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It's About Time! Advancing Justice Through Joyful Inquiry With Young Children

Elizabeth J. Erwin, EdD[1], Jessica K. Bacon, PhD[1], and Priya Lalvani, PhD[1]

Abstract

Young learners often are enchanted with the world, fascinated by the ordinary, and absorbed in the present moment. We explore interconnected ideas about how young children's natural proclivity toward being curious, and noticing differences among people should be harnessed toward socially just ends. We consider ways in which joyfulness in learning are preserved, as teachers partner with young learners to cultivate their sense of justice in the classroom and beyond. We use disability studies in education as a theoretical framework for doing anti-bias work within early childhood education. We also describe global and neoliberal trends which directly and negatively impact the lives of young children by escalating injustice through educational practices and policies often disguised as reform. Ultimately, we propose, reimagining equity-based practices, positive disability narratives, freedom and humanity, and the concept of place within pedagogy to transform early childhood education.

Keywords

early childhood education, equity-based education, social justice education, disability studies in education, young children

Young learners are enchanted with the world, fascinated by the ordinary, and absorbed in the present moment. A sense of joy reflects young children's engagement with their environment as they ask questions and investigate the world around them. Currently, children have questions about the events unfolding before them locally and globally. We are living in an unprecedented moment in history marked by the collision of a global pandemic, a greater urgency of Black Lives Matter, and other social justice movements—all of which have implications for the future of humanity. In this moment, it is urgent that we work alongside young children to create a more just and joyful world.

In this conceptual article, we explore interconnected ideas about how young children's natural curiosity and inclination toward noticing differences, particularly among people, are understood through a social justice lens. We also consider the ways in which joyfulness in learning should be preserved during early childhood years, especially given global and local pressures facing teachers, and why partnering *with* young learners to cultivate their sense of justice in the classroom and beyond is needed. Toward this end, we first examine the presence of joy and justice during the early years, and discuss how young learners are both recipients and agents of cultural transmission. Next we explore how young children learn bias, as well describe current global trends which threaten inclusive, equity-oriented practices and pedagogy in early childhood education. We then examine how a disabilities studies in education (DSE) framework can guide anti-bias work during the early years. Finally, we describe inventive educational practices for engaging *with* young children to challenge injustices. Teachers must work in close partnership with young learners to engage in anti-bias work and to elevate a greater sense of joy in learning.

Intersections of Joy and Justice in Early Childhood

The notion of "child-like joy" clearly illustrates the natural ways young children become fully captivated in the here and now by a genuine, pure, and unrestrained delight. All children have unique interests, preferences, and fascinations—however, the expression or experience of joy is not the same

[1]Montclair State University, NJ, USA

Corresponding Author:
Elizabeth J. Erwin, Department of Teaching and Learning, College of Education and Human Services, Montclair State University, 1 Normal Avenue, Montclair, NJ 07043, USA.
Email: erwinel@montclair.edu

for every child. Perhaps this is one reason there is no universal definition of what constitutes joy in early childhood. Terms such as "jump for joy," "overjoyed," "full of joy," and "unbridled joy" are commonly used and widely acknowledged when it comes to describing joy experienced by young children.

During the early years, Ward and Dahlmeier (2011) assert that joy is personalized and individualized; therefore, what brings joy to one child will likely be very different for another child. They also suggest that "joyfulness as a state of being is long term and of enduring significance" (p. 95). The notion of joyful learning has garnered some attention in education (Burton, 1991; Rantala & Määttä, 2012; Udvari-Solner & Kluth, 2017) perhaps because "joy leads students to learning rather than away from it" (Ford & Opitz, 2015, p. 37). Despite the lasting and important role joy plays in a young child's life, joy is not a concept that has been studied widely in early childhood education.

In particular, there is scant literature and research on joy other than through an Anglo-European lens. One non-Western example described by Coffino and Bailey (2019) is Anji play, which is a Chinese approach to early childhood education created by Cheng Xuequin. Anji play uses what is considered an ecology of learning that embeds "true play" where relationships of *love* allow children to take *risks* through play, which cultivate experiences of *joy*, that ultimately lead to *engagement* and *reflection* of the child's own inquiry. Coffino and Bailey cite Cheng who describes *joy* as "the measure of the experience of the child" (p. 4), which ultimately allows for children to take a stance of uncertainty, curiosity, and wonder in terms of development and knowledge acquisition.

The fundamental role that joy plays in a young child's life is recognized within national early childhood guidelines across the world. For example, the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care repeatedly acknowledge joy as related to a young child's learning, play, and success (Karjalainen et al., 2019). The attention to joy in widely respected national early childhood curricula underscores a shared recognition of the significant role joy plays in learning during the early years. An emphasis on joy during the early years is also prominently articulated in Australia's national early childhood guidelines, which emphasize ". . .the importance of children's right to be a child and experience the joy of childhood" (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2009, p. 21). In addition, Australia's national guidelines advise early childhood practitioners that children's learning must be centered in the present moment. In other words, young children make sense of the world by noticing and becoming engaged at the precise time in which experiences are happening as opposed to focusing on past or future events and experiences. In essence, young learners are naturally engaging in reflective inquiry as they become deeply aware and absorbed in what is happening at the moment.

According to Siegel and Bryson (2012), young children generally live moment by moment, and their engagement with the world is grounded in what is happening in the here and now. Young learners are naturally mindful and present in each moment; their carefree expression might possibly be the hallmark of the early years. Linked to this, young children are born naturally curious about the world around them and are attuned to the physical or linguistic attributes that make up our human diversity. That children experience joy and exhibit wonder in their surroundings and simultaneously recognize social identity characteristics are not contradictory ideas; perhaps it is precisely *because* children are mindfully present and curious that they are attuned to human variations.

Contrary to a commonly held belief that children are "innocent" to the existence of constructed social or physical differences, a vast body of literature establishes that young children *do* have the capacity to note and respond to differences related to race, gender, ability differences, or physicality and that they create schemas and make evaluations based on these (e.g., Anzures et al., 2010; Quinn et al., 2002). Their initial observations of these differences are unlikely to have negative associations, but over time, they begin to understand the social meanings ascribed to these identities. In the next section, we discuss the emergence of in-group preferences among children and the mechanisms through which messages about constructed hierarchies among groups are transmitted to children.

"Do They Even Notice?" Dominant Discourses About Children as "Innocent"

Young children's natural curiosity and awareness regarding differences among people begins during infancy. As early as the first year of life, children show sensitivity to social dimensions as they begin to distinguish faces associated with gender (Quinn et al., 2002) and show recognition of people of the same race as those common in their own environment (Anzures et al., 2010). In educational discourses, Annamma et al. (2016) describes the concept *color evasiveness*, which explains that there is a widespread belief in schools that children do not notice differences within human diversity. Efforts to "evade" discussions about race insinuate that recognizing race is problematic, and for this reason critical race theorists and scholars have long critiqued this ideology as inherently racist in itself (Annamma et al., 2016). Along this same thinking, we argue that claims of children not noticing differences associated with disabilities make similarly problematic assumptions that identities of disability are undesirable (cf. Bacon & Lalvani, 2019). As such, the discourse of *not noticing disability* is, at its core, grounded in ableist beliefs, which reinforce the notion that being able-bodied is a preferable way of being in the world, while disability is societally devalued (Hehir, 2002).

Not only do young children notice and evaluate constructed human differences, they are simultaneously

interested in, and drawn to, issues of justice. Indeed, moral principles like fairness and equality are often the cornerstone of young children's reasoning. When provided information about what other people need or desire, children often prioritize what is fair, despite their understanding about socially expected or stereotypical norms and expectations (Killen et al., 2001; Shaw & Olson, 2012). Such research suggests that young children's natural sense of fairness is tapped into when they are provided information about others' interests and needs, and simultaneously given the opportunity to engage in making moral decisions.

The Emergence of In-Group Preferences

Children's ability to *recognize* differences may shift to their *preferences* for in-group members at an early age (Escayg, 2019; Hetherington et al., 2014). Preschool-aged children start to demonstrate discriminatory and prejudicial attitudes toward members of other groups and may have already become socially proficient in the ways they appropriate and manipulate racist discourses (Connolly, 2003). Derman-Sparks and Anti-Bias Curriculum Task Force (1989) explicate the idea of pre-prejudices—beginning ideas and beliefs, misconceptions, or lack of information—that, left unattended, are solidified over time. By the time children reach the age of 5, many are likely to show consistent preferences for members of their own gender (Shutts et al., 2013), race (Baron & Banaji, 2006), and language group (Kinzler et al., 2007). These preferences are connected with stereotyping and discriminatory behavior as well as the avoidance of members of other groups (Killen & Verkuyten, 2017; Oostenbroek & Over, 2016; Over, 2018).

In addition, children are not just the recipients, but also the agents of cultural transmission, with the potential to communicate prejudice and discrimination to others. For example, they may directly communicate stereotypes to peers, or share more resources with and offer more help to members of their own group (Over, 2018; Sierksma et al., 2015). Thus, it is imperative that we become more acutely aware of and attend to these developing early biases in children. To be clear, the fact that children notice the diversity among us and classify based on it is not, in itself, a problem. Rather, the problem is that, through external mechanisms, children seem to learn that some kinds of differences are less desirable and certain groups less valued (Lalvani & Bacon, 2019).

Social Construction of the "Other": How Do Children Learn Biases?

Young children are not passive recipients of information but rather, are active and engaged learners, so it is critical that educators understand the mechanisms that young children use to internalize bias, and ways that they begin to form their identities during the early years. When young children enact their identities, they do so in the context of their understanding of societal norms related to these identities. For example, as Masuchika Boldt (2004) elucidates, when children enact gender identity, they do so in accordance with gendered norms; taking into account what is expected, they try to "do it right." Thus, the early childhood years are formative, because it is when children form their understanding of the world and their place in it, and take note of the values and attitudes of those around them (Rogoff, 2003). As children begin to develop their own intersecting identities, they begin to assign meaning and value to social phenomena. Through various mechanisms related to cultural transmission from adults and external school practices, they may lose their ability to enjoy differences. More specifically, children may learn to stifle their natural curiosity about *certain kinds of differences* as they internalize messages about which groups have more status, start to recognize social hierarchies based on systems of power and privileges, and construct notions of the "other" (Ryan & Grieshaber, 2004).

Social referencing. Children's understanding of social hierarchies and the development of intergroup biases have their roots in the process of social learning and cultural transmission of values (Allport, 1954). Social referencing theory suggests that when facing a new or ambiguous social situation, "we often look to a familiar, trusted person for interpretive cues to help disambiguate the circumstance" (Campos, 1983, p. 85). In fact, many have recognized (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978) that as humans we "each acquire the lion's share of our knowledge by virtue of social transmission, a process enabling us to transcend the limits that would otherwise be set by the range of experiences typical of any single lifetime" (Baldwin & Moses, 1996, p. 1915).

Social referencing also accounts for the transmission of attitudinal bias across generations, as infants and young children are likely to seek interpretive cues about differences they observe regarding physicality, race, or disability from the adults around them, and simultaneously engage in social categorization—the process of categorizing self and others in-group terms (Over & McCall, 2018). Through language and affective cues, adults may communicate social values attached to race, gender, or disability, and in this way children note that social identities carry social meaning. They may also observe discriminatory behavior and infer that a particular attitude is appropriate toward that group, or extrapolate what behaviors are justified by that attitude (Oostenbroek & Over, 2016). Children are also influenced when they observe structural societal issues, such as de facto segregation that exists between groups, for example, in the neighborhoods in which they live or in the structure of their own families' peer networks (Bigler & Liben, 2006). In addition, children encounter a considerable amount of stereotypical information from various forms of media designed specifically for children (Baglieri &

Lalvani, 2019). As such, young children enact their identities as well as their cultural repertoire through play, mediated by the activities, literacy, or discourses which surround them. For instance, during play children collaborate with peers to engage with social ideas that are part of their culture, enact or challenge various aspects of their identities, critically analyze their own actions and those of their peers, and try out stereotypical roles associated with different identities or reject them (Paley, 1990; Souto-Manning, 2013; Yoon, 2014).

Insufficient opportunities for meaning engagement within heterogeneous groups. Another problem that young children encounter stems from the lack of experience with members of other groups in schools or lack of opportunities to engage meaningfully in mixed ability groups can contribute to the construction of the *other*. This is particularly relevant in the context of disability, as schools in the United States continue to practice ability-based segregation. Despite the existence of educational laws dating back to the 1970s that emphasize the need to educate children with disabilities alongside nondisabled peers to the maximum extent possible, large numbers of young children with disabilities continue to be educated in partially or completely segregated educational environments. For instance, in 2017, only 40% of U.S. children with disabilities aged 3 to 5 years received special education or related services in a general education classroom (United States Department of Education, 2019). Thus, there is widespread acceptance of a parallel system of education in the United States (i.e., general education and special education) based on an implicit educational ideology of *separate but equal* when it comes to disability.

Allport's (1954) seminal works reveal that prejudice reduction best occurs when children have the opportunities to work collaboratively with members of other groups toward the achievement of mutual goals, with institutional support in the process. Perhaps this is what is missing in educational contexts which practice de facto segregation in the case of race, and de jure segregation in the case of disability—Children in such segregated systems have limited if any opportunities to collaborate within truly heterogeneous groups. As a result, children are constantly receiving messages in educational contexts about who matters and who belongs. The implicit and explicit messages that young children receive about belongingness and inclusivity count and have implications for their development of identity and self-worth (Beneke et al., 2019). For this reason, allowing children to explore complex questions about society's response to constructed categories (i.e., gender, disability, culture, and so forth) is an essential and critical component of building community in early childhood classrooms. Real community building is rooted in fostering an appreciation of the similarities among young children, alongside building space to value differences and providing opportunities to question expectations of groups (Masuchika Boldt, 2004; Silin, 1993).

Messages about normality and differences implicit in curricula. The curriculum in most schools is dominated by a Eurocentric or White frame of reference (Ryan & Grieshaber, 2004) and generally originates from heteronormative and able-bodied perspectives. Messages about whether human variation is (or is not) considered a natural aspect of who we are as living beings are transmitted explicitly and subtly to young children, through choices of what is included in the curriculum and what is left out. In particular, the topic of disability is largely omitted in early childhood curricula, and when it is included, it is sometimes through problematic representations of people with disabilities as either heroes or villains in literature or other cultural products (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019). Within early childhood curricula, there are few opportunities for children to learn about disability as a natural form of human diversity; instead, through images, activities, songs, or stories, constructed notions about the normative body are reified. In addition, there is little that acknowledges and honors the presence of children who may appear, move, or communicate in ways other than what is unquestioningly considered "normal" (Bacon & Lalvani, 2019).

If children first learn about citizenship and democracy through their educational experiences, then these messages embedded in the curricula, especially during the early years, have broad negative implications regarding a sense of community and participation in a diverse, equitable society. Bearing this in mind, if we are to provide every child with equitable opportunities for self-expression, early childhood classrooms should be inclusive spaces with a transformative agenda aimed at the full expression of all identities or realities—and this can occur through the use of inquiry-based praxis that is responsive to children's lived experiences (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007; Paley, 1990). Unfortunately, current global trends in early childhood education are threatening to stifle equity-based practices, which we explore in the next section.

What in the World Is Going On? Global Contradictions in Early Childhood Education

We have been examining the ways in which young children's natural curiosity toward noticing differences, particularly among people, are understood. Given that joyfulness in learning during the early childhood years is essential, how must teachers work together with young learners to cultivate their sense of joy and justice in the classroom and in the world? To begin, teachers have to become more fully aware of what is happening on a global scale and how this impacts young children and their families. This understanding is part

of the web of interconnected influences that promote a general presence or absence regarding justice and joy in young children's lives.

Injustices in early childhood education have invaded the lives of young children, particularly those with disabilities and others who have been historically excluded, forgotten, and segregated. It has become commonplace to witness troubling educational reform movements that directly affect the lives of young children, in particular those with marginalized identities. Whether locally or globally, early childhood practitioners, many of whom teach within publicly funded programs, share similar experiences stemming from a lack of value placed on teaching about diversity, or a watered-down approach to exploring issues of social justice. For example, incalculable moments of joyful learning are never realized due to neoliberal policies that diminish freedom in a young child's life (i.e., lack or limited opportunities for open-ended play, discovery, decision-making, creativity). Within an era of neoliberalism, marked by an increasing pressure to focus on academics, conformity, and assessment, there is an expectation for young children to learn through rote memorization and drills (Sims, 2017) as opposed to joyful engagement in their learning such as experimenting, discovering, playing, problem solving, and thinking critically.

Some educational trends negatively impacting young children can be traced to local and national factors. However, much of what we are experiencing in early childhood education and care is the result of international initiatives which are disguised as global "reforms." Although many of the educational policies and efforts taking place across the world may sound beneficial for young children and their families, upon closer examination we can see how these policies simply camouflage real motivations. Neoliberal thinking, grounded in consumerism and the free marketplace, is on the rise, which has resulted in serious and devastating consequences, with marginalized populations being hit the hardest (Nagasawa et al., 2018). For instance, in the United States, one way that neoliberalism has been promoted within early childhood education is tied to universal Pre-K initiatives. Important district-wide early childhood initiatives are designed to increase access to Pre-K for a more racially and socioeconomically diverse group of students. Yet, the goals of these initiatives often focus on teaching students' readiness skills for elementary school and to prepare for the high stakes tests they will encounter in third grade (Brown, 2009). As Brown explains, this has meant that there has been increasing focus in early childhood education on rote learning with an emphasis on developing literacy and math skills through a more teacher-centered curriculum. Brostrom (2012) similarly makes this point by stating that "the tendency towards narrowing down educational practice and reducing preschool to an introduction to school with a strong emphasis on literacy and math is currently seen in most modern neoliberal countries" (p. 2). Thus, teachers often feel threatened to keep focus on standardized curricula and instruction, at the expense of socially just teaching practices.

Neoliberal thinking has impacted the lives of young children across a range of human diversity including disabilities; these types of "reforms" have been widely debated, documented, and criticized in education locally and globally. For example, the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OCED), had a well-established record of developing reports that have guided policy in early childhood education. However, in OCED's more recent international assessment of learning outcomes, The International Early Learning and Child Well-Being Study (IELS) has gained harsh criticism worldwide for a number of troubling reasons. Urban and Swadener (2016) explain some of these fundamental flaws including excessive standardized testing of young children; the noticeable lack of diverse perspectives, pedagogies, and paradigms; extreme lack or absence of local communities and global indigenous populations; and the systemic problem of how essential funds for extremely vulnerable communities will be redirected by IELS to create useless tables of international achievement. Furthermore, Urban and Swadener articulate how the IELS initiative is *not* going to create greater equity for children and families but rather produce the opposite result.

There has been an absence of meaningful involvement from the early childhood global community, including educators, scholars, families, and others committed to the learning, care, and education of young children, particularly for those with disabilities. Moss and Urban (2019) warn that when understood with an expanding international web of measurement, early childhood education is being slowly, yet methodically diminished into a market-driven initiative, situating early childhood education as purely an economic commodity. Thus, the IELS international effort, which deliberately ignores core beliefs, and diverse practices that shape early childhood education and care, essentially focuses on what is assessed, evaluated, and measured in a young child's life. Parnell and Iorio (2016) indicated that what is happening globally is fundamentally a reductionist approach that "produces an oversimplified view of children and their educational experience and masks the complexities of the diverse practices that exist internationally" (p. 1). Early childhood educators worldwide have been facing pressures in the classroom such as limiting or extinguishing play, creativity, joyful engagement, and self-expression in exchange for implementing more commercially-driven, assessment-based, and teacher-directed academic instruction. Overall, these efforts to reduce early childhood education and care to a product-oriented, uniform, and unidimensional system are happening by those outside the field, with no interest in the well-being and learning of young children. We therefore must find viable,

inclusive solutions grounded in theory and practice that will present clear and sustainable alternatives to the influence of neoliberalism in early childhood education.

Disability Studies in Education (DSE) as a Framework for Doing Anti-Bias Work With Young Children

Ultimately, children's pre-biases or biases are mitigated when they are provided with positive information and experiences about diversity through schooling, which takes a fundamentally different approach to teaching and learning than what is promoted within a neoliberal reform agenda. In this section, we describe a DSE theoretical framework for teaching and learning in early childhood, with a goal of infusing anti-bias, anti-ableist, and anti-racist education.

DSE is a multidisciplinary field of study that uses cultural, political, and social perspectives to understand how disability is constructed and responded to in educational institutions (Gabel, 2005). As described by Bacon and Lalvani (2019), a cornerstone of DSE scholarship is that it rejects deficit-oriented perspectives about disability and puts into question notions that disability categories are universal and biologically fixed. Ferri and Bacon (2011) explained that universal ideas about disability categories are strongly linked to the ideology promoted in our early childhood educational systems, which over rely on normative developmental models. Dominant developmental theories promote ideals that linear, predictable, and progressive ladder-like steps are the only "normal" way for young children to develop, grow, and demonstrate skill acquisition. Young children who do not conform to such norms are often seen and subsequently labeled as "at risk" (Mutua, 2001) and/or as disabled (Kleiwer & Raschke, 2002). Thus, when a child's developmental trajectory strays from rigidly defined frameworks associated with the developmental models, differences are cast as deficits within the very systems and structures that, ironically, are designed for all learners. Furthermore, a dominant female, White and middle-class teaching force commonly interpret cultural differences and diverse expressions in young children as a sign of failure to progress through developmental models, and may target those children to be labeled as disabled. Baker (2002) explains that often this provokes a "hunt for disability" where ability, language, social, and physical differences intersect and become pathologized.

In opposition to deficit, medicalized and normalized perspectives on disability and diversity in young children, DSE scholars see uneven child development (e.g., Kleiwer et al., 2004) and disability as a positive and naturally occurring aspect of human variation. Furthermore, DSE scholarship seeks to understand the experience of disability in relation to ways that societies construct, represent, and respond to it. DSE is commonly associated with adopting a social model perspective (Oliver, 1990) where disability is distinguished from, rather than equated with the medical model and impairment. In this sense, the concept "impairment" refers to particular physical or sensory experiences (e.g., blindness or absence of motor function), whereas disability and disablement refer to political, economic, social, and cultural oppression that people experience (Oliver, 1990). In addition, DSE seeks to question overrepresentation of young minority children identified as needing special education and seeks to promote inclusion for young children in schools and society. Also, DSE works toward socially just and equitable educational practices that honor disability diversity and promote an understanding of disability as a positive and prideful identity that young children can associate with.

Intersecting Agendas: Social Justice Education, Critical Theory, and Disability Studies in Education

The central tenets of DSE are aligned with the agendas of social justice education (SJE) and grounded in critical theory. Proponents of social justice envision a society in which there is an equitable distribution of resources, and all individuals are seen as valued, self-determining members (Bell, 2016). In such a society, there is appreciation for the value of diversity, and social reciprocity is a guiding ethic among humans (Brantlinger, 2009). To these ends, SJE begins by learning about the nature of oppression—which is understood as a pervasive, and cumulative process in which personal bigotry becomes fused with institutional practices and sanctioned by laws, economic policies, and social mores (Bell, 2016). Simultaneously, SJE strives to include multiple perspectives and to honor the multiple histories, knowledge, expertise, and understandings of all groups (Hawkins, 2014). As such, teaching for social justice is a form of conscience raising, both at the individual and collective levels, which can have emancipatory and transformative outcomes for individuals and society as a whole (Freire, 1993).

Critical theory—an umbrella term for a range of perspectives (e.g., postcolonial, poststructural, feminist)—is based in a core assumption that knowledge is socially constructed, political, circulates through discourses and social practices, and is used in ways that privilege some groups while simultaneously marginalizing others (Ryan & Grieshaber, 2004). Critical theory is applied to anti-bias education in the form of critical pedagogies (Freire, 1993). Critical pedagogies seek knowledge outside of the culturally sanctioned master narratives, particularly from historically marginalized groups, allowing for the inviting of counter-knowledges through which students can question commonly held beliefs and internalized ideologies. Here, there is an acknowledgment that children of all ages are often deeply concerned with issues of fairness and equity,

and that educators as well as students can engage in examining hidden biases and recognizing oppressive systems that have been assumed to be the "truth" (Kuby, 2013; Lalvani, 2015). Through constructivist teaching, children actively participate in constructing their own identities and making sense of the information they encounter; students are positioned as the architects of their own self-directed learning (Allen, 2013).

In alignment with critical theory and SJE, DSE is invested in understanding how power relations play out around issues of disability and its intersections with other marginalized identity categories. DSE posits that by exploring multiple perspectives on disability, including their own, young children can come to understand shifting interpretations of social issues, situated in sociocultural, political, and historical contexts (Danforth & Smith, 2005). By embedding SJE and critical theory within a DSE framework to engage in anti-bias work with children, an opportunity opens up to pursue pedagogical approaches that promote children's internal curiosity about exploring identity, which to date have been stifled in early childhood education.

Now Is the Time: Engaging *With* Young Children to Challenge Injustice

In this article, we have explored intersecting ideas that influence the natural joy and curiosity young children have about the world, with a particular focus on noticing differences among people. In addition, we examined the serious challenges and injustices facing early childhood education today as well as theoretical framing to lead us to sustainable solutions to these complex issues. In this final section, we provide four educational practices about how to engage in anti-bias work together with young children to cultivate their sense of justice inside and outside the classroom.

We propose that whether at the local or global levels, educators must not remain part of the problem but stand in solidarity with children to be part of the solution. As such, we propose the following educational recommendations to consider how to partner with young children to preserve joyfulness and challenge systemic prejudice, bias, and exclusion. These recommendations include, reimagining equity-based pedagogical practices, reframing narratives about disability and diversity in the curriculum, rethinking freedom and humanity, and reconnecting to place-based pedagogy in early childhood education.

Reimagining Equity-Based Pedagogy

By engaging collaboratively and consciously with young children on a regular basis, we deepen our understanding of bias and our response to it. Erwin (2020) advises that "through identity-specific conversations about difference and dignity, we can construct with children what it means to be human" (p. 59). Anti-bias teaching practices in early childhood is based on an implicit understanding that children can benefit from learning about equity and fairness, and that it is important to teach them to value all forms of human diversity. In a just, democratic society, the need for citizens who are self-directed and have the tools to recognize and challenge injustice is increasingly urgent. Therefore, educators must cultivate an unwavering sense of justice through equity-based pedagogy in collaboration *with* young children (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019).

Beneke et al. (2019) assert, "anti-bias learning should begin and end with considerations of how each child in the classroom community can take an active role" (p. 82). Furthermore, they argue, practitioners need to create learning environments in which all intersecting identities are affirmed, including disability identities, and where deficit-based ideologies are disrupted. Based on these ideas, we suggest that early childhood teachers actively engage in anti-bias practices and pedagogical approaches in collaboration with and alongside young children. Anti-bias work is an ongoing process that is embedded daily within instructional and non-instructional times, as opposed to only during certain routines, units, or days of the week. In essence, an equity-based approach must be infused into the climate of inhabited learning spaces.

Working in close partnership with young children to identify and transform narratives on injustice requires a deep sense of awareness. As discussed earlier, young children tend to live fully present in the moment and it is precisely this awareness that educators must also invite and revisit in their own lives. Focusing an awareness into whatever is happening in each moment allows us to notice more fully and clearly. It is precisely this noticing that early childhood practitioners can use to become more in tuned to all the explicit and implicit messages about injustice that occur during school, and help children to notice them too. Erwin (2020) suggests that during conversations with young learners "in the absence of respect or dignity, there is a discourse rooted in deficit-oriented and disapproval thinking" (p. 171). She further explains teaching young children about justice is analogous to supporting them to practice noticing and being present since both processes are ongoing and intentional, and involve a deeper sense of reflection and questioning. We recommend that educators engage in their own reflective inquiry to inform their teaching, and at the same time engage alongside young children in reflective and contemplative practices. In other words, partnering with young children to advance justice must encompass a daily, deliberate reflective practice involving personal as well as collective inquiry.

Critical pedagogical approaches can serve as a way for young children to interrogate issues of fairness, equity, and power in their classrooms. Teachers and children may engage in critical inquiry leading to social action that

addresses issues of fairness and bias within their schools. For instance, inviting children to question issues of access during play by asking critical questions such as: Who is able to enjoy this playground? Who would not be able to enjoy all parts of this playground? How is this fair? Who decided how this playground was made? What are some ways we can make changes to this playground so that everyone can play here? Who can we talk to about making these changes?

For children to truly build communities, we wish to stress that teachers need to first situate themselves in relation to their students. Gross (2020) emphasizes the need for White teachers to acknowledge their privilege, teach from multiple perspectives, ask which perspectives are missing, encourage advocacy, lean into discomfort, practice reflection, expose themselves and their students to other people's stories, and center other people's truths. As Gross further explicates, true education is liberation—a process where there is acknowledgment, that we participate in systems that have detrimental effects on our students and colleagues of color, teaching these truths to your students and to all around you, and ultimately making spaces for people of color to be seen and heard.

We wholeheartedly concur, and we extend Gross' recommendations to the full spectrum of diversity among us; teachers should situate themselves in relation to the multiple and intersecting identities of the children before them, creating opportunities for the exploration of privilege associated with whiteness, heteronormativity, class, gender, language, or levels of ability. Erwin (2020) further emphasizes that "when we dismiss, ignore, or take lightly any form of microaggression, we are essentially teaching young children that prejudice, bias, and injustice are acceptable. We must begin to notice—alongside young children when microaggressions occur" (p. 119). If a teacher notices that microaggressions occur between peers, the teacher can invite children to think reflectively and critically by creating structures in the classroom, for example, maintaining "solutions circles" where classmates can meet to engage in collaborative problem solving or designing allocated spaces for stillness, reflection, and/or quiet contemplation. Through a culture that values questioning of injustice, children can drive their own understanding of equity, and take ownership of solutions that benefit all.

Reframing Narratives in the Early Childhood Curriculum

Humans have multiple and intersecting identities: race, social class, age, gender expression, disability, religion, ethnicity, language, and more. There are multiple ways in which educators can communicate to children a value and appreciation for these. For example, Lalvani and Bacon (2019) explain that

> Reading books and sharing images of diverse families (some that include disability) is one way to open dialogue [about diversity]. Perhaps teachers might strategically choose books about families who look different, speak different languages, observe different religions, have two dads or moms, have non-standard family structures, have family members who use a wheelchair or have an intellectual disability, or represent the intersections of these categories. (p. 5)

Anti-ableism in education is based on a stance that positioning disability as a natural form of human diversity aims to provide children with the necessary tools to recognize and challenge disability injustice and to question the hegemony of normalcy itself (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019).

For this reason, teachers need to infuse liberatory messages about difference, diversity, and disability into the early childhood classroom through, for instance, the curriculum, materials, toys, wall coverings, literature, art, and music. Some practical ways educators might infuse discussions about disability through the arts, for instance, include (a) viewing artwork created by people with disabilities; (b) viewing dances made by the *National Dance Institute Dream Project* (National Institute Dream Project, 2019) and creating and performing a new dance that represents the diversity within the classroom community using various modalities; (c) choosing a class song that embodies the classroom diversity through lyrics and movement; (d) engaging in a craft activity where each child creates their own fidget toy that works best for them and that can be shared by others (Lalvani & Bacon, 2019).

Through such examples, we can see how making curricular choices about how to approach existing or absent messages within literature, for instance, requires close scrutiny of the positioning of power (e.g., who is represented or silenced, the arch of story plot, motivations of characters). Whether the curricular focus is on literacy, mathematics, social studies, technology, science, the arts, and so on, we must inspire young children to engage in genuine conversations, investigations, and critical examinations about diversity and dignity, especially when challenging or uncomfortable situations are presented, dismissed, or ignored.

(Re)thinking Freedom, and Humanity: It Begins Here and Now

For young children, particularly those who are marginalized, there is little to no joy in learning in the absence of justice. Love (2019) notes that both joy and Black joy are central to justice, particularly in education, although there is a fundamental difference:

> Black joy is often misunderstood. Black joy is to embrace your full humanity, as the world tells you that you are disposable and that you do not matter. Black joy is a celebration of taking back your identity as a person of color and signaling to the world

> that your darkness is what makes you strong and beautiful. Black joy is finding your homeplace and creating homeplaces for others. (p. 120)

As educators, we must commit to understanding the prominence joy holds in the lives of young children and how joy may be positioned and expressed by those who are traditionally oppressed, excluded, or stigmatized. Engaging joyfully in anti-bias work together with young children helps to advance our collective sense of justice in schools and in the world.

How justice is realized within an early childhood context depends on collective structures as well as individual commitment. From a global perspective, Moss and Urban (2020) advise us that interrogations focusing on "how to secure humanity's survival on a finite planet have moved from hypothetical to urgent with a convergence of climate crisis and global pandemic" (p. 6). They warn that the urgency to confront social, environmental, and ecological justice in early childhood can only occur if worldwide, uniform, and predetermined outcomes for young children are not the focus.

There is no justice if children (or educators) are not free to make decisions about their own learning and teaching. Social justice in all forms, therefore, is about freedom. Shalaby (2017) argues that "we pay dearly for our failure to teach freedom, for our refusal to insist on being fully human, and for our selection of just a precious few who are granted the right to matter" (p. xvii). Shalaby continues to explain that we need schools to be the origin of creating a world where there are no throwaway lives, "to resurrect our imagination for schooling as a deeply human, wildly revolutionary site of possibility" (p. xviii). This can only happen, Shalaby claims, if there is an urgency and collective response to teach love and freedom.

By profiling the lives of four young children, all of who are beautifully human despite their inabilities to conform to the rigid natures of their schooling contexts, Shalaby reveals the urgency and practices needed to recreate early childhood education. Ultimately, she describes a set of teaching practices and ways to handle what is commonly considered "behavior problems" that adopt an approach that she calls a "loving way" (p. 176). These practices involve the following approaches: (a) having discussions with children about the meaning of freedom; (b) presenting problems of freedom and help students work together to solve the problems; (c) noticing behaviors that present a threat to freedom; (d) working alongside children when they express behaviors that pose a threat to freedom, and allow for the class community to discuss and work through a curious approach to uncovering what the behaviors might mean; and (e) identifying the human need that the behavior might be signaling, and have a collective way to meet that need. Freedom and justice must be considered widely respected approaches to handling student behaviors in classrooms, thereby providing alternative and dignified ways for teachers to engage with "classroom management." The lessons from Shalaby's book are immensely important for us to truly place value on humanity and reimagine joy, justice, and freedom in early childhood education. It's about time.

(Re)connecting "Place" and Early Childhood Pedagogy

Injustices are not solely related to human beings. Attention to environmental or ecological injustice, specifically related to land, continues to grow. The concept of *place* has been critically examined, specifically its relationship to early childhood pedagogy (Finch & Bailie, 2015; Rau & Ritchie, 2018). Altman et al. (2015) acknowledge place-based education "as education grounded in the built and human (social, cultural, and economic) environment, as well as in the natural environment" (p. 2). Understandings of place situated within a context of early childhood pedagogy can extend far beyond surface-level thinking about land, environment, geography, and landscape. Instead place represents a deep respect for and interconnectedness between history, traditions, knowledge, and rituals. The idea of place-based education confronts conventional thinking about place by exploring the interrelationships that exist but have been unacknowledged, silenced, and misunderstood—locally and globally. It is not possible to exclusively question, with young children, injustice related to people and living beings without also examining the significant, contextual, and historical understanding of place.

Specifically, Duhn (2012) encourages a broader thinking and conceptualization of place that extends beyond local environments and considers multiple forces and forms, including non-human entanglements, which are located within place. In this way, thinking about place in broader ways is one way of revealing and reconciling a painful colonial past by acknowledging Indigenous culture, history, knowledge, language, and rituals that are inseparable from the land. It is these understandings of justice—related to place—that are virtually absent in early childhood pedagogy, particularly in Western cultures.

Hamm (2015) suggests that one way to consider place-based pedagogies in early childhood education is to construct new and diverse understandings about place, such as situating Australia's Aboriginal history, culture, and ways of knowing at the very core. As a way of transforming early childhood pedagogy, Hamm noted that early childhood place-based pedagogy starts with a decision as well as a responsibility to conceptualize place as larger than simply environment, and to examine critically with young children the complicated and complex connections of past, present, and future. Critical examinations with young children, specifically around place, encourage critical thinking about

history, justice, and connections. Invite young learners to be curious and reflective about place in the present and the past. For example, multiple investigations with children about place might involve noticing the many varieties of flowers, trees, plants, ponds, and rocks to research how they and the land have changed over time. In addition, teachers should encourage children's emergent explorations of whose land this is, who has been here before, and how can we learn about place through our senses. The teacher plays a critical role by encouraging a deeper awareness of place alongside children.

A focus of place-based pedagogy into early childhood must acknowledge and reconcile the past, which is key to advancing justice in early childhood education and care. Thus, a sense of place is far more multifaceted than a traditional Western perception of place which is often limited to owning land. Together with young children, an inclusive, deliberate examination of place must involve a discovery, awareness, and appreciation of land with all of the intersectionality, complexities, and histories.

Conclusion

In this article, we discuss a web of intersecting ideas and approaches to teaching and learning within early childhood education that draw upon the tendencies of young children to be joyous, curious, fair, just, and caring human beings. We wish to position anti-bias teaching in early childhood *not* as efforts to introduce children to the ideas of fairness and justice, but rather, as efforts to *undo* the damage resulting larger societal messages that children may internalize. Current neoliberal trends combined with the proliferation of prejudiced norms and discourses threaten early childhood education. Yet, we feel that there is optimism and a pathway toward a more just and joyful world that begins by working in partnership with young children.

We propose that by promoting positive, prideful narratives from marginalized and multiply-marginalized groups (Connor et al., 2016), reimagining equity-based practices, reframing narratives in the early childhood curriculum, rethinking freedom and humanity, and reconnecting place-based pedagogy, there may still be *time* to transform early childhood education. Inclusive education in this sense mitigates the need to hunt, label, and identify young children as disabled who simply fail to fit within the rigid norms of schooling. When considering the current era, which has witnessed an urgency to focus on change, based on the Black Lives Matter movement and amid economic, health, and social upheaval, it is clear that we are living in an era of uncertainty. However, we are hopeful that such uncertainty brings the promise of unprecedented opportunity and transformation. For this reason, there has never been a more urgent time to partner with young children toward creating a more joy-filled and just world.

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