

Practicing Inclusion, Doing Justice

Disability, Identity, and Belonging in Early Childhood

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Abstract

The implicit and explicit messages early childhood practitioners send about disability have important consequences for young children's developing identities and sense of belonging. The authors discuss how practitioners can cultivate early learning communities in which the identities of all young children, with and without disabilities, are affirmed. Drawing on research and examples from practice, they explain how early educators can challenge and change deficit-based assumptions about disability and other forms of diversity by practicing inclusion. The article provides a framework for practicing inclusion and illustrates how such a process has the potential to positively affect the experiences of young children with and without disabilities, sending a much-needed message to all young children and families about civil rights, human diversity, and justice.

Leo, a 2.8-year-old child, experiences developmental delays. Leo was born just months after his family emigrated from Mexico to the United States. He has attended the same early childhood center since he was 12 weeks old. Leo moved from the infant room to the toddler room alongside his peers. He frequently chooses to participate in small- and large-group classroom activities such as dancing and exploring books with other children in the class. However, center staff have recently voiced concerns about

Leo advancing with his peers to the preschool classroom in the fall. The center has a strict policy that children in preschool must be able to use the bathroom independently, and Leo has not shown interest in toilet training. The staff understand that Leo's documented developmental delays may impact when he begins toilet training. Felicia, the center director, believes her preschool staff do not have the resources to support children in diapers. Up until this point, center staff have included Leo in all classroom activities and have welcomed his early intervention (EI) team as partners in supporting full inclusion for Leo. However, when Leo's parents meet with Felicia, the EI team, and the preschool teachers, they seem to come to an impasse over the toilet training issue.

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Early educators who practice inclusion design and reflect on activities, environments, and classroom experiences with each individual learner in mind, to ensure that all children can access and participate in interesting, relevant, and engaging early learning experiences.

2016). In other words, disability is produced in environments in which individuals are perceived to be different from socially constructed notions of normal child development. For example, in the opening vignette, Leo's delay in toilet training was constructed in relation to a socially shared value around when and how toilet training should be mastered. Were Leo to be in a program with different expectations for toilet training, there may have been no issue with him transitioning to preschool. Thus, despite the ways IDEA frames disability as an either/or (i.e., an individual either has a disability label or does not), the meanings and consequences of a disability label change depending on children's circumstances, and directly relate to assumptions in particular social environments (e.g., classrooms, child care centers, schools).

As we discuss identity and belonging in EI/ECE/ECSE, we recognize that disability identity is complex and intersects with other aspects of identity. By this we mean, there is a tendency to discuss individuals in terms of singular notions of identity (i.e., disability or race or gender) and to make generalizations about all people within these categories. However, we know that individuals with disabilities are simultaneously members of multiple identity groups and social locations (Annamma et al., 2016; Crenshaw, 1995; Gillborn, 2015), whose experiences with disability, identity, and belonging vary. For instance, Leo is not only a young child with a developmental delay, but also a young boy of color whose parents are immigrants. Based on a combination of factors (i.e., biological, environmental, geographic, historical, political), Leo's sense of self and belonging may look very different from another child with the same disability label. In this article, while we foreground disability, we recognize how intersecting identity markers (e.g., race, gender, class, language) are also relevant to a child's sense of self and belonging.

What Is Ableism?

Leo's parents worry about the short-term and long-term consequences of not advancing Leo to the preschool classroom with his peers and feel that the center is not considering Leo's identity and sense of belonging. They are concerned that center staff are focused on what Leo cannot do rather than all that he can do. They are afraid that keeping Leo in the toddler classroom will affect his friendships while sending other children, families, and center staff deficit-based messages about Leo, his disability, and their family. At drop off, Leo's mother has already heard another child call Leo a "baby," because he still "wears diapers" and is upset that the teachers did not intervene. Leo's father wonders how their family's immigration status might also be impacting center staff's thinking about Leo's transition.

Supporting young children with and without disabilities to navigate messages about their own and others' identities requires that EI/ECE/ECSE practitioners contend with implicit and explicit forms of ableism. Like other -isms (e.g., racism, sexism), ableism is an oppressive ideology that permeates systems, policies, and practices. *Ableism* can be understood as:

The devaluation of disability [that] results in societal attitudes that uncritically assert that it is better for a child to walk than roll, speak than sign, read print than read Braille, spell independently than use a spell-check (Hehir, 2002, p. 3).

Ableism is systemic, meaning it is not simply an individually held explicit prejudice, but a social idea that is deeply embedded in how society is structured around singular accepted standards of physical, intellectual, and emotional normalcy (Sensory & DiAngelo, 2017). Such enmeshed societal attitudes mean that even well-intentioned EI/ECE/ECSE educators work in systems that frame young children who do not meet notions of "normalcy" through a deficit lens (Ferri & Bacon, 2011). To illustrate, Leo is seen as "different" from his same-age peers because he is not meeting center staff's developmental expectations for toilet training. Because of this difference, the problem is seen as "with Leo" versus with staff expectations or the policy. Positioning Leo as the problem justifies his potential exclusion from transitioning to preschool, as opposed to critically examining programmatic expectations for toilet training. In addition, Leo's father is concerned that this decision is potentially influenced not only by ableism but also by deficit-based thinking toward children of immigrants. Leo's father's response is justified, as ableism can be exacerbated when individuals experience intersectional forms of oppression (i.e., ableism and xenophobia; Annamma et al., 2016).

To promote young children's sense of belonging, EI/EC/ECSE educators must recognize how ableism operates through deficit-based thinking and take actions that support children's belonging in classroom and program communities. First, center staff can shift the focus to children's assets and interests. Instead of concentrating on a narrow set of skills (e.g., toilet training) that Leo does not have to be "ready" for the transition to preschool, staff can prioritize ensuring the

on activities, environments, and classroom experiences with each individual learner in mind, to ensure that all children can access and participate in interesting, relevant, and engaging early learning experiences. For example, early educators in a toddler classroom might post simple step-by-step photographs of children engaging in classroom transition to the outdoors so that children see themselves represented in the classroom and have visual cues to support the transition process. These same educators might engage in ongoing documentation of children's interests and home experiences, rotating available choices to ensure that activities will garner each child's interests. Educators might build classroom systems for multiple modes of communication, in which children can express their feelings verbally and/or by pointing to pre-printed images. In the next section, we discuss the process of practicing inclusion and doing justice in more depth, using Leo's story as an example.

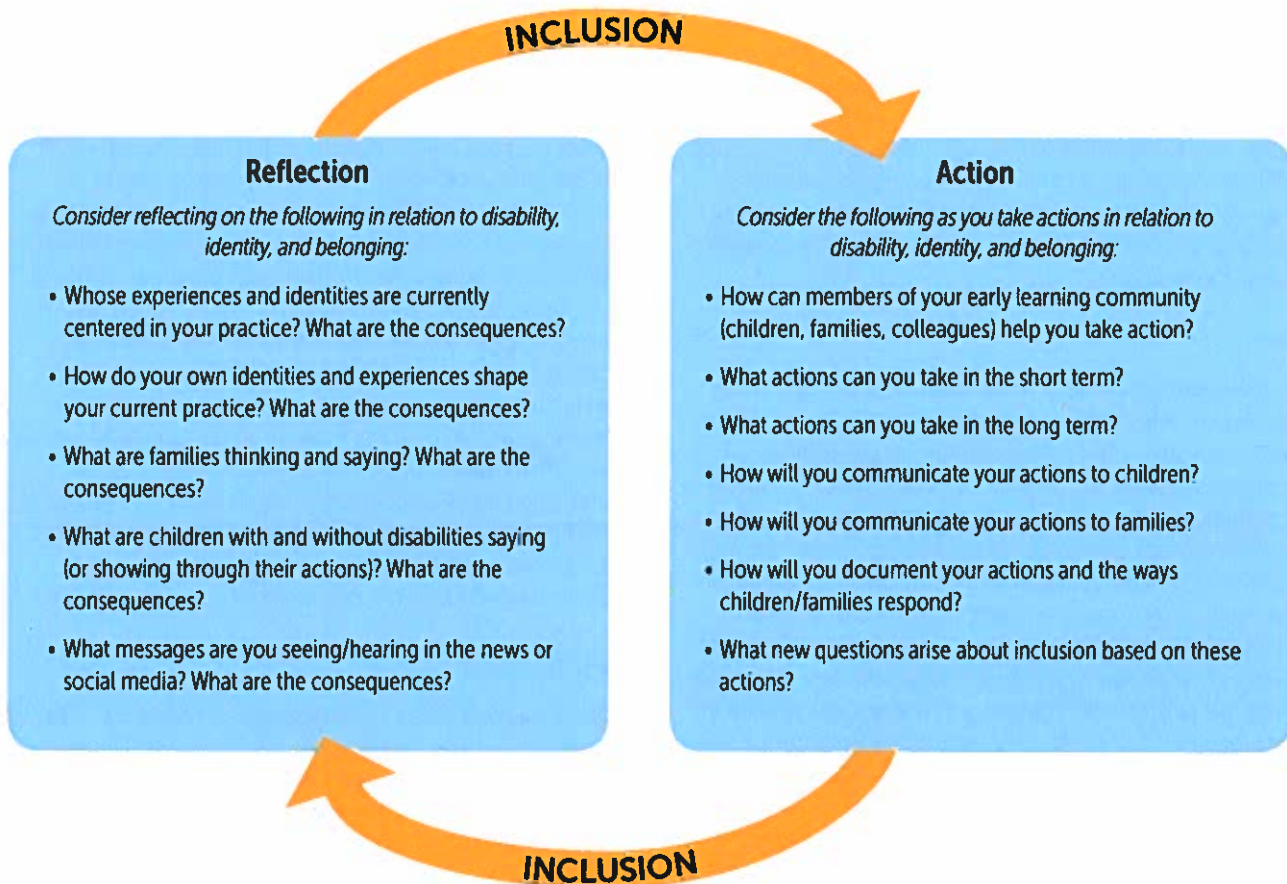
Practicing Inclusion

The meeting to discuss Leo's toilet training and potential transition to preschool continues. One member of Leo's EI team, Dana, speaks up, "I think it's important to consider the ramifications of keeping Leo in the toddler room. This

decision means we are excluding Leo from preschool. How will this decision affect Leo and how he feels about himself? How will it influence how his peers think and feel about him? We are keeping Leo from important learning opportunities and friendships in the name of toilet training. Can we think creatively about how to work around this toilet training policy?"

In the context of histories of educational exclusion and deficit-based narratives about disability, EI/ECE/ECSE practitioners must grapple with how ableism shows up in their day-to-day practice, as well as in program policies and procedures. While adapting practice to meet the needs of individual children and families is necessary, it is equally important to re-think policies that perpetuate exclusion. Doing so supports and affirms the identities of young children with disabilities in early educational settings. Critically interrogating assumptions to promote belonging can be accomplished through *praxis*. As Freire (2018) explained, "Praxis [is] reflection and action on the world in order to transform it" (p. 51). We apply this view of praxis to inclusion (see Figure 1). Through an ongoing, iterative process of reflection and action, we believe EI/ECE/ECSE practitioners can practice inclusion, transforming early learning communities into spaces where young children with

Figure 1. A Framework for Engaging in Inclusive Praxis





Cultivating early learning communities in which the identities of all young children are supported and affirmed is an iterative, ongoing process.

a committee of parents and teachers to continue breaking down these barriers." Camila responds, "I would love to be a part of that committee. It would be interesting to see how we could involve the children in this work as well. Let me know how I can help." Kevin, who had initially articulated feeling unprepared to include Leo, shares, "This conversation has pushed me in ways I was not expecting. I'm looking forward to learning more about how to make this an awesome year for Leo, for you all, and for the preschool children."

Learn More

Resources for Practicing Inclusion in Early Childhood Settings

The Preschool Inclusion Toolbox: How to Build and Lead a High-Quality Program
E. E. Barton & B. J. Smith (2015)
Baltimore, MD: Brookes

Implementing the Project Approach in Inclusive Early Childhood Classrooms
S. Beneke, M. M. Ostrosky, & L. G. Katz (2018)
Baltimore, MD: Brookes

DEC Recommended Practices in Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education 2014
Division for Early Childhood (2014)
www.dec-sped.org/recommendedpractices

First Steps to Preschool Inclusion
S. S. Gupta, W. R. Henninger, & M. E. Vinh (2014)
Baltimore, MD: Brookes

Six Steps to Inclusive Preschool Curriculum: A UDL-Based Framework for Children's School Success
E. M. Horn, S. B. Palmer, G. D. Butera, J. A. Lieber, A. I. Classen, J. Clay, ... A. Mihai (2016)
Baltimore, MD: Brookes

Cultivating early learning communities in which the identities of all young children are supported and affirmed is an iterative, ongoing process. Said differently, inclusive praxis requires early educators to engage in a reciprocal cycle of reflection and action. Because center staff took time to rethink the policy and have begun to shift practice, Leo now has the opportunity to continue building relationships with his peers and learn alongside his peers in preschool. The adults in Leo's early learning community worked together to engage in reflection and action around the toilet training policy, and this process must continue for Leo to be supported once he enters the preschool classroom. Therefore, practicing inclusion in EI/ECE/ECSE settings is never over. Inclusive praxis requires that early educators continue to challenge deficit-based assumptions about disability and other forms of diversity, recognize how forms of exclusion present in their practice, and make changes. Through ongoing reflection and action, EI/EC/ECSE educators can consider how classroom and program policies, activities, experiences, and environments allow every child to access and participate in meaningful learning. This process can support children with disabilities, like Leo, to build a positive sense of self and experience belonging. Ultimately, such a process has the potential to positively affect the experiences of young children with and without disabilities, sending a much-needed message to all young children and families about civil rights, human diversity, and justice.

Authors' Note: The authors of this article represent former early educators, local and state administrators, professional development, current EI/ECE/ECSE scholars, and representatives of the Division for Early Childhood (DEC). DEC promotes policies and advances evidence-based practices that support families and enhance the optimal development of young children (birth to 8 years old) who have or are at risk for developmental delays and disabilities. DEC is an international membership organization for those who work with or on behalf of young children (birth to 8 years old) with disabilities and their families.
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Margaret R. Beneke, PhD, is an assistant professor in the College of Education at the University of Washington. A former inclusive early childhood teacher, Dr. Beneke completed her doctoral degree in special education at the University of Kansas. Her scholarship focuses on increasing access for children and families from historically marginalized backgrounds to inclusive, equitable education. Through critical analysis of the local processes and consequences of identity construction (e.g., ability, race, gender), she aims to support early childhood practitioners' inclusive practices, as well as identify and transform deficit discourses surrounding young children's identities and competencies. Dr. Beneke received the 2018 Outstanding Dissertation Award from the American Educational Research Association Disability Studies in Education Special Interest Group. She currently serves as managing editor for the Division for Early Childhood's practitioner journal, *Young Exceptional Children*.

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