



Being an Equity Leader

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When the best leaders' work is done, the people say, "We did it ourselves."

—Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*

Integrating an equity approach to diversity into early childhood education (ECE) programs calls for both *visionary* and *strategic* leadership. It requires critical assessment and change in all parts of an ECE program and engagement of the various members of

the program—teachers, staff, families, and children. While the ideals of equity may feel right and good, changing the way things are to the way they ought to be in relation to equity and diversity brings challenges as well as rewards. In this article, we describe the key concepts and strategies for leading change toward equity and diversity in ECE programs. We use the term *leader* to name the role of directing or administering ECE programs.

A Framework for Change

Critical Awareness

Building a program that reflects equity principles requires leaders who seek out a critical awareness of their own history and identities, develop an understanding of the dynamics of institutional oppression within schools and society, and have a clear commitment to social justice (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis 2016; Khalifa 2018). This learning occurs simultaneously with leaders taking action in the daily life of the program. As both advocate and activist, an equity leader is willing to take risks when faced with obstacles and resistance (Long, Souto-Manning, & Vasquez 2015). The leader's knowledge of how inequities are both perpetuated and challenged, along with a clear understanding of the context of their program, forms the basis for supporting teacher professional development. As with all learning curves, leaders deepen their knowledge and skills over time from experience in their programs, critical self-reflection on these experiences, and study.

Intentional, Facilitative, and Strategic Leadership

Every decision an equity program leader makes needs to keep the long-term social justice vision and mission in the foreground while managing the day-to-day immediate issues. Program leaders plan and implement a long-term strategy for shifting the culture of the school to one that reflects the values and principles of NAEYC's "Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education" position statement (2019).

They make decisions about both short- and long-term goals, set priorities, determine the most effective route to meet goals, muster resources, and manage the speed at which to proceed to ensure sustainability. Through observation, listening, and focused conversations with staff, families, and community members, equity leaders gather and analyze information about the context, history, culture, stakeholders, and resources in their programs. They also identify the challenges, strengths, allies, and gatekeepers that shape the opportunities and obstacles facing their work. This data gathering informs the leader's priorities, goals, and the road map of strategies needed for the shift toward greater equity (Derma-Sparks, LeeKeenan, & Nimmo 2015).

Facilitative leadership involves all the stakeholders sharing in the power and responsibility to meet an organization's goals (Forester 2013). The leader develops collaborative partnerships with staff and families so that there is a collective voice in the planning, decision-making, and implementation of the equity mission. However, when sharing power, there are decisions that are ultimately the administrator's responsibility, such as budget and staffing. Before making such decisions, effective leaders authentically gather input from staff and families (LeeKeenan & Ponte 2018).

Creating a Culture for Creativity, Risk Taking, and Colearning

Building programs where diversity and equity can live, and that effectively solve the challenges this process involves, rests on a school culture that nurtures creativity, risk taking, and colearning. The goal is to create a space where everyone feels they can offer their perspectives, take risks, make mistakes, and contribute at their own pace. This requires everyone learning from and with each other.

Equity leaders make it possible for staff and families to develop connections and build trusting relationships with each other. They encourage the various stakeholders to expand their perspective beyond a focus on their own interests to being able to empathize with and see other points of view and the big picture of how one's actions intersect with those of others. The leader proposes ground rules for safe and courageous conversations and encourages a healthy embrace of dissonance and disagreement (Nicholson et al. 2018).

Managing Conflict and Finding the Third Space

Conflict, disequilibrium, and tension are inevitable in the journey of equity and anti-bias efforts. Many conflicts come from dissonance between staff and families' cultural beliefs, practices, and histories. Others are rooted in differing beliefs about diversity that reflect learned stereotypes and prejudices. The leader has the authority and big-picture perspective to play a proactive role in seeking out a *third space*—an intellectual and emotional place where people in conflict move beyond either/or viewpoints

and embrace a spectrum of possibilities (Barrera, Kramer, & Macpherson 2012). The objectives of third space conversations are to inform and understand each other, build on each other's ideas, and propose solutions that work for everyone. In seeking a third space, conflicts become opportunities for building collaborative relations and inclusion. One approach to finding a more inclusive third space is the following three-step process:

- 1. Acknowledge.** Listen deeply and name the difference in opinions, beliefs, or values that need to be addressed and analyzed.
- 2. Ask.** Gather information from all parties to develop a more inclusive and empathetic understanding of the underlying issues. This step involves clarifying the priorities and being receptive to learning about others.
- 3. Adapt.** Create alternatives for adapting policies and practices that are inclusive and reflect equity principles.

Third-space solutions are new ways of looking at the issues, not simply a compromise. In a discussion of solutions, leaders identify non-negotiable practices and policies aligned with the equity mission (Derman-Sparks, LeeKeenan, & Nimmo 2015).

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Strategies for Change

While the long-term goal is to distribute leadership broadly across program stakeholders, leaders with responsibility for policy, budgeting, supervision, and staff development can act immediately and decisively. They can use their power in ways that are both structural and wide-reaching to encourage and support a range of equity initiatives from teachers and families. These strategies are informed by NAEYC's "Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education" position statement (2019), which implores leaders to listen to diverse voices, foster learning communities with adults, and engage in reciprocal partnerships with families.

Program Leader Tasks

The following are suggestions of tasks a program leader can undertake to advance equity:

- › **Engage teachers, staff, and yourself in reflection and education.** Effective change toward equity rests on people being reflective about their attitudes, knowledge, and practices, and continuing to expand their understanding of equity issues. Create the time, space, and support so everyone can take steps in their own equity and diversity journey.
- › **Form an equity inclusion team.** Develop a team that oversees equity initiatives and that ensures commitment, accountability, and coordination with equity activities. The team should include stakeholder representatives (for example, staff, families, an advisory board, and others who have direct involvement in the program) who are committed to the equity mission and can act as conduits for these efforts into their various constituencies. Ensure that your team does not become diverted into "diversity" activities (e.g., multicultural dinners) that may be helpful community-builders but do not address the underlying inequities in the system (Gorski 2018).
- › **Cultivate commitment through a mission statement.** Make your equity commitment transparent by explicitly making it a part of your program's mission statement. Engage program staff, teachers, and families in developing and regularly reviewing the mission statement to ensure shared accountability. Seek feedback from others directly invested in your program.

- › **Budget for equity work.** Equity work must be an explicit priority in budget lines for materials, professional development, and recruitment. Identify specific fundraising projects related to your equity strategic plan; for example, ensuring that your children’s book collection reflects all the backgrounds and languages spoken by the families within the community your program serves.
- › **Create equitable policies in staff and family handbooks.** Policies and procedures will communicate the values and goals of your program; they should explicitly reflect your equity commitment. For example, program leaders can address the inequitable impact of disciplinary and exclusionary practices that affect children of color, particularly boys, by requiring positive alternatives and ongoing assessment of teachers’ disciplinary and exclusionary practices.
- › **Assess progress.** Ongoing program assessment includes progress toward explicit annual equity goals. Observation, documentation, surveys, and focus groups with staff, families, and other stakeholders reflect and influence your strategic planning.
- › **Diversify.** Be intentional in your outreach to recruit teachers and staff who reflect the languages and communities of the children and families you serve and to increase diversity. Mentor leadership development to build diversity in administrative roles. Lead with your mission and values in arguing why having a diverse population is a key element of your program.
- › **Be present in the community.** Leaders have a vantage point from which to learn about and be an active participant in the community surrounding their program (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis 2016). Specifically, include outreach to community elders and advocacy organizations representing groups traditionally marginalized in our society and schools. Community engagement enables program leaders to leverage resources to support the equity mission. In turn, school leaders can join in community efforts for social justice and be a role model to families and staff.

Engaging Teachers and Staff

Even the most talented, committed teachers and staff require the active support of their program leaders to be effective in their equity efforts in and outside the classroom. This involves recruitment, retention, and professional development.

- › **Recruit and retain staff committed to anti-bias education.** Make your commitment to equity work visible in all your recruiting and public relations materials (e.g., websites, flyers, position descriptions). Be strategic in advertising and doing outreach, whether formally or by word of mouth. Include questions about equity and anti-bias education in interview protocols when hiring. Implement retention strategies that ensure all staff feel included, visible, and engaged in decision-making.
- › **Facilitate collaboration.** Arrange staff work schedules to facilitate relationship building and collaboration, through curriculum planning, team teaching, and common professional development experiences.
- › **Engage staff in critical thinking.** Facilitate courageous conversations among teachers and staff about their social identities and about planning, implementation, and assessment of anti-bias materials, environments, and curricula experiences. These activities would include
 - discussing an anti-bias article
 - reviewing children’s books for anti-bias issues using a tool such as [Social Justice Books](#)
 - sharing teachers’ documentation of current anti-bias dilemmas in their classrooms

Use protocols to help facilitate the conversation among colleagues, such as can be found through the [School Reform Initiative](#).

- › **Integrate anti-bias education into staff meetings and professional development.** This includes focused experiences, such as exploring the linguistic and social identity development of children, institutional dynamics of oppression, and anti-bias curriculum. Professional development

for equity also includes bringing an equity lens to all aspects of early childhood education. For instance, the program leader ensures that a staff professional development on STEM education includes exploring how the science curriculum can reflect families' diverse cultural contributions.

- › **Provide curricula resources.** Proactively and intentionally, ensure that teachers have the classroom materials in the languages they need to support anti-bias activities with children (e.g., persona dolls, books, block accessories, labels, and puzzles that represent families in the program as well as give visibility to diversity in the children's larger community).
- › **Supervise and coach staff in anti-bias work.** As part of their annual individual professional development goals, teachers and staff should identify specific anti-bias education goals and be accountable for meeting equity expectations. Use a tool like a self-study guide to help staff identify their strengths and challenges (Chen, Nimmo, & Fraser 2009). Equity leaders aim to hire and develop staff who are committed to equity principles and want to contribute and expand their skills. At the same time, creating equity is a required competency in the work of staff, just like developing children's literacy or supporting social-emotional development. Leaders should have supervision strategies for working with staff who are not showing improvement or are resistant to the equity mission.
- › **Distribute leadership.** Empower emerging equity leaders within the staff and families to take on responsibility for developing and implementing specific social justice projects. For example, taking the lead in creating an anti-bias library for the school or developing a professional development experience.

Including Families

While classroom teachers typically have the most direct and intense relationships with families, the program leader has important responsibilities in ensuring the inclusion of all families in a program's equity mission and implementation.

- › **Set the program climate.** Provide opportunities for families (and staff) to socialize, dialogue, and learn together, in ways that give everyone a

voice. Be sensitive and responsive to negotiating and adapting the differences among families around time, money, transportation, preferred communication, and language. Through your everyday interactions with families, model a *funds of knowledge* approach in which you learn from families about the strengths, knowledge, and expertise children bring to school from their families and communities (González, Moll, & Amanti 2005).

- › **Communicate explicitly about anti-bias goals.** Provide opportunities for teachers and families to learn together about anti-bias education, such as teachers and families sharing their identity stories, favorite childhood memories, and creating an FAQ document for the family handbook about anti-bias education. Let families know about your program's anti-bias education with children, such as conversations with children, new children's books, activities happening in the classrooms, and ongoing professional development efforts (Derman-Sparks & Edwards with Goins 2020).
- › **Reach out to families.** Take the initiative in reaching out to families, especially those who have traditionally been marginalized by school environments. Ensure that your program's environment, including hallways and offices as well as classrooms, reflect cultural and linguistic diversity. Explicitly welcome and encourage families to visit in their native language. Take the time to meet with families in their communities and in their homes, learning from and with them about the equity issues they confront each day and what program policies and practices need changing (Long, Souto-Manning, & Vasquez 2015).

Conclusion

Ultimately, leading change toward equity and diversity means firmly holding to the vision and mission, while inspiring, facilitating, and supporting step-by-step strategic action. This work takes time—change is a process, not an event or two. Developing a network of supportive colleagues with whom to learn, doing critical assessment, and celebrating small changes makes the complex job of equity leaders doable.

An Outline for Facilitating Anti-Bias Education (ABE) Discussions at Staff Meetings (Total time: 60 min)

This guide was created by John Nimmo and Debbie LeeKeenan.

1. Connections/Ice breaker: Share one thing important to you about your identity. *(5 min)*
2. Review meeting agreements: Anti-bias education requires community commitments that help create a safe place to have honest and brave conversations. These commitments can be collaboratively developed by the group or provided by the facilitator. *(5 min)*

Examples of community commitments include

 - listen openly and actively
 - be mindful of impact, not just intention
 - seek awareness of how our identities shape our stories and perspectives
 - respect confidentiality
3. Choose ONE of these activities for the staff meeting: *(45 min)*
 - Have classroom teams each take turns sharing documentation about an anti-bias strategy, curriculum idea, or dilemma that occurred in their classrooms. This may require giving teams advanced notice to prepare materials for the activity.
 - Analyze children's books for anti-bias issues.
 - › Use the "[Guide for Selecting Anti-Bias Children's Books](#)" to help make your selection
 - Read an anti-bias/equity article together and discuss using the following framework:
 - › **Connect:** How do the ideas presented connect to what you know about ABE?
 - › **Extend:** What new ideas did you gain that extended or broadened your thinking?
 - › **Challenge:** What challenges or questions have come to mind?
 - See [School Reform Initiative](#) or [Making Learning Visible](#) for protocols and reflection prompts.
 - View the film [Reflecting on Anti-Bias Education in Action: The Early Years](#) *(48 min)*
 - Provide anti-bias questions for small group discussions. Divide the whole group into small groups of 3-4 staff members, which encourages more personal conversations. Choose ONE of the following questions per meeting:
 - › **Anti-bias goals:** What are four anti-bias goals, and how do I implement them?
 - › **Raising self-awareness:** What moments have come up in my work with children and families that triggered my own social identity, history, bias?
 - › **Physical environments:** What is in my physical environment that reflects anti-bias goals and values?
 - › **Pedagogy:** How do I actively encourage children's critical thinking about differences and stereotypes?
 - › **Families:** How do I involve families in anti-bias work? How do I respond to families' requests respectfully and fairly when there is conflict about beliefs and goals?
4. Closure: Share in dyads something you learned today and can apply tomorrow. *(5 min)*

About the Authors

John Nimmo, EdD, is associate professor of early childhood education at Portland State University in Oregon. He is coauthor of three books: *Leading Anti-Bias Early Childhood Programs: A Guide for Change*; *Loris Malaguzzi and the Teachers: Dialogues on Collaboration and Conflict Among Children*, Reggio Emilia 1990; and *Emergent Curriculum*. John is also coproducer of the international film *The Voices of Children* and is collaborating with Debbie LeeKeenan on an anti-bias education professional development video.

Debbie LeeKeenan, MEd, is an early childhood consultant and lecturer (www.antibiasleadersece.com) in Seattle, Washington. From 1996 to 2013, she was director and lecturer at the Eliot-Pearson Children's School, the laboratory school affiliated with the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Study and Human Development at Tufts University. She is coauthor of *From Survive to Thrive: A Director's Guide for Leading an Early Childhood Program* and *Leading Anti-Bias Early Childhood Programs: A Guide for Change*.

Louise Derman-Sparks, MS, has worked in early childhood care and education for over 50 years as a preschool and college teacher, director, author, consultant, and social justice activist. The author and coauthor of several books and articles, Louise's first book, *Anti-Bias Curriculum* (NAEYC 1989), developed with the ABC Task Force, brought the concepts and goals of the anti-bias approach into early childhood education discourse and practice. A Pacific Oaks College faculty emeritus, Louise continues her social justice activism.

Working Toward Equity

Despite being considered one of the worst single incidents of racial violence in our nation's history, the Tulsa Race Massacre has until recently been unknown to most US citizens. It has rarely been taught, even in Tulsa's schools. Yet the community trauma of the event has lasted for a century.

As the city and community approach the centennial of the Tulsa Race Massacre, many organizations are recognizing this event, including early child care centers. As director of Tulsa Educare MacArthur, Chris Amirault decided to dig into the work of advancing equity and guide his staff toward a greater understanding of systemic racism and inequity in Tulsa . . . and beyond. He designed and led a training for a racially diverse team of six facilitators in which they learned about the history and systems of racial injustice in the United States, developed facilitation and conflict resolution skills, and did the hard work of establishing a shared mindset of rigor, tolerance, honesty, and brave confrontation.

You can read about the journey Chris and his colleagues took in a special online feature, "Journeying Together: How Our Program Addresses Race and Anti-Bias Education," at NAEYC.org/yc/summer2021.

Go online for more information, further reading suggestions, a glossary of included terms, and the references for this article. Visit NAEYC.org/yc/summer2021.

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This article supports recommendations from the NAEYC position statement:

Recommendations for Everyone

Item 5: View your commitment to cultural responsiveness as an ongoing process.

Recommendations for Administrators of Schools, Centers, Family Child Care Homes, and Other Early Childhood Education Settings

Item 2: Take proactive steps with measurable goals to recruit and retain educators and leaders who reflect the diversity of children and families served and who meet professional expectations.

Item 9: Create meaningful, ongoing opportunities for multiple voices with diverse perspectives to engage in leadership and decision making.