

Alternative Communities in a Time of Crisis

We are living in the midst of an intensely divided nation, large scale distrust of those who differ from us, and an unpredictable future. News reports tell of increasing numbers of desperate refugees, war and terrorism, an uncertain global economy, and frightening political dynamics. As early childhood educators, our work takes us directly into this world of turmoil, which is impacting our most vulnerable population, young children and their parents.

There are critical questions now facing our field. How can child care programs provide conditions of safety and openness for everyone in a time of social and political crises? What kind of educational community can be inclusive of differing needs with families in a highly diverse society?

Attending to these questions will require more than adjusting classroom curriculum. It will entail creating a more expansive approach to our concept of education; one that is able to produce communities that embrace multiple realities and needs of families. Our ability to respond to changing times may well determine the viability of early childhood education today.

A glimpse into key factors necessary for creating an inclusive community emerged as I listened to students sharing during our last class of Working with Children and Parents. With tears in her eyes, Sophia raised her hand to speak. “You know, all the readings and projects were great. But what I really learned from this class is that I’ve been living in a box. I couldn’t see beyond my reality. My own biases blocked me from knowing anybody different from myself, even people in my own family... Quietly looking at each student, she continued,

I just want to thank each of you for telling your stories. Every story shocked me. I thought I had everyone figured out when I first looked at you. But I didn’t know anything that you all had been through, how brave you are, and how much you cared about me

when I finally could tell the truth about my own life. I feel like I'm going back into the world knowing less than when I came into this class. The one thing I know is that everybody has a story, and I can't judge anyone without knowing their story (Bernheimer, 2016, pp. 115-116).

I gratefully listened to her message. Sophia, like other early childhood educators, will be facing many realities that take her far from textbook theories and guidelines. Reflecting upon her personal beliefs while listening to others' stories, enabled Sophia to move past life-long biases into a broader, more empathetic understanding of others.

Early childhood at the crux of change

The image of early childhood education as a protected and insulated field does not reflect the reality of its position in our society. Every day, teachers confront traumatic issues that are usually seen only as sound bites on the news: a father killed in the Middle East; a child and parent suddenly living in a car; a refugee family frightened of being deported; a child who stops speaking as his parents go through a divorce.

These are some of the many experiences that Sophia heard as fellow students shared their hidden stories. Yet, their stories did not stop there. Their narratives included ways they developed unexpected strengths and forms of resilience. Within the safety of this learning community, where people could share, listen, and explore new perceptions of life, Sophia began gaining a fuller picture of how people live and develop.

Their stories made her think of the children and families at the program where she was teaching. So many were frightened of what could happen to them. She saw immigrant parents closing down, not talking to anybody. Some children came to her scared that police were going to come after them. What kind of community do children and parents need at a time like this?

Creating alternative communities

In times of anxiety, parents and their children often lose the ability to see beyond fear-based perceptions and limited choices. Early childhood programs can play a vital role in our society by offering alternative communities that provide the caring and safety everybody needs to learn and grow together. Children and adults can let go of the constraints of self-protection to share with others, explore new ideas, and be part of an inclusive community. Thus, our field can fulfill its true purpose as an educational institution; to support and protect the optimal development of all its participants.

Two unanswered questions address this vital issue, “What mechanism is powerful enough to create modern-day forms of alternative communities?” “How can these communities become safe, inclusive environments for highly diverse children and parents?”

These questions lay heavily on the mind of Juanita. As the director of an early childhood program in the Central Valley of California, she wanted to find a way to include the Latino farm labor families they were serving. She watched the fearful look on parents’ faces when they entered the school, hardly ever speaking to the teachers. She remembered her own life growing up as a child of a farm labor family. She always felt marginal at school, and her parents never spoke with her teachers. Most hurtful was the sense that she had nothing to offer because of her family, and she had nobody to reach out to for help.

Juanita had a vision of having the children and parents become a vital part of her program. She wanted a place where the families felt appreciated, and safe to share their lives and needs with her, teachers, and each other. “A key goal I had for the program was developing projects that would include parents. I knew I had to find a way to bring them into our child care community. I also knew how important food and cooking is for the families. I wanted to create

a ‘food curriculum’ they could relate to and become participants with the staff and children.” I wanted them to have a way of connecting and building a community together.

The way of storytelling

When staff responded with anger and resistance to changing the curriculum, Juanita remembered how stories brought people together in her teacher preparation class. She saw how sharing stories connected people who had little in common outside the classroom,

I told them about how I had felt as a child in school, having parents who were farm laborers and being poor. I felt I didn’t belong and my parents were afraid of speaking with the teachers. And how these kinds of changes will help children feel they belong in school and that parents can be part of their children’s education.

Juanita shared about all the ways that cooking could benefit children, and make families part of the program. She also told them her own story about cooking with her family while she was growing up. This opened the way for them to begin telling stories about their own experiences with cooking. The more they shared, the more the atmosphere began to change. Eventually, Juanita gained staff support to put her vision into action.

Once the teachers agreed to the new curriculum, its benefits for everyone began multiplying, reaching the children, staff, and parents. Cooking is an activity that the families relate to well. As they enacted the curriculum, their connection with others grew,

The staff decided to have pot-luck dinners once a month. Parents brought in their favorite dishes. We were all eating and having fun together. The parents trust the teachers now. And the teachers have parents helping in projects like holiday

celebrations. They all use food from the garden for cooking projects. It has many hands-on learning and social development benefits for children.

It has brought the staff together. They are helping each other plan new ideas for the center, and they go to workshops together. Another benefit has been that parents are more willing to talk with teachers about their children as well as participating in class activities (Bernheimer, 2016, p. 58 - 60).

A Greater Purpose

In this time of history, there is a great need to create educational institutions that are able to honor the lives of the children and parents they are serving. By embracing their stories as an integral part of our programs, we will be modeling a new kind of community where everybody plays an active part in bringing forth a deeper understanding of our shared humanity. In this way, early childhood programs can take a central place in our society, providing assistance, resources, and a safe and caring community for families.

The greatest risk confronting our children and parents is succumbing to a fearful silence in the face of ongoing threats. Not only would such communities be an antidote for a sense of hopelessness and fear, they will be modeling an education that illuminates the richness of our diversity. In cities such as Los Angeles, now home to people from over 140 countries who speak 224 languages that have been identified (World Population Review, 2015), the stories of children and parents will be continually expanding our knowledge base. Freire (1998) believes that we should always be expecting new knowledge to arise, enabling us to move beyond the current limiting beliefs. Our shared stories will take us into this world of new possibilities.

References

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