



Dimensions of Early Childhood

Volume 46,
Number 2, 2018

**Every Child Needs a Champion:
Working with Children and Families
Living in Poverty**

**Transformative Education in Dallas:
The Story of Lumin Education**

**Addressing Poverty
through Authentic School
Partnerships Using High Impact
Immersion Experiences**

**Poverty and Immigrant Children:
Moving Ahead with
Esperanza, with Hope**

**La Pobreza y los Niños Inmigrantes:
Saliendo Adelante con Esperanza**

**Meeting Learning Standards
through Dramatic Play**

**SPECIAL
ISSUE**

**Supporting Children
Living in Poverty**

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Southern Early Childhood Association

Editor: Mari Riojas-Cortez, PhD
Dimensions of Early Childhood

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SECA serves the interests of early childhood educators concerned with child development, including university researchers and teacher educators; early childhood, kindergarten, and primary grade teachers; and early childhood program administrators and proprietors. The association has affiliates in 14 Southern states. Non-affiliate memberships are available to anyone living outside the 14 affiliate states. For information about joining SECA, contact the executive offices at (800) 305-7322. Members receive a one-year digital subscription to *Dimensions of Early Childhood*.

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Children's Champion, Jedi Warrior or Both?

BY CATHY GRACE, Ed.D. AND KENYA WOLFF, Ph.D.

The timeliness of this issue of *Dimensions* highlighting the need for innovative as well as practical solutions to support families in the South as new federal policies begin to take effect is apparent. It appears that some public benefit programs such as SNAP, Medicaid, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) will remain in danger of a reduction in funding as the current administration pushes for funding cuts in order to pay for a \$1.5 trillion tax cut that largely benefits wealthy individuals and corporations.¹ Even though those attempts have failed, for now, some states are seeking waivers that will allow for possible decreases in health care to take place. We know that children under 6 make up the largest group of Americans who live in poverty and it is their well-being that is hurt the most when these programs are cut.² In addition to the threat of cuts by Congress at the direction of the White House, state level maneuvers to reduce gains made at the Federal level calls for state advocates to be more vigilant than ever.

The need for a champion for children in every community is apparent. Who is standing for and with the children and families most impacted by recent federal, and in some instances, state changes or enactment of policies designed to reduce support to the low income families who work more than one job to just survive?

The national opioid epidemic has hit rural families as hard if not harder than those in urban and suburban areas of the country. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), in 2015 West Virginia led the nation in the highest rates of death due to drug overdose with Kentucky ranking third.³ According to the report, Southern states with significant increases in drug overdose-related deaths between 2014–15 were: Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, North Carolina, Tennessee, and West Virginia.⁴ In an astounding report from the CDC, all but three SECA affiliated states, Virginia, Florida and Georgia, have the same or more prescriptions issued for painkilling drugs (opioids) than state residents.⁵ Deter-

mining steps local advocates need to take to support recovering addicts who happen to be parents is place based. Do we have the army needed to take on this challenge?

The list of challenges to families in rural areas of the SECA affiliated states can be overwhelming. Some would say this points to the fact the region is as it is portrayed through stereotypic caricatures such as the *Beverly Hillbillies* or *Petticoat Junction* families or even worse, the characters in *Deliverance* or *Hee-Haw*. *The Waltons*-like life as portrayed on television probably occurred less likely than we would want to believe, but all of these television portrayals were just fiction, aimed at making money for the producers and actors who appeared in them. We are living in the here and now and must act accordingly if our children are to have a chance of being a competitive member of society who earns a living wage and enjoys a healthy life.

The following steps are important to consider when training to be a champion, just as the steps illustrated and portrayed in the training of the Jedi in the latest Star Wars movie, "*The Last of the Jedi*" became valuable to the Jedi. Acting accordingly is subjective. In considering your definition of champion, consider the following elements of training for a Children's Champion, Jedi Warrior or both:

Know what you are talking about.

The articles in this issue provide some solutions to challenges facing teachers and the profession at large. Go to state and local data sources such as Kids Count and state advocacy groups for data that can help make your case. Review information on websites that point out the economic return of investing in young children and make your case on one piece of paper. Look for solutions reported by others that address the challenges you are experiencing, reflecting on strategies that could be tried in your location.

Know who you are talking to and their interests in the topic at hand.

Research the positions taken by local and state leaders on children's issues before

meeting with them and come prepared to answer questions as well as pose them.

Know that this is a hard and sometimes thankless job. As with any worthwhile job, there are personal sacrifices that must be made if a person is involved as a champion for the long haul. Whether it is speaking out for poor children in a town or state level meeting where you are met with angry comments about your position or, losing a "friend" because you respectfully voice your opinion that differs from theirs, the trick is to be smart and non-yielding to the bait, which can get you off point or angry.

Spend time with the children and families for which you advocate, and encourage them to take their story forward.

One of the greatest mistakes made by champions is to become separated from the focus of their advocacy. True advocacy is not about the spotlight directed on the champion, but for the light to illuminate the possibilities of those impacted by bad policy or policies that promote inequity if they had a fair opportunity to realize their potential. Teaching and supporting families to tell their stories to decision makers will break down stereotypical generalizations about the poor and reframe issues in a way that only those affected can do.

Be clear with yourself when asking and answering "Do I have the resolve and fortitude to be a champion for children in my first grade classroom, with my university or community college students, or with my co-workers in my current place of employment? And within my own family?"

We begin this special issue with Wolff's article that calls on us to become, *Champions for Children and Families Living in Poverty*. This article examines some of the major factors that contribute to poverty in the South and how they impact children. It dispels some of the myths and stereotypes that exist about the poor and examines why it is crucial for teachers to uncover their own biases in order to promote equity in their

own classroom. Additionally, many practical suggestions are included to help educators become champions for children and their families, both inside the classroom and as advocates for policy change.

In the next article, *Transformative Education in Dallas: The Story of Lumin Education*, Cossentino and Ford describe and analyze a path-breaking educational program that has been serving low-income families for nearly four decades in one of Dallas, Texas' poorest neighborhoods. Drawn from a larger study, this article revolves around

Lumin's distinctive approach to directing early childhood education toward the amelioration of poverty. Working as a committed team, this handful of neighborhood activists willed their vision into existence. The approach that has evolved combines an insistent focus on community and family engagement with an educational system not typically associated with poverty: Montessori.

Barnes, Mathur and Myers share how their teacher education program is able to provide diverse field experiences in their

article, *Addressing Poverty through Authentic School Partnerships Using High Impact Immersion Experiences*. Acknowledging that the preparation of teachers to work with high-needs and high-risk schools requires innovation and intentionality, the authors discuss how they work closely with teacher candidates, classroom teachers, and administrators to develop local school partnerships and customize opportunities for teacher candidates that are responsive to the academic, emotional, social needs of children in the poverty context.

In Robles-Melendez and Driscoll's article, *Poverty and Immigrant Children: Moving Ahead with Esperanza, with Hope*, the needs of immigrant and poor children are the focus. This article calls on the reader to move forward, *hacia adelante*, and find effective solutions to address poverty challenges. Undoubtedly, challenges are many and remain on the educational agenda calling for concerted efforts from everyone needed to bring what is justifiably owed to children.

The final article, *Meeting Learning Standards through Dramatic Play*, written by Puckett and Vail, provides practical advice on how to differentiate instruction through center play, especially the dramatic play center. The authors share how teachers bring play-based learning back into their classrooms while meeting state standards and ensuring school readiness for all children.

As guest editors, we hope you find this issue of interest as you determine how your work will support Southern children and families in this most challenging time. The greatest impact families and children feel from the execution of policy and new or changed laws is how they are implemented at the local level. That provides any champion a large playing field on which to take a possible negative and turn it into a positive. But someone has to be there to make it happen.

Endnotes

1. Retrieved from <https://www.cbpp.org/research/federal-tax/jct-estimates-final-gop-tax-bill-skewed-to-top-hurts-many-low-and-middle-income>
2. Retrieved from http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_1172.pdf
3. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/data/statedeaths.htm>
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5. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/opioid-prescribing/infographic.html>



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Every Child Needs a Champion: Working with Children and Families Living in Poverty

BY KENYA WOLFF, Ph.D.



The Southern Early Childhood Association (SECA) has been committed to addressing issues that impact young children in the South for over 60 years. Poverty is one of the most pressing issues we face in the region. Consequentially, SECA made a conscious decision to strategically address and focus on the issue of poverty for over a period of two years. In 2017, the SECA conference theme, “Strategies for the New South – Addressing Generational Poverty” was adopted. Conference speakers, panels and workshops focused on working with and advocating for children and families living in poverty. The 2018 conference also addressed poverty with a focus on the preparation of professionals to meet the complex challenges of working with and advocating for children living in poverty, with the theme “Every Child Needs a Champion.” As child development and early education professionals, we envision a New South where every child has a champion; one in which children have every opportunity to reach their highest potential. High quality early childhood education has been shown to aid in breaking the cycle and

can be a major part of turning despair into hope. This article will examine some of the major factors that contribute to poverty in the South, how poverty impacts children, and the ways we can be champions for children, both inside our classrooms and as advocates for policy change.

Poverty’s Deep Southern Roots

It is important for us as educators to understand the unique challenges that we face in Southern states. While poverty is found everywhere, the South has the lowest median U.S. income and the poorest people per capita (US Census Bureau, 2017). In addition to higher poverty rates, the South has lower economic mobility, which is the ability of an individual or group to change economic status. The Economic Mobility Project (2012), identified some key factors related to areas that have lower economic mobility – it occurs in areas of high racial segregation, places plagued with income inequality, and pockets that have a higher rate of poverty than the national average. These

conditions can be found in many Southern states. In addition to lower economic mobility, wages tend to remain lower in the South. The poorest states in the U.S. are Mississippi, Arkansas, West Virginia, Alabama, Kentucky, New Mexico, Tennessee, Louisiana, South Carolina and Oklahoma (Semuels, 2017). Making matters worse, research also suggests that in the South tax policy is especially regressive – this means that the tax burden falls the heaviest on low-income families (Newman, 2013).

Too often families who live in poverty are stigmatized and judged by policymakers, teachers and the general public (Hansen, Bourgois, & Drucker, 2014). It is important to understand that the South’s deep-rooted poverty is a result of complex historical, economic, social, racial and political contexts. While personal agency plays a role in helping individuals escape the cycle of poverty, we must advocate for greater equity and systematic change. The bottom line is that in one of the richest countries in the world, too many families are living at or below the poverty level. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) released the 2017 Federal Poverty Level (FPL) Guidelines and a family of three must make more than \$20,420 to remain above the national poverty level. Many critics argue that this measure of poverty is outdated. Current research recommends doubling these figures, pointing to rising health care, housing and food costs. In 2017, a family of three that earns twice the FPL, which is \$40,840 per year, is considered low income (Jiang, Granja, & Koball, 2017). The majority of these are families living paycheck to paycheck, one crisis away from a financial calamity.

Poverty’s Impact on Young Children

As educators, we need to understand the immense impact poverty can have on young children’s minds, bodies and spirit. While

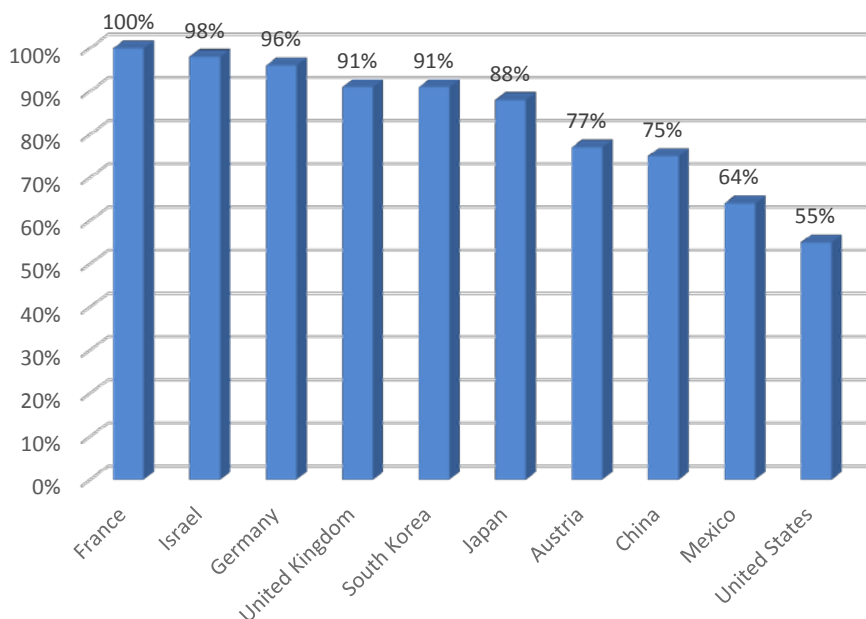
growing up in a poor home is not an automatic barrier to a child reaching their full potential, it comes with unique challenges and stressors. Poverty potentially impacts the child's physical health in myriad ways: poor nutrition, inadequate access to health care, increased incidents of asthma, ear infections, hearing loss, and tuberculosis. We have decades of research that have shown a connection between poverty and developmental delays, behavioral and emotional issues and lowered academic achievement (Yoshikawa, Aber, & Beardslee, 2012).

In the last decade, neuroscience has been able to show us that chronic stressors from living in poverty actually changes the brain's structure. Scientists using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans studied the brains of children and found that those from poorer families tended to have thinner sub-regions of the prefrontal cortex – the part of the brain connected with executive functioning (Cooper & Stewart 2017). Executive functioning skills include: working memory, ability to maintain focus, to prioritize and self-regulate. This impact on executive functioning is thought to explain the years of data we have seen on poverty's negative impact on academic achievement (Mariani, 2017).

Quality Early Childhood Education as Part of the Solution

We know that high quality investments in early childhood education can make a life-long difference in the lives of children. Furthermore, research shows that it can significantly help low-income children, even more than their peers if they attend quality center-based care before they start kindergarten. Two of the most notable preschool experiments are the HighScope Perry Preschool Study, which began in 1962 in Michigan, and the Abecedarian Project, which began in 1972 in North Carolina. Both longitudinal studies demonstrated that high-quality preschool programs can positively impact children living in poverty. Some of the benefits include increased executive function, higher graduation rates, reduced need for special education services, increased income levels and a reduction in incarceration rates from their non-preschool peers (Englund, White, Reynolds, Schweinhart, & Campbell, 2014). In addition, cutting-edge research coming from neurology has shown us just how critical the period of early childhood for the

Figure 1: Enrollment Rates of 3 and 4-year-olds in Preschool.
Data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2017).



creation of neural connections, with over 80% of them happening before the age of three. However, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, only 44% of children from low-income households attend center-based preschool versus 54% of middle-class children and 69% of children with a high socioeconomic status (Rathbun & Ahang, 2016).

Many countries, influenced by this research are making investments in early childhood, with the understanding that it will more than pay for itself in the long run (Heckman, Moon, Pinto, Savellyev, & Yavetz, 2010). It is this economic argument, that has persuaded lawmakers from both parties to support early education initiatives in their own states. However, there is still a lot of work to be done. In the latest Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2017) report, the U.S. is ranked 29th out of 36 industrialized countries that assessed early childhood education enrollment, access, funding, staffing (see figure 1).

The former U.S. Secretary of Education who served under President Obama, Arne Duncan, was asked why he thought the U.S. was so behind other nations when it comes to investing in young children, he replied, "I think we value our children less than other nations do, and I don't have an easier or softer or kinder way to say that." Duncan went on to talk about the "massive" impact this will have on our children, "It's a loss

of human potential. We don't truly believe there's tremendous talent in rural America or among black and brown children or among poor children. So, we choose to under-invest" (Mongeau, 2016). While this is a bleak assessment, we must ask ourselves, what will it take to make a difference? We know children and families deserve more. We have to be part of the solution.

What Can Educators Do to Champion Children and Families Living in Poverty?

The next section of this article provides practical suggestions for how educators can support children and families who struggle economically. One of the first and most important steps we can take is to examine our own biases regarding poverty and to make sure we aren't passing them on to our students. We can counter negative stereotypes and create safe, loving and equitable classroom environments that ease the burden of poverty for students and families. Educators are also uniquely situated to serve as advocates for policy issues that impact children in our classrooms and communities.

Examine Our Own Beliefs About Poverty

One of the first things we need to do as educators is to examine our own beliefs and biases towards families who live in poverty. There are many myths, misperceptions and

stereotypes that exist in regards to the poor. Our attitudes and beliefs impact how we treat the families we work with and can be passed on to the children in our classrooms. Below are some of the most common myths about poverty.

Misconception: Poor People Are Lazy. The belief that wealth is the result of hard work ignores the challenges that make it more difficult for some people to pull themselves up from their bootstraps. It also supports the idea that the people who are born into wealth got there based on their own individual merit or hard work. In contrast, most wealth is gained through inheritance, social capital and available educational opportunity. This is supported by the fact that the largest predictor of economic status is the economic status to which someone is born. In addition to the idea that the poor are lazy, many people assume that children living in poverty live in homes where adults do not work and live solely off government handouts. While there are some people who are able to work or choose not to, this ignores the millions of families who are working but fail to make a living wage.

The most recent figures from the National Center for Children in Poverty (2015) report that approximately 43% of children in the U.S. live in low-income families. The majority of these children have parents who work, but of all working families approximately one-third struggle to pay basic expenses such as food, housing and medical expenses. This is due to low wages, unstable work conditions, lack of sick pay, and/or health benefits. While some are able to climb out of these low-wage jobs, millions stay in them. It has been nine years since Congress raised the federal minimum wage and in that time food prices have increased 25% and housing 50% (Babic, 2016). Millions of families are struggling to provide for their children on \$7.25 an hour, which translates to \$290 a week or \$15,000 a year.

Misconception: Parents Living in Poverty Don't Value Education. Most parents living in poverty are supporters of education and do want the best for their children. However, they may not always show it in the ways we are accustomed. For example, parents living in poverty may be struggling to pay bills and provide food, leaving them without the energy or time to attend classroom events. Some may have had

negative experiences in school and therefore avoid it. Others may not be able to take off work or have transportation to attend parent/teacher conferences or field trips. As a teacher, it is best to assume that this is circumstantial and not make assumptions about the parent's commitment to their child's education.

Misconception: Poor People Waste their Money on Alcohol and Drugs. Substance abuse crosses all cultural, racial, religious and economic boundaries. However, this assumption is popular. It is so prevalent, that 10 U.S. states have begun drug testing welfare recipients. What these states found was welfare recipients are actually less likely than the overall population to take drugs (Covert & Israel, 2016). While the national drug use rate is 9.4%, welfare applicants ranged from 0.002% to 8.3%. In 2015, these states spent \$850,909.25 combined to find that just 321 people tested positive for drug-use and in one state, not one person had a positive test result (Covert & Israel, 2016).

Misconception: Parents Living in Poverty Lack Parenting Skills. This misconception is based in an outdated deficit model of thinking that is classist and ignores much of the research that shows that it is educational institutions and teachers who need to find better ways to connect with students from all backgrounds. When we fail to do this, there is an educational mismatch that can hinder learning. Rather than focusing on what a family does not have, it is important to focus on a family's funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). These funds consist of a families' unique strengths and hidden resources. This not only helps us to view families through a more positive lens, but it also enables us to become true partners with parents (Moll et al, 1992).

Given just how entrenched some of the myths are in our society, it is likely many of us have absorbed some bias. We need to examine our own attitudes, so that we are not reinforcing these myths in our own classrooms. After we have done the work of addressing our own bias, it is important for us to focus on how we can support low-income children and families in our classroom.

Provide a Safe, Loving and Equitable Classroom Environment

All children need to feel safe at school, but those who grow up in stressful environments

especially need reassurance that school is a place where they feel loved, comforted, and protected. The eight hours a child spends at school may be the only time he or she can relax and let down their guard. In order to relax and learn, they need to build a strong relationship with their teacher. Children who are constantly worried about safety need a teacher who is kind, caring and understanding. This doesn't mean teachers need to lower expectations for behavior and/or achievement, rather it means they may need to go out of their way to use a calm, soft and even tone of voice, and demonstrate that they care for the child and are there to keep him or her safe.

Another way to support children from low-income backgrounds is to be mindful of how economic equity is represented in the classroom. Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2010), share many wonderful ways that teachers can do this in the classroom in their chapter "Learning About Economic Class and Fairness," in "Anti-bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves." It is a wonderful resource on the topic. Below are some of their practical strategies for supporting low-income children and economic equity in the classroom:

- If "show and tell" is something your class participates in, make sure to focus on meaning and experiences rather than material things. Too often, this activity turns into an opportunity to "show off" the latest and greatest toys. Have children bring in a photo or bring in their oldest toy and explain why they still love it.
- When talking about community helpers and jobs, make sure you are including all types of roles. Don't just focus on doctors and policemen. Ask parents who work as janitors, trash collectors and wait staff. This helps children take pride in all jobs and know that everyone can contribute to society in their own ways.
- When reading stories, make sure to expose children to the many diverse places in the community. Read books about children who live in apartments, mobile homes and single-family homes. Include books with characters who use public transportation and go to laundry mats to wash their clothes. This not only helps children from low-income backgrounds to see themselves in the story, but exposes other children to the different ways people live.
- Be sensitive to issues surrounding food.

For children who have experienced hunger, it can be confusing and down-right insensitive for us to encourage children to use food to create art or to play with in the sensory table. Adopt a policy that food is exclusively for eating. It is important that we teach a respect for the sanctity of food and avoid sending the message that food is something some people have so much of they can use it for play.

Partnering with Families

One of the most important things a teacher can do is to build relationships with students and their families. Each family is different and has its own set of strengths and challenges. It is crucial to avoid making assumptions or judgements based on one set of characteristics or circumstances. With that said, below are some ways that educators can support low-income families and in turn support their students.

- Be open and welcoming to families when they visit. Some adults have had negative experiences with school when they were children themselves. They may have great anxiety about visiting a school and speaking to an administrator or teacher. A smile and an open-door policy goes a long way to building a relationship. Acknowledge the strength it took to overcome their personal feelings about school as they attempt to become involved in their child's program.
- Be creative when scheduling parent-teacher conferences, meetings and classroom events. Find out the schedules of parents and be flexible. Some hourly-wage jobs do not look kindly on employees leaving during their shift.
- Be cognizant that some families may not have regular phone service and/or access to email. Ask parents how they prefer to communicate with you and be creative about sending messages. For example, some schools put a sticker on children's shirts to remind families of important events, along with sending texts, placing notes on the door, etc. Make sure that you are also communicating in a language the family can understand. This may mean you will need to arrange a translator for all of your newsletters and to be at conferences.
- Avoid adding extra financial pressure on families who may already be struggling to provide for their family. For example, some preschools celebrate color week where children are required to wear a different color

shirt each day. This may seem easy for some but adds stress to families who do not have as many clothing options. Other financial pressures include requiring money for field trips, school supplies and class parties. Consider allowing parents several options for how they can contribute. For example, some parents can send money, some parents can volunteer in class, and for those who cannot come to class, provide an alternative way they can help from home (i.e. collect recycled items for a future art project).

- Create a family resource room for all parents. This can include a computer and lending library with books on parenting and children's books, DVDs, etc. The center should also provide information about community resources such as food banks, job opportunities, health clinics and shelters. It is important to know these community resources yourself so that you can be a source of information for families.
- Finally, work hard to avoid judgment. Regardless of circumstances, each family is unique and some relationships take longer to build than others. Keep in mind that families experiencing poverty may be overstressed, working several jobs and may be focused on survival. It is really important to avoid judgement. There are often times circumstances may be unknown to you. For example, a child may be chronically late because a family's vehicle is unreliable or absent because there was not money to visit the laundry mat and there were no clothes to wear. These times bring to mind, Mother Teresa's famous quote, "If you judge people, you have no time to love them."

Become an Advocate for Policies that Support Families

As educators who care about children, we should all be concerned about the growing number of families who are struggling economically. Many of us can relate to this struggle, as we may be part of a low-income family. On average, preschool teachers make \$28,500 nationally, which is significantly less than the \$53,100 a year K-12 teachers bring home. Head Start teachers with a Bachelor's Degree earn \$24,000 less annually than K-12 public school teachers. This wide disparity is even larger for Early Head Start teachers who earn \$27,000 less than public school teachers with the same credential (Interlandi, 2017). We need to be advocating for higher pay for our field and

living wages for all.

Becoming an advocate can be intimidating and overwhelming for those of us without experience. It can be helpful to join with others to learn and hear about how they are making progress in their states. That was the idea behind the *Possibilities, Policies and Practices for the Future: Early Childhood Education in the South Research Symposium* which brought together 60 early childhood educators and policy experts in Biloxi, Mississippi. This event was the first of its kind and provided an avenue for early childhood experts to meet around common issues facing Southern rural communities. Poverty, race, low wages in the field and funding for early childhood programs were central to the research presented. A panel addressed the importance of advocacy and also explored community-based models for change. On the panel, Michelle Accardi, the Director Policy and Partnerships National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, was asked to share some of the wisdom she's garnered advocating in Washington, D.C., over the years. Her advice was to "build a strong rapport with not only the legislators but also with their staffers. These relationships are crucial. The goal should be to become known as an expert on Early Childhood Education issues. That way when a something related to young children comes up, they will think about calling you."

There is an overwhelming amount of research on the issues. We need to convince policymakers that they need to make an investment in early childhood programs now in order to reduce poverty, incarceration, special education services, and other costs later (Heckman et al, 2010). The data is available and we need to at least be able to summarize it, in order to begin using it when advocating for a more equitable system. It is equally important for educators to stay informed. Get the *Politico Morning Education Report* – it is free and can be trusted for accurate and fair information.

Look for local opportunities to talk to your national representatives. It is easier to go to the state office or to make an appointment with your Senator when he or she is home. Also keep in mind that the time to make or establish a relationship is before a bill is introduced. Invite policymakers into your classroom, or to visit them when things are calm. We have to participate. We may think that we are not political, but we

all have to move out of our comfort zones, as the experts who can inform policymakers. It is our job to push things to be where they should be.

Conclusion

If ever there was a time for SECA to be heard, it is now. Federal law changes are putting poor children in compromised situations regarding their health, mental wellness, educational advancement, and general well-being. We hear politicians wax on about how children are this country's greatest resource, but they vote time and time again for deep cuts to education, health and social services. There is need for increased advocacy around many of the issues discussed in this article. We know that children are worth investing in, not only because there is a proven return on our investment, but because it is our moral imperative. A champion is one who succeeds against all odds and refuses to give up. Together we can champion children living in poverty. The great Fred Rogers (2003) once said, "When I was very young, most of my childhood heroes wore capes, flew through the air or picked up buildings with one arm. They were spectacular and got a lot of attention. But as I grew, my heroes changed, so that now I can honestly say that anyone who does anything to help a child is a hero to me" (p. 145).

Join SECA in becoming a champion for children today.

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on children within today's globalized world. She currently has several studies underway, including one on the use of yoga in preschool settings, a study on homeschooling as "school choice" in rural settings and an investigation on administrative decisions to recommend alternative schools for young children. In addition to research, Dr. Wolff currently holds a position on the editorial board for the Southern Early Childhood Association Journal, Dimensions, and serves as an associate editor for the journal, International Critical Childhood Studies. She is also mother to Grace (16) and Ethan (12), who inspire her daily to strive for a more just and equitable world for children everywhere.

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Transformative Education in Dallas: The Story of Lumin Education

BUT, ISN'T MONTESSORI FOR RICH KIDS?

BY JACQUELINE COSENTINO AND TERRY N. FORD



This article describes and analyzes a path-breaking educational enterprise that has been serving low-income families for nearly four decades in one of Dallas, Texas' poorest neighborhoods. Drawn from a larger study of four pioneering early childhood programs¹, this particular story revolves around Lumin's distinctive approach to directing early childhood education toward the amelioration of poverty. Lumin's history is embedded, foremost, in the drive of neighborhood parents who rallied around two local educators and activists to create Dallas's first community school. Working as a committed team, this handful of neighborhood activists willed their vision into existence. The approach that has evolved combines an insistent focus on community and family engagement with an educational system not typically associated with poverty, Montessori.

While Montessori education has been part of the American educational landscape for more than a century, since the 1960s it has tended to be most visible in affluent communities. Rising out of a post-war economic boom, which led to a new population

of college educated mothers searching for better solutions for their children, Montessori surged as a boutique pre-school option in the leafy suburbs of major U.S. cities (Whitescarver & Cossettino, 2008).

The same culture that enabled Montessori to take hold as a private preschool option for affluent families also gave us Head Start, which not only affirmed the potential of early learning to address some of the impacts of poverty, but also identified Montessori as an "approved" model for the program (Rose, 2010; Zigler & Styfco, 2010). In the late sixties and seventies Montessori Head Start programs proliferated in cities like Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. During this same time, Montessori was also directed to rural and southern poverty centers as a strategy for the Johnson administration's War on Poverty (Gitter, 1965).

Within this culture, Lumin's founders, Terry Ford and John Fullinwider, grew up and toward a life's work focused on activism, education, and social justice. This article's authors, Jacqueline Cossettino and Terry Ford, have been working together for three years to describe and analyze the

significance of the Lumin story. What follows is that story told largely through Ford's narration with further analysis provided by Cossettino.

Origins

As a girl growing up in Prairie Village, Kansas, Ford recalls watching the Civil Rights movement unfold on her family's black and white TV. "At the age of nine," Ford remembers, "I announced to my parents that I was going to Alabama to march with Dr. King." They gently convinced her to wait a few years. By the age of twelve, her goals had sharpened to focus on education as she decided to become a teacher in inner city schools; and by high school she was volunteering at the local Head Start program and tutoring children in a low-income neighborhood of Kansas City. In 1978, still in her twenties, she had been teaching for four years serving as a first-grade bilingual teacher in the Dallas Independent School District.

Early in her career, Ford moved into the low-income East Dallas community that surrounded the public school where she taught first grade. At the time, her school served a largely African-American and Hispanic population, and when her students came to visit on her front porch, she was evicted. At that point, she found herself involved with a local activist group called the *Bois d'Arc* Patriots. There, in addition to campaigning for fair housing policies, she met John Fullinwider, also a teacher, librarian, and housing advocate – who today is recognized as Dallas' "best community organizer" (*Dallas Observer*, 2016). Together with neighborhood parents, they founded a non-profit called Neighbors United for Quality Education and opened East Dallas Community School.

At the start, the program served eight children in borrowed space with a budget

of just under \$9,000. Nearly four decades later, the school, which is now a network of schools called Lumin Education, serves more than 600 students from birth to age nine on four campuses. Blending federal, state, local, and private funding, Lumin manages a seven-figure budget, and has achieved acclaim throughout Texas and the U.S. as a model of family-centered, community-based education (Ayala, 2014; Ford, 2015).

From the beginning, Fullinwider explains, “We never saw the school and the community as separate. The only way that the school could survive was if parents made it happen.” Two parents in particular, Rosa and Lupe, are the protagonists of one of the school’s first stories. Lupe worked as a painter. Rosa worked as part of a crime prevention program for the *Bois d’Arc* Patriots, which meant she was mostly volunteering, thus not much money was coming in. In 1978 they had two sons, Alonso and Juan Carlos.

Ford explains:

Alonso was in elementary school. He was basically a good, smart kid, but he was getting into trouble at school. His teachers complained that he didn’t pay attention, he had a bad attitude, and his grades were dropping. Juan Carlos was just three. As Rosa and Lupe tried to figure out how to help Alonso, they were equally concerned with ensuring a different path for Juan Carlos.

Juan Carlos became the first child to enroll at East Dallas Community School.

With Juan Carlos, Rosa and Lupe pursued a different path than the one with Alonso. Neither parent had ever been involved at Alonso’s school. They didn’t attend parent conferences or go to PTA meetings. Rosa explained, “In Mexico, where Lupe and I grew up, the respect for teachers is very high, so you don’t put your nose in their business. It’s the teacher’s job to teach and it’s the parents’ job to take care of things at home,” but at East Dallas Community School, things were different. Rosa explained, “If we wanted this school to make it, we had to participate. That’s how I learned to volunteer and to be involved in my child’s education.”

There are other versions of this story. One story is about Pepe Rivera a parent who worked busing tables at a restaurant and got permission from his boss to host a benefit dinner that helped raise the \$3,000 down payment for the building that Veena, another parent, found. Another features

two local ministers, who each at different times allowed the school to operate in their churches for drastically reduced rents. Another features the neighbors who comprised the *Bois d’Arc* Patriots, and who worked together to advocate for better living conditions and saw education as a key to improving the lives of neighborhood families. In all versions, the core theme remains the same: Social action that is community-based, collaborative, and focused on doing with, as opposed to doing to, the neighborhood is what enabled the Lumin project to succeed.

The climax of these stories is also consistent: Parents are empowered to harness their love for their children toward actions that result in deep and lasting success not just for the children, but for the family and the community as well.

Ford narrates:

When Juan Carlos moved from East Dallas Community School to DISD’s OM Roberts Elementary, Rosa became the president of the PTA. She was president through Juan Carlos’ 6th grade year. She went door-to-door telling parents how important it was to be involved and tripled the attendance at PTA meetings. Juan Carlos went on to do very well in school. He was a quick learner; he was persistent – always completing whatever he started – and he had a beautiful heart. All the teachers loved him.

For Rosa, Lupe and their sons, Lumin “planted a seed – *una plantita*.” As Rosa puts it, “If we need something to be done, we need to get up and do it.” That seed is what Ford and Fullinwider and their neighborhood compatriots call “empowerment” and it represents Lumin’s greatest impact. As a symbol of the child’s potential, the seed grows to fulfill not just its own destiny, but to thrive within nested systems—the family, the neighborhood, and society. The seed is the source of its own potential and its power is magnified by the community within which it grows.

The story’s conclusion emphasizes the way in which thoughtful, informed action leads to “transformation.” “Being a parent,” Fullinwider explains, “means learning to be an activist.” Ford agreed, “Rosa and Lupe and the other parents and teachers not only transformed the lives of their own children, but countless other children and parents. They actually ended up transforming a

whole community and the way that our community views education.”

The Lumin Model: Start Early, Involve Parents

Today, the ideas of early learning and family engagement are so prevalent that the Lumin motto, “start early; involve parents,” seems self-evident, even a little quaint, but in 1978 the concept was nothing short of revolutionary. As the stories above attest, Ford and Fullinwider arrived at the motto and built a program that embodied it through direct engagement with the families of the East Dallas neighborhood that they themselves, were also members. As neighbors, they saw, first-hand, the negative impact of delayed formal schooling, and just as important, the transformative power of engaging parents in the process of supporting their children’s development.

In fact, only in the last decade has public opinion shifted to embrace the value proposition of early learning, let alone the idea that it is worthy of widespread public funding. In 1978 most people associated Dallas with the lavish lifestyles of the oil barons and cattle ranchers depicted on the eponymous television show that began its run in April of that year. Dallas was a segregated city, with wide income gaps, a growing population of immigrants and a boom or bust economy at the mercy of the oil industry and (later) high tech. The East Dallas neighborhood where the families of East Dallas Community School lived was a world away from South Fork Ranch or even the closer-in, affluent neighborhoods of Highland Park, Preston Hollow or Westlake. Still, people shared a common view that young children belonged at home. Pre-school options were rare and, typically, only available to either the most privileged in the form of pricey half-day programs or to the lowest income families through Head Start.

The pricey programs included Montessori schools, which at the time catered almost exclusively to professional families. It was at one of these schools that Ford first saw Montessori in action. Still an undergraduate at Southern Methodist University, a professor in a course on the Philosophy of Education – “the only time in four years I heard the name Montessori mentioned” – suggested she visit the school her children attended in North Dallas. “I was dumbfounded,” she says of her first

visit, “I watched these children go about their purposeful work and just was struck by how calm and peaceful and orderly and interactive the classrooms were. I thought ‘this is it’. This is what I want to do when I teach first grade in the inner city.”

Ford was so taken with what she saw that she continued to visit each week for an entire semester, “just trying to absorb what was going on.” Knowing that the only Montessori options available at the time were in tuition-based schools, she elected not to take the formal Montessori training (later, when Lumin sponsored a course, she earned an AMI diploma). Instead, she read, observed, talked with Montessori teachers, and “tried to soak up as much as I could.” When she became a first-grade teacher, she attempted to reproduce as much as possible in her own classroom. When the time came, four years later, to open East Dallas Community School, she knew she wanted it to be a Montessori school.

Meanwhile, Fullinwider continued to advocate for fair housing policies as well as teach in the Dallas public schools. His insights from the field continued to fuel the Lumin vision on both fronts. Indeed, the disconnect between “great education” and the social – both school and housing – infrastructure that determines what sort of education most of our children experience was, and remains, a key theme in the Lumin story. Ford and Fullinwider’s first priority was serving the neighborhood, which meant addressing the existing infrastructure. At the same time, their vision for how to work within the system pushed against convention. Fullinwider concentrated on protecting the stability of the neighborhood by successfully changing the zoning laws to stave off gentrification. Through a careful examination of the zoning codes, he devoted himself to a campaign to make the neighborhood surrounding the school the city’s first planned development district designed to preserve a working class neighborhood (Hendricks, 1990). Ford, on the other hand, focused on what happened inside the school.

“I’m going to open a school for families who don’t have any money,” Ford explained to her supportive, though somewhat confused, parents. She laughs as she recalls their reaction. “How does that business plan work?” they asked her. At the time, she didn’t have a fully formed answer, but she and Fullinwider were determined not just

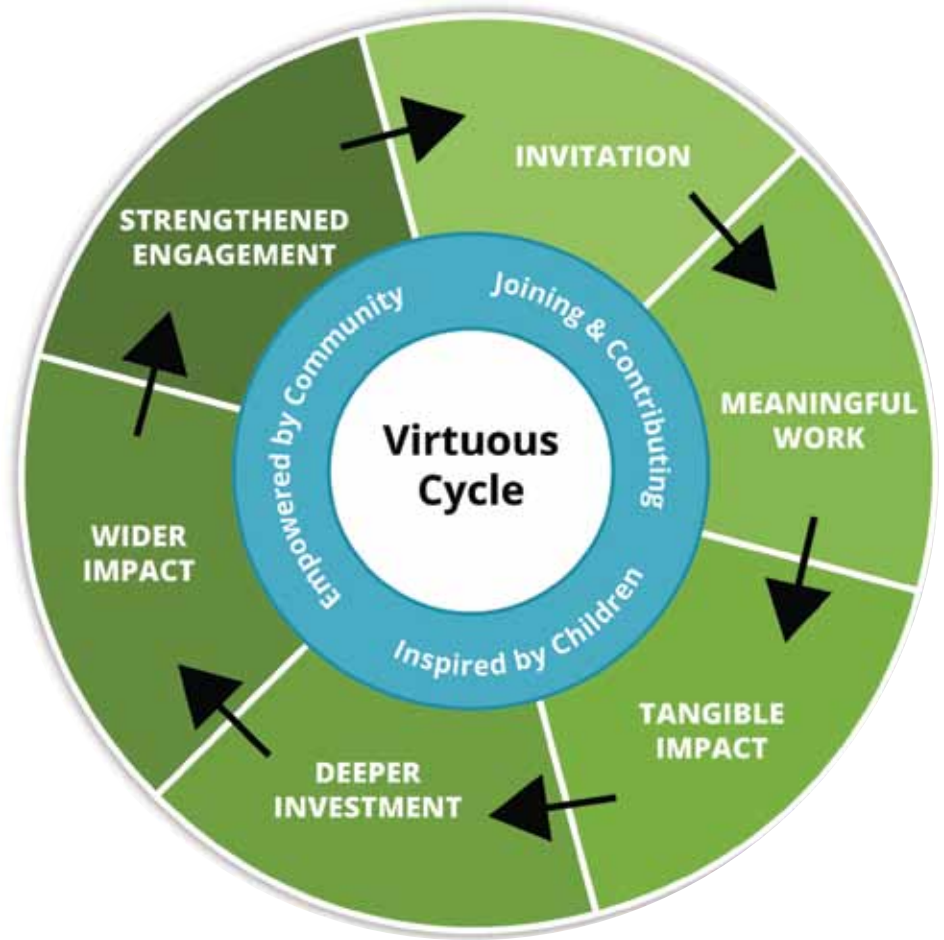


Figure 1: The Virtuous Cycle of Meaningful Family Engagement

to open a school for families without money, but to open one that looked a lot like the ones that families with lots of money chose for their own children.

The Virtuous Cycle of Meaningful Family Engagement

In the beginning, the business plan relied heavily on volunteerism – volunteer carpenters and cleaners, real estate consultants, fundraisers, even volunteer teachers. It took several years for the school to be able to afford a fully trained Montessori teacher; and during that time, the school pieced together volunteers to manage the classrooms while holding fast to the vision. It’s crucial to note that everyone who was giving to the school was also getting something of value in return.

Because their volunteerism was directly linked to tangible, positive outcomes related to their children, parents had the most to gain. As a result, Ford’s original business plan, which was not really a plan at all, launched a virtuous cycle that produced

far more positive outcomes than even she anticipated. In fact, it was the necessity of engaged families that gave birth to the idea that parent involvement could be something more than attending PTA meetings or holding bake sales.

Indeed, it wasn’t just involvement that the East Dallas project called for. It was deep, ongoing engagement driven by genuine need, which produced concrete benefits to both; to those who contribute directly and, over time, to the wider community. As the *figure 1* suggests, invitation to participate in meaningful work – rather than offering a new service – was the catalyzing act.

It may seem like a minor distinction, but it turns out that invitation, rather than solicitation (or summons), is the key ingredient to successful engagement because it entails relationship. Invitation signals activity done *with*, rather than *to*.

Put another way, because invitation assumes reciprocity, it is an act of respect. Respect is a cornerstone of community, and when it is offered in the context of shared

commitments and shared work, it can lead to love. In the case of family engagement focused on human development, love is always present because parents love their children and are intrinsically motivated to work for their well-being. When that work yields tangible outcomes – children who are thriving, parents who experience the satisfaction of effective nurturing along with being part of a community that shares commitments, struggles and successes, the work enlarges itself – the commitment deepens, and the impact widens further.

The intangibles – inspiration, humility, compassion, a sense of belonging, and clarity of purpose – are just as important. In fact, these core values are what break the vicious cycle of deficit-based service models focused on requiring, remediating, and monitoring parent behavior. Ford is quick to point out that she did not invent this approach to working with families. Fullinwider further emphasizes:

It doesn't take a superhero to do this.

It takes paying attention to neighbors' hopes and dreams, needs, and skills. Contrary to what many think about people living in poverty, the parents we know – all of them – dream of better lives for their children and are willing to do almost anything to ensure those dreams are realized. We invite engagement through real, meaningful work.

In other words, at Lumin Education, they follow the family. Following the family looks a lot like following the child. Which is to say, it is a developmental process, fueled by authentic engagement in meaningful work and grounded in deep, trusting relationships; and that's by design. Ford's certainty that Montessori was what she wanted for this school was not just about offering families without money access to the kind of education that the most affluent members of society seek for their own – though that's not insignificant. The developmental theory that undergirds Montessori education, rather, is directed entirely toward the realization of human potential, both at the level of the individual and at the level of society. When Montessori (1972) wrote, "the child is both a promise and hope for mankind" (p. 208), she was referring to the inspiration that adults can, if they pay attention, derive from the very process of human development.

The virtuous cycle that was launched in 1978 continued to gain momentum, even-

tually leading to substantial investments from outside the East Dallas community. Today the Lumin budget blends federal, state, and local funds with significant philanthropic support. Ford spends much more of her time cultivating external stakeholders. Fullinwider continues to lead the Board of Directors. Together, these founders oversee a growing infrastructure aimed toward ensuring the sustainability of this model beyond their tenure. Yet, at the core, the work is still directed toward continually catalyzing family engagement in ways that are personal, invitational, and focused on realizing the potential of very young children.

The work of organizational development is both fueled and tempered by the personal stories of the families that comprise the "community" of Lumin Education's four community schools. Early on, the story of Rosa and Lupe and their two sons, Alonso and Juan Carlos, Lumin's very first student, was a signifier of hope and empowerment. The coda to that story, however, conveys a more complex message. As Ford tells it, East Dallas in the 1980s was heavy with gang activity:

When Juan Carlos was 15, he had saved his money to buy a car and bought a 1950 Mercury that he worked on every day after school. One evening, he and his dad and some other friends and family were outside in the driveway working on the car, and a member of a gang drove by and thought he saw someone from a rival gang. He fired his gun, spraying the yard with bullets and Juan Carlos, an innocent bystander, died. A few years later in a case of mistaken identity, his older brother Alonso was also killed in another gang-related shooting.

When Ford relays these events, she does so in the same, measured, precise manner she uses to explain any other situation. Gangs and gun violence are part of life in many neighborhoods. And neighborhoods are also made up of many people who are a lot like Rosa and Lupe.

That seed, that little *plantita*, that had been growing in Rosa took root. She took a job at *Mi Escuelita* and over many years helped hundreds of children and families. The parents, in particular, learned to be involved in their child's education. But really, after the death of

their two sons, there was only one thing that kept Rosa and Lupe from falling into complete, unending despair. And that was their youngest son, David. David was just about a year old when Juan Carlos died. Growing up, he attended Dealey Montessori School (a Dallas magnet school), and he now has four children of his own, who also attend public Montessori schools.

Rosa and Lupe weathered the tragic loss of their two sons. They faced unimaginable adversity and carried on, in part, because they were able to maintain hope not just for David but for hundreds of other children who, like David, might have access to educational opportunities that can make a better life possible.

Part of the reason Ford tells stories like these is to guard against the tendency to regard the Lumin story as something supernatural. The daily reality of life in neighborhoods blighted by poverty, neglect, and crime is far from magical. There is no fairy dust to sprinkle and erase the suffering that comes with poverty. There are no simple solutions. And every triumph occurs within the context of daily adversity. Taking on this work means living with that daily reality, and continuing anyway.

For as long as they can remember, Fullinwider and Ford have been animated by the pursuit of justice through collective action, through community organizing, and, most of all, through education. Through Ford's entire adult life, one figure has remained a constant reminder of not only why she does what she does, but how. His name is Charles Franklin.

Ford met Charles when she was seventeen and a freshman at Southern Methodist University. Charles was in fourth grade. He and his brother lived with their grandmother because their mother was in jail. Beginning in her freshman year Ford tutored Charles three times a week and continued to work with Charles through the next four years. Charles remains a close friend to this day, and Ford credits him with "teaching me more about being a teacher than any education professor I ever met."

Working with Charles, I learned about things that I had never known. I learned about wolf rats that crawled along the tops of the kitchen cabinets. Pimps and drug dealers were the ones in the neighborhood who had the money to



Conclusion: The Steady Work of Social Justice

In some ways, the goals and method of the 1960s War on Poverty have come full circle. After nearly two decades of efforts to close a stark and persistent achievement gap through back-to-basics teaching driven by high stakes testing, the pendulum has swung back toward a preference for education that looks a lot like the Lumin model. Fueled, in part, by a surge of research on neurodevelopment and trauma, links between early learning and poverty are even more starkly drawn than they were when Head Start launched in 1965.

Focusing less on deprivation and disadvantage (key words in early Head Start documents) than on human potential, birth to six is no longer understood to be the period before real learning begins. Rather, study after study demonstrates that 85 percent of the human brain's development is complete by age five (Galinsky, 2010; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2016). Not only is growth rapid during this period but the brain's plasticity makes the acquisition of important executive function skills such as inhibition, working memory and cognitive flexibility especially robust at this time (Center on the Developing Child, 2011). Taken together, this research confirms not only that these years are most significant in determining future success, but that investing in the very young produces dramatic economic as well as developmental returns (Heckman, 2011).

Perhaps not surprisingly, the proliferation of new research has also fueled significant policy initiatives at all levels. Recent federal investments such as the *Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge*, combined with legislation enabling state-supported pre-Kindergarten in 44 states have made early learning much more common for many more people. In 2015 almost 1.4 million U.S. four-year-olds were enrolled in a state-funded pre-Kindergarten program, a jump of about 37,000 from the prior year (US Department Of Education, 2016).

The expansion of early learning opportunities is good news for advocates of poverty amelioration and social justice, but it only addresses part of the challenge. As the Lumin story illustrates, the kind of education offered to vulnerable families matters just as much.

Great education should start early, it should support the development of execu-

have nice clothes and cars. The three-year old girl next door died when her nightie caught on fire with the old space heater that her family used to heat their home.

But one of the things that I remember most vividly is what Charles' grandmother told me the first time I met her. I drove the van to his house on Bryan Street. I walked up the broken steps and knocked on the screen door. The first thing that hit me was the damp smell and how dark it was inside the house. Charles led me back to his grandmother, who was raising Charles and his brother while his mom was in the penitentiary. His grandmother was ill and was in bed laying down, but when she realized that I was Charles' tutor, she struggled to sit up and had a very clear, straightforward message for me: 'I want you to learn that boy. And I want you to learn him good. And if he don't learn, you whoop him. You whoop him till his bones break if you have to, but you learn him.'

When Ford tells this part of the story, she often cautions listeners to pause and "look through words to see a powerful message" of determination and desire for justice. Filtered through 40 years of direct work with hundreds of families like Charles' and Rosa's and Lupe's, Ford understands justice through the eyes of a child to mean three things

including a decent place to live, a safe place for children to play, and a great education for all children. Charles got none of that, as seen in the following excerpt:

Justice would have been Charles getting a great education. Instead, Charles was 10 years old and could barely read or write or add two-digit numbers. What justice ends up looking like for Charles – after he starts hanging out with the pimps, getting in trouble, stealing in order to buy food for his family – is, a few years later, going to prison for life due to committing a murder in the course of a robbery.

The story concludes, as usual, with a lesson:

When I met Charles, he was not a criminal or a murderer. He was a scared little boy who was failing in school. What Charles taught me is that if you want to transform the lives of children in poverty, don't wait until they are in 4th grade.

Charles, of course, represents much more than a lesson. He has been in prison for more than 30 years and every Saturday morning he and Ford talk on the phone. Before giving me permission to tell his story in these pages, Ford made sure to discuss it with Charles. Ford and Charles share a genuine friendship, born of mutual respect, constancy and, ultimately, a particular kind of clear-headed hope.

tive functions and social-emotional skills as well as personalized, hands-on, and deeply engaging to students. It should prepare students not just to pass tests, but to participate in an increasingly complex social, political and economic world, a world in which creativity and innovation are necessary not just for economic participation, but for human flourishing. And within this environment, Montessori is slowly but surely drawing attention to itself as a model of education that not only does all these things but has been doing them steadily for the past hundred years and not just for affluent families.

Despite public perception, Montessori is firmly established as a public-school option for more than 125,000 U.S. children and that number grows by approximately 5% annually (National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector, 2016). Slightly under half of the children who attend public Montessori schools live in poverty, and many are located in urban centers with especially high concentrations of racial and economic isolation. In cities like Milwaukee, Chicago, Dallas, Denver, Baltimore, Memphis, St. Louis, Hartford, St. Paul, and Washington, DC, public Montessori schools not only serve low-income families, they are integrated communities, serving rich and poor side by side.

Finally, as both Fullinwider and Ford emphasize, the issues facing education aimed toward social justice have not changed all that much since Lumin first started in 1978. "We're still about lifting every voice," says Fullinwider. Ford agrees, and also sees the potential for the vision of a true community school to expand beyond even the four campuses and 600 families Lumin currently serves. "We've been learning all these years about what works for families and children; and we are more and more convinced that great things are possible when you start early and involve families."

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TERRY N. FORD is the Co-Founder and Executive Director of Lumin Education. In 1978, after four years as a bilingual first grade teacher in the Dallas public schools, she opened a school for eight children - sharing donated space with a neighborhood methadone clinic - in response to concerns of neighborhood parents who saw their children falling through the cracks in public school, branded "failures" as early as second grade. For the past four decades, Terry and her team have worked relentlessly to implement the philosophy of "Start Young, Involve Parents."

Ford graduated with honors from Southern Methodist University with a B.A. in elementary education. She holds lifetime bilingual elementary teaching certification from the State of Texas and primary teacher certification from the Association Montessori Internationale. Based on Lumin's outstanding results with children from primarily poverty-level families, Ford has been honored with the Dallas Historical Society Award for Excellence in Education (1981); the Real Estate Council's Dreamers, Doers and Unsung Heroes Award (1993); and Southern Methodist University's Distinguished Alumni (1996), History Maker (2013), and Simmons School of Education Luminary (2014) Awards.

Endnotes

1. In addition to Lumin, *Following the Family: Practical Lessons for Educating Human Potential*, tells the stories of Family Start Montessori in Denver, Colorado, Montessori Partners Serving All Children, in St. Paul, Minnesota, and Crossway Community, in suburban Washington, DC.

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Addressing Poverty through Authentic School Partnerships

USING HIGH IMPACT IMMERSION EXPERIENCES

BY SUSAN BARNES, SMITA MATHUR AND JOY MYERS



Poverty is an elusive and context-specific construct that is hard to define. It implies the inability to secure a healthy diet, live in safe and sanitary dwellings, and secure basic education and fair employment. During childhood, intergenerational, absolute, and situational poverty contributes to trauma much like physical, emotional, verbal, or sexual abuse, domestic violence, parental incarceration, mental illness, and alcoholism (Campbell, Walker, & Egede, 2016). Healthy social, emotional, and cognitive development in early and elementary years serve to mediate the traumatic effect of childhood poverty. Quality and responsive education empowers children and their families and offers a way out of chronic poverty (DeJarnette, 2016). Thus, rigorous teacher preparation programs must include several opportunities for teacher candidates to learn about the context and effects of poverty on young children and their families.

The Context

James Madison University (JMU) is embedded in a diverse community in

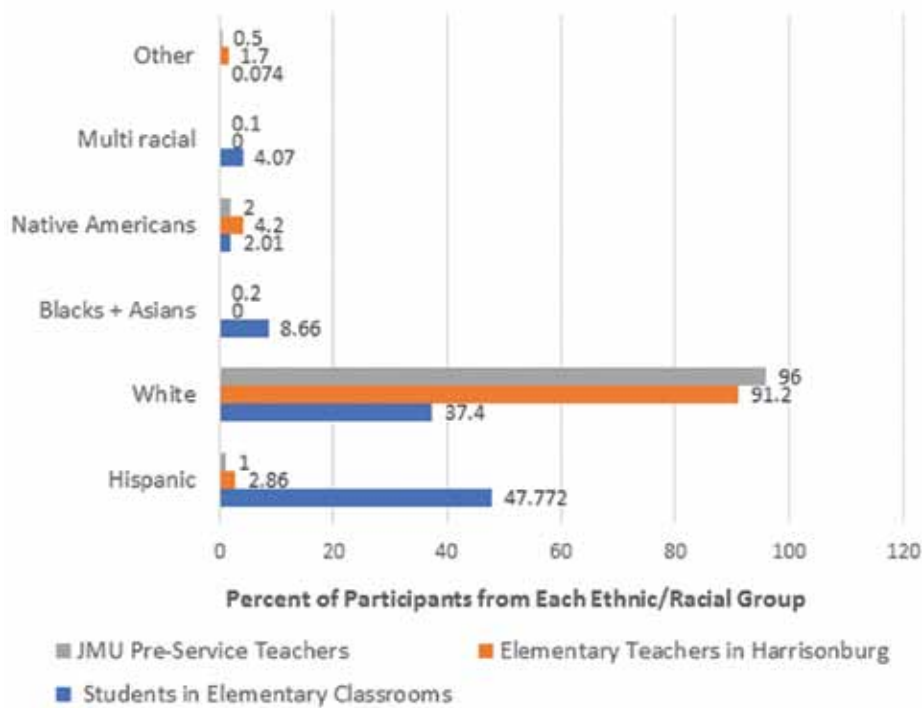
the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia where elementary schools serve immigrant and refugee children and families from over 43 nations who speak 47 different languages (Harrisonburg County Public Schools, 2016). Harrisonburg is experiencing the demographic changes seen across the country as a result of the mass movement of people across the world, higher birth rates for racial/ethnic minority groups, immigration and the recent influx of new refugees, due to political unrest around the world (HCPS, 2016). It is unique in that this city is federally recognized as a refugee resettlement community. In addition, 72% of children in its local elementary schools participate in the free and reduced lunch program. While the student body in the local school division is diverse, the teaching body constitutes an ethnic and economically homogeneous group (see Figure 1).

The teacher education program at JMU, just as many others, is searching for powerful strategies to equip teacher candidates with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be effective teachers for diverse learners

(Cochran-Smith et al., 2015). However, preparing teachers to work with high-needs and high-risk schools requires innovation and intentionality. As early childhood and elementary education faculty members, we typically work with eager college students who fit the typical profile of future teachers across the United States, mostly White, middle-class women (Haddix, 2008). We believe teacher candidates need to have a personal and deep understanding of the lived experiences of the children and families they serve. Immersive field experiences afford teacher candidates the opportunity to observe and learn about children through consistent, deep, extended, and hands-on interactions during practicum. However, in our current model of practicum, teacher candidates are placed in classrooms for only 14 full days, one day each week, over the course of a semester. Exposure for this short amount of time during a semester compromises their ability to fully grasp the complexities of the teaching profession and the diversity of the student body (Denson & Chang, 2015).

As program faculty, we believe that field experiences in diverse, high-needs schools are essential to providing teacher candidates opportunities to develop skills, dispositions, and content expertise to best serve children and families from backgrounds that include the whole spectrum of economic, racial, linguistic, ethnic, geographic, and educational diversity. Early childhood classrooms in Harrisonburg provide optimal field placement options for preparing candidates for deep immersion with a diverse population. Responding to the needs of the schools and of our future teachers, we developed the High Impact Immersion Experience (H.I.I.E.). In this article, we describe our innovative approach and share the benefits of H.I.I.E. for creating meaningful experiences for pre-professionals who will soon be responsible for supporting the learning and

Figure 1. Ethnic differences among elementary students, their teachers, and teacher candidates.



development of children in early childhood classrooms.

High Impact Immersion Experiences

H.I.I.E. was inspired by the rigorously tested and beneficial High Impact Practices (HIP) proposed by Kuh (2008). HIP are teaching and learning strategies for undergraduate college students that lead to student engagement and academic success. H.I.I.E. is designed for our teacher candidates who are taking their first courses in the teacher education program. Many of these novice teacher candidates have not been in an early childhood classroom. This initiative places our new teacher candidates in a local preschool, kindergarten, or first grade classroom.

Implementation of H.I.I.E.

H.I.I.E. is offered in five distinct phases described in *Table 1*. Phase 1 takes place before the teacher candidates start field-based practicum. It includes developing authentic school partnerships with all stakeholders, conducting a needs assessment, and orienting the teacher candidates to the program. Phase 2 starts at the beginning of the academic semester. Teacher candidates spend time in early childhood classrooms one day

a week for six weeks while attending classes at the university. The main focus of Phase 2 is learning academic content in preparation for H.I.I.E. Phase 3 marks the beginning of the H.I.I.E. experience. Novice teacher candidates spend five to six full weeks immersed in schools and attend a two-hour seminar at the university on Fridays. The faculty visit schools to meet with the teacher candidates individually or in small groups, providing them instructional support and serving as the “face of the university” to school partners who have taken on the role of mentoring our candidates in the field. The teacher candidates do not attend their typical classes at the university at this time. Phase 4 resembles Phase 2 because the teacher candidates return to attending regular classes on campus and spending one day a week in schools. In the final phase, all stakeholders, including the teacher candidates, cooperating teachers, administrators, and faculty meet to reflect on their experiences during H.I.I.E. During this phase, we collaboratively identify areas of strength and growth for program improvement.

As we collaborated in developing the H.I.I.E. initiative and breaking the silos between our courses, we shared our plans with cooperating teachers before the start of the semester. This communication gave

school personnel the opportunity to offer suggestions and feedback. As a result of this consultation with partners in the schools, the faculty created assignments aligned with the school priorities and needs of the children enrolled in each school.

H.I.I.E. offered the participating faculty an opportunity to integrate learning experiences across content areas and include information about issues related to working with children living in poverty. One assignment required teacher candidates to identify a way to express their appreciation to their school. Each project met a specific need and benefited the children attending that school. One school wanted a garden for young children and the teacher candidates prepared such a spot for them, bringing in rich topsoil and plants. Another school specializing in arts integration needed a welcoming feature near the school office. Candidates brought in paint and worked with the students and the art teacher to create a permanent mural on the wall. At the end of the semester, the four-faculty created a final exam that assessed learning objectives in all five course content areas, including questions specific to working with diverse populations and children living in poverty.

Roles and Responsibilities of H.I.I.E. Participants

Teacher candidates. During H.I.I.E., the teacher candidates are enrolled in five courses at JMU including early literacy, early childhood education, child development, diversity in elementary education, and a seminar class where they debrief and synthesize course and field experiences. One of our goals while co-developing H.I.I.E. was for the teacher candidates to see our courses and field experiences as an integrated whole program instead of an assemblage of individual courses and assignments. While in the early childhood classroom, candidates are expected to participate fully and take initiative to assist the cooperating teacher and the children as well as interact with other teachers, parents, and staff in a manner that reflects professional standards and best practice.

Cooperating teachers. The cooperating teachers are asked to work with the teacher candidates to schedule times for them to complete assignments for the concurrent course work, informally observe the candidates implementing lessons or



other learning activities, provide feedback, and complete brief mid-term and final evaluations of candidates' performance. The cooperating teacher is also expected to provide on-going informal feedback to the teacher candidate regarding performance in the classroom and to share any concerns with us, the JMU faculty.

University faculty. Our role as faculty is to support the partnership by visiting a practicum site weekly and observing the teacher candidates' interactions with their cooperating teachers and the young children and to provide additional on-going informal feedback to the teacher candidates regarding their performance in the classroom. We continue to be responsible for grading course work, such as lesson plans, and answering questions related to assignments. Additionally, we serve as a point of contact to the university for the teachers and school administrators who are our partners in this initiative.

Benefits of H.I.I.E.

To document the benefit for all stakeholders, we conducted field observations and did interviews with the cooperating teachers, JMU teacher candidates, and administrators. We also administered surveys to the teacher candidates and cooperating teachers and collected their reflections. Highlights of our findings are summarized in the following paragraphs.

Benefits for our teacher candidates. Teacher candidates reported that after a very short time, as soon as the first H.I.I.E. week, they were accepted as trusted team members in the schools. Many teacher candidates were given their own reading groups to lead and were included in team

meetings where school faculty discussed the needs of individual children and planned interventions to support the young learners. As the teacher candidates were given more responsibility and included in instructional discussions and decisions, they grew incredibly in their confidence. This confidence was further developed as they received ongoing feedback on their performance from their cooperating teachers and other building personnel. Because these H.I.I.E. participants were in the building every day, the principals and resource teachers had multiple opportunities to observe their interactions with the children and watch them perform a wide range of increasingly complex tasks typically done by the graduate students who were student teachers in the program. These tasks included attending teacher meetings, participating in home visits, proctoring tests, leading morning meetings, setting up classrooms before the children arrived, preparing materials, and implementing behavior management plans.

These experiences provided teacher candidates a glimpse into what their lives would be like in their own future classrooms. They also learned the perspective of families living in poverty. For many teacher candidates, this early, deep immersion experience that allowed them to connect theory to practice, was just the confirmation they needed to know that teaching young children was the right career choice. However, one teacher candidate, was relieved to know early in her college career that her interests would be better met if she prepared to be an advocate for children and families instead of a classroom teacher. In all cases, candidates realized the benefits of having deeper relationships with the children and appreciated the value

of knowing children well, especially children living in poverty and with other risk factors.

Benefits for classroom teachers. Because the teacher candidates were in the classrooms every day, there was time for them and the cooperating teachers to build a relationship of trust. Thus, the teacher candidates were more than just an extra pair of willing hands; they were trusted members of the instructional team. While the cooperating teachers offered significant feedback to the teacher candidates and encouraged them to reflect on their learning, the cooperating teachers shared that they became more reflective. Very aware that a beginning professional was watching everything they did in the classroom, the cooperating teachers shared that they became more intentional and thoughtful in their own teaching. They also became more aware of the decisions they made and the rationale for the practices they used with individuals and groups of children. For the cooperating teachers, H.I.I.E. was a useful strategy not only for teacher preparation, but also for their own professional development.

Benefits for young children. While our study of the H.I.I.E. did not formally allow us to gather impact on individual children's learning outcomes, we have anecdotal records from the teachers and the candidates that children benefited from having another caring adult in the classroom with them. The cooperating teachers often had the H.I.I.E. teacher candidates work with individual children who would otherwise not receive one-on-one instruction. H.I.I.E. teacher candidates also provided individual social and emotional support to children, sometimes just being there to hear their stories and/or to hold their hand.

H.I.I.E strengthened our partnership with local schools by improving communication and collaboration between the teacher education program and the schools. We invited cooperating teachers to campus so they could co-teach with university faculty, drawing on their experiences and expertise. One preschool teacher demonstrated how she uses instructional technology with young children. Through these shared experiences, we offered one cohesive message to the teacher candidates, thus reducing the dissonance teacher candidates sometimes experience between the theory they learn in courses and their practicum experience in schools.

Table 1 - H.I.I.E. Schedule During a Typical 16-Week Semester (One week of Spring Break)

Field participation	Objectives	Experiences/Activities
<i>H.I.I.E. Phase 1: Before H.I.I.E. experiences start</i>		
<p>University professors, school administrators, and cooperating teachers meet to collaboratively plan for the H.I.I.E.</p> <p>Introductory email exchange between teacher candidates and cooperating teachers, but no direct contact with schools</p>	<p>All stakeholders meet to network, conduct a needs-assessment specific to each classroom, and plan the H.I.I.E. for teacher candidates.</p> <p>Teacher candidates receive placements and make arrangements for carpooling and other school-specific logistical requirements such as arrival and departure time, school dress codes, and orientation with school and university administrators.</p> <p>Teacher candidates establish contact with cooperating teachers.</p> <p>Teacher candidates learn about credit bearing-courses and understand curricular expectations.</p>	<p>All stakeholders meet to network, conduct a needs-assessment specific to each classroom, and plan the H.I.I.E. for teacher candidates.</p> <p>Teacher candidates receive placements and make arrangements for carpooling and other school-specific logistical requirements such as arrival and departure time, school dress codes, orientation with school, and university administrators.</p> <p>Teacher candidates establish contact with cooperating teachers via email or visits.</p> <p>Teacher candidates learn about credit bearing-courses and understand curricular expectations from the faculty. Typically, teacher candidates take courses in Child Development, Diversity, Literacy, and teaching pedagogy for early elementary students.</p>
<i>H.I.I.E. Phase 2: Pre-deep immersion</i>		
<p>One-day-a-week for four weeks in the field placement.</p>	<p>Gain theoretical and content-specific information associated with each credit-bearing course.</p> <p>Observe classroom activities.</p> <p>Develop a professional relationship with the cooperating teacher and children.</p> <p>Develop personal and professional goals for the H.I.I.E. in collaboration with the cooperating teacher and the university professor.</p>	<p>Observe classroom environment and daily schedules.</p> <p>Develop a relationship with cooperating teacher, children, and other school staff by joining in classroom routines</p> <p>Develop and strengthen the relationship with peers and develop a community of learners.</p>
<i>H.I.I.E. Phase 3: Deep immersion</i>		
<p>Thirty consecutive days in the field placement and with a two-hour Friday seminar.</p> <p>Formal campus class meetings are replaced by small group meetings with university faculty in the field.</p>	<p>Apply, analyze, and synthesize theoretical knowledge in the classrooms.</p> <p>Acquire a deeper understanding of children, their families, and the teaching profession overall through deep immersion in classrooms.</p> <p>Construct opportunities for understanding the environments that influence student learning, especially in the context of poverty</p> <p>Engage in formative assessment from multiple sources such as University professor, practicum supervisor, cooperating teacher, school administrators and sometimes children and their families.</p> <p>Engage in activities that contribute to learning content through activities such as reading reflections, developing assignments, and developing thoughtful reflections.</p>	<p>Meet with cooperating teacher for formative assessment.</p> <p>Meet with one university professor for concept clarifying discussions and reflection on readings.</p> <p>Plan and execute one-on-one instruction for children.</p> <p>Conduct literacy lesson for small and large groups of children such as read alouds, assistance with class activities, and homework.</p> <p>Supervise transitions, such as bus duties, and monitor lunchtime.</p> <p>Shadow a school administrator or a resource teacher.</p> <p>Participate in parent conferences.</p> <p>Work on assignments such as child case studies, diversity projects, peer observations, and peer evaluations.</p>
<i>H.I.I.E. Phase 4: Post deep-immersion</i>		
<p>One-day-a-week practicum for 3 weeks (21 hours)</p>	<p>Engage in the evaluation and meaning-making activities with teacher candidates and university faculty.</p> <p>Review, reflect on, and assess H.I.I.E.</p>	<p>Return to university classroom for culminating experiences and final exams.</p> <p>Present projects that demonstrate understanding of developmentally appropriate practice.</p>
<p>Post H.I.I.E. Activities</p>	<p>All stakeholders meet to review and assess the H.I.I.E. process. Stakeholders reflect on areas of growth and opportunities for future H.I.I.E. cohorts.</p>	

Conclusion

Having the opportunity to respond to our local high-needs schools with this innovative and creative approach was instructive and beneficial for all stakeholders. Working closely with teacher candidates, classroom teachers, and administrators was a transformational experience. H.I.I.E. strengthened our resolve to further develop our local school partnerships and to explore professional development opportunities related to the effects of poverty on young children and their families. If you are interested in customizing the H.I.I.E. experience in your own context, please contact us. Together we can create educational opportunities for teacher candidates that are responsive to the academic,

emotional, social needs of children in the poverty context.

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Poverty and Immigrant Children:

MOVING AHEAD WITH *ESPERANZA*, WITH HOPE

BY WILMA ROBLES-MELENDEZ AND WAYNE DRISCOLL

Poverty, an Ongoing Social Issue

Across society, poverty continues to be one of the most challenging factors affecting people's lives. In communities, big and small, poverty is one of their realities. People with limited or no income sources struggle each day to meet the needs of their families and children. No one is excluded from poverty as it may impact anyone beyond ethnic, cultural and diversity lines (Jensen, 2009; Seccombe, 2007). Today, the faces of children living in poverty, whether in countries far and near or in communities across our nation, are a living call for action. For early childhood educators, poverty continues as a reality pressing everyone for appropriate answers and solutions. Just as in the past, early childhood educators call for understanding and socially just efforts to close the cycle of poverty.

Looking at Poverty in the Global Context

The presence of poverty is clearly felt in the global society where people faced with inadequate resources continue to fight for survival. For decades, longtime social and political inequities have trapped many into poverty. An array of difficult circumstances in some parts of the world, caused at times by natural disasters and ongoing social crises, continues to lead countless families and children into the ranks of the poor. Many find themselves with little or no means to overcome their situations, falling into a cycle of poverty. Armed conflicts and political instability has forced others seeking safety to leave their homelands, resulting in many losing all they have and facing an uncertain life in new environments. Among those immigrating include a significant number of families with young children. Often overlooked in the literature about immigration, immigrant children are sometimes seen "as luggage" (Forbes & Sime, 2016), while focus is placed on

the adults and their concomitant roles. In recent times, political unrest, violence and famine in some African nations and the Middle East has brought attention to the fate of displaced families and of young children who, turned into immigrants, face the unknown and the likelihood of poverty. Forbes and Sime (2016) contend that for children, given their parents' status, many end up being socially excluded from needed educational opportunities. For these young migrant children, their hope remains as they wait for their Superman (Driscoll, 2017).

Globally, poverty it is one of the urgent situations continuing to demand action given its devastating impact on the most vulnerable—children. Determined to find solutions to this critical issue, the United Nations 2030 agenda for sustainable development identified alleviating poverty as one of its target goals stating their commitment "... to ending poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including by eradicating extreme poverty by 2030" (United Nations, 2015).

Poverty in the United States

Poverty is also a reality in the United States where many who are considered poor continue to struggle each day. In 2015, 43.1 million, or 13.5% of the population, were reported to be living in poverty (Proctor, Semega & Kollar, 2016; Children's Defense Fund, 2016). Despite efforts from all sectors, public and private, poverty constitutes a lingering priority in the social and educational agenda. Images of poor families and children are not absent from daily life in American society. Despite the work of local and national agencies, poverty continues to be at the top of the issues calling for action. In a nation where immigration is continuous, data shows that immigrants are also counted among those in poverty. Though immigrants portray a wide variety of socioeconomic realities,

data indicates that a significant number of immigrant families are considered to be poor and live with scarce or very limited resources (Borjas, 2011). Demographically, the U.S. has experienced a steady influx of immigrant families during the last decade. Among these, Hispanics represent the majority of those immigrating becoming today the largest ethnic group (Borjas, 2011). Many of these immigrants are parents of young children, most of whom were born in the U.S. With many families facing difficult economic situations, it raises concerns about their children's well-being, given the developmental implications that poverty bears on the future of young children. This article brings attention to the realities of young immigrant children and their families living in poverty.

Child Poverty: A Social Reality

Poverty today is one of the challenging realities for childhood in the United States. Currently, thousands of children in classrooms across the country live in poverty or come from households with low income and limited access to economic resources. Socioeconomic data reveals that in the United States over 15 million of those in poverty are children (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2017). Of these, 23% are children under age six (Jiang, Granja & Koball, 2017). This reality presents obvious implications for early childhood educators since appropriately meeting the needs of all children is paramount. Growing up in poverty has multitude of implications on children's development that directly influence their opportunities for successful academic achievement and overall wellbeing (Harris & Kearney, 2014; Borjas, 2011; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). Challenges faced by children living in economically defied conditions are wide-ranging. They present serious situations compromising a child's individual development and future success. The negative consequences of poverty on

children and their future have been well evidenced by developmental and educational research (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2013; Berger, 2011; Seccombe, 2007), a fact that emphasizes the urgent need to address poverty.

Families and children living in poverty conditions encounter multiple challenges. Some of these include limited materials and resources, poor nutrition, access to health services, and food insecurity (Wright-Edelman, 2016; American Academy of Pediatrics, 2013; McDevitt & Ormrod, 2013). An additional challenge is the range of misconceptions and prejudices society holds about people living in poverty (Robles-Melendez & Beck, 2013). The severity of the reality of poverty is summed up by Corsaro, who states that for children "... poverty is the most pervasive and insidious" (2015, p. 297) factor contributing to the social challenges they may face. The many faceted impact that poverty has on children delineates the need for actions to eradicate it from society. In the United States, as well as throughout the world, the presence of poverty continues to task everyone in the search for solutions to end its existence. This is a challenge that pertains to everyone in education.

Realities of Poverty Among Immigrant Families and Children

In a nation rooted in immigration, immigrants continue to be an important part of the United States population. Overall, immigrant contributions constitute a major factor in the economic, social and cultural landscape of the nation. A growing number of immigrant families and their children live in communities across the country. Overall, children of immigrant families comprise about one-quarter of the child population in the United States (Center for Law and Social Policy [CLASP], 2017). Nationally, about one in three children have immigrant fathers (Zeigler & Camarota, 2016). Immigrants from Latin American countries and the Caribbean are today one of the fastest growing ethnic groups established in the nation (CLASP, 2017). About 23% of the country's school enrollment are students with immigrant roots, with many speaking languages other than English and where Spanish is spoken by most. There are multiple reasons that bring immigrant families and their children to

the U.S. While some come in search of better opportunities for their children, others are fleeing political unrest and violence in their countries, hopeful for a peaceful life. Still others, displaced by danger and armed conflicts, enter the country as refugees.

Many immigrant families face serious challenges as they adjust to new life realities. Poverty, as mentioned earlier, is also a denominator present in the immigrant population. Reports show that many immigrants are deeply impacted by poverty with an estimated 21% living in poverty conditions in 2014 (Zeigler & Camarota, 2016). Most immigrants experiencing poverty in the U.S. are of Hispanic roots (Camarota, 2012). While the educational and skill levels of immigrants vary, some of those experiencing poor living conditions confront challenges due to lower educational preparation, language barriers, lower job training skills, and sadly discrimination. Altogether, these factors undermine their economic security, forcing some into poverty. Many immigrant families end up working in lower-paid jobs or face job insecurity. Data shows that migrant farm workers, which constitute an important segment of the agricultural workforce, are among the lowest paid (Ribando, 2002). Others find it hard to obtain employment due to unfamiliarity with practices, job regulations or because of immigration status. Despite challenges, armed with their desire to do better for their children, through time and today, immigrant families continue to demonstrate their many assets and resiliency, finding ways and laboring to ensure their children obtain opportunities and a better life.

Immigrant Landscape

Different from the past, where immigration concentrated in certain areas, today immigrants are establishing their homes across the nation's communities. In the last decade, the Southern states have seen a rise in the number of immigrants (Vazquez, 2010; Zong and Batalova, 2017). Attracted to this area by job opportunities, particularly in the agricultural sector, many families and their children have settled in the Southern states where traditionally immigration was low. The decade of 1990-2000 marked a high increase in the immigrant population in Atlanta, Georgia, where Hispanic immigration multiplied (Vazquez, 2010). States such as Tennessee,

Kentucky and North Carolina have also seen an increase in the number of immigrant children and families living in their communities (Zong & Batalova, 2017). Others, like Florida and Texas, continue to be home for incoming generations of immigrants. In general, the southern region of the country has experienced an increase in the number of children with immigrant roots who now attend schools and early childhood programs. For many of these immigrant children, escaping from uncertain futures and limited resources was among the reasons motivating their families to immigrate. Yet, many are faced with poverty as part of their daily reality.

During the summer of 2014, the number of unaccompanied immigrant children that entered the United States caught national attention (Pierce, 2015). It served as a testimony to the urgent nature of political and social crises, raising attention to the reality of inequities and poverty from which families wanted their children to escape.

Efforts Supporting Quality Services for Immigrant Families and their Children

Responses to the needs of children in poverty in the U.S. have been many. Perhaps some of the most long-lasting efforts in early education came out of the War on Poverty from the 1960s. With one of its goals centered on enhancing and leveraging educational experiences for the young, it sponsored some of the most fruitful research in early childhood. Its aims were to identify appropriate early childhood models responsive to the needs of children living in poverty, many of which were children of immigrants. The legacy of this historical effort was the creation of a variety of exemplary early childhood program models. Some of these included the High Scope Perry Preschool program, the Abecedarian Project, and Head Start, all successful programs now serving thousands of children. Head Start, now a federally funded program, provides services to almost a million low-income children and families, including thousands of young immigrants and children of migrant families engaged in agricultural work. As an outcome of the War on Poverty, Head Start exemplified socially just efforts aimed at leveraging economic disparities, providing children with equal and quality experiences. In 2016,

37% of their enrollment were children of Hispanic roots (Head Start, 2016). As a direct response to the population of seasonal migrant farmworkers' families, Head Start initiated their Migrant Head Start program. Targeted at overcoming the challenges of the seasonal migrant farmworkers' families, the program also aimed at providing their children with early childhood experiences and services while their families were out in the fields. The program remains true today to its goals ensuring access to quality services and experiences for children as their families move from state-to-state following the agricultural cycle.

Across communities, nowadays the presence of immigrant children is evident in almost all early childhood programs and services. Voices of hope have been raised by many, leading to the establishment of programs directed at offering educational experiences for young immigrant children. Some of those early efforts are still today beacons of socially just practices for young children. Historically, many have answered the call for action on behalf of immigrant children. Among the many responding to this call was Jane Addams, the first American woman to be a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. An activist during the early part of the 20th Century, she opened Hull House in Chicago, offering services for the poor, most of whom were families and children of immigrant roots and living in difficult conditions (Robles-Melendez & Beck, 2013). Hull House's legacy remains as an example of the promise of hope that Addams initiated for those in need in the Chicago area.

“We Open Doors to Opportunities”: A Model Program for Immigrant Children and their Families

Programs responding to the needs of young immigrant children are found across the country. Many emerged out of individual initiatives, while others are led by government efforts at the local, state, or national level. In Florida, the Redlands Christian Migrant Association (RCMA) is one of those individual initiatives that started 50 years ago (Robles-Melendez & Beck, 2013). The RCMA is a successful model providing services to immigrants and families with limited resources in rural areas in Florida. Just as its mission

reads, “opening doors to opportunities” (RCMA, 2017), RCMA is anchored on social justice principles of respect, opportunity, compassion, fairness, and quality. Currently, RCMA offers educational and comprehensive experiences to over 7,000 children of immigrant and low-income families throughout the state of Florida. The RCMA continues its mission in its 68 child development centers and two charter schools, delivering quality services to children in Florida's rural communities.

RCMA was born in 1965 in response to the dire situation experienced by the children of poor Hispanic farmworkers in the South Florida Homestead farmlands. At the time, the immigration reforms emphasizing family reunification prompted an increase in the influx of immigrants that continues to this date (Lopez, Passel & Rohal, 2015). Among the immigrant groups that came, Hispanics, particularly from Mexico, were the majority. Some of the Hispanic lower-skilled workers that immigrated to the U.S. found work in the fields. This was the case of the families working in the Homestead area farmlands. Many of them were families with young children, without any resources to care for their young. Therefore, parents were taking their young infants and toddlers to the fields, where they were being exposed to pesticides and inclement weather conditions. Witnesses to the life-threatening conditions and the series of accidents children suffered motivated a group of concerned Mennonite volunteers to open a childcare facility. To the surprise of the community, their classrooms were remaining empty. Intrigued by the apparent indifference, they contacted Wendell Rollason, a known immigrant advocate in Miami (Florida), who soon realized a cultural disconnect was hindering their efforts and which led to the practice of hiring a group of mothers to work in the centers. Out of the insights of Rollason, together with the efforts of the volunteers, grew the RCMA model. At the core of RCMA's model was the need to honor the families' culture by providing a source for gaining their *confianza*, trust, and *respeto*, respect.

Key to the RCMA model are four basic principles. These are working with farmers to improve conditions for workers, hiring teachers and staff from the migrant communities, respecting families' cultures, and engaging families in their children's learn-

ing process (Brammertz, Mendez, Eklund & Moonan, 2012). True to Rollason's spirit, these principles still guide RCMA's efforts to assist those in need (Judy Burlinson, personal communication, April 2017). Embracing the view of families as their children's first teachers, the model is rooted in respecting and validating the culture of children and their families. Their traditional *tamaladas* held in December are but one of the many activities where families' culture is celebrated, bringing everyone together. The empowerment element of this practice has contributed to engaging families as collaborators while supporting their sense of pride as members of a cultural group. As outcomes of this practice are the examples of many former farmworkers who now serve in leadership and management positions. Others found the support and motivation to pursue their own education, becoming part of their teaching staff.

From a systems' perspective, RCMA's model also anchored its practices on supporting the family's needs as a whole. An array of services for family members provided through the family coordinators has been integral to their early childhood programs. Hundreds of success stories of parents who found support to complete their GED, obtained ESOL services, or who received assistance during difficult situations attest to the importance of extending services to the entire family.

Under the leadership of Barbara Mainster, a passionate advocate for the immigrant and poor who served as the organization's first education coordinator and executive director, RCMA continued its mission, expanding services and advocating for the rights of children and their families. Their mission carries on today as they remain as a voice and hope for immigrant and low-income children and families in rural communities.

***Hacia Adelante*, Moving Forward**

Addressing the needs of immigrant and poor children is a continuing goal for early childhood educators. The call is for action to move forward, *hacia adelante*, and find effective solutions to address poverty challenges. Undoubtedly, challenges are many and remain on the educational agenda, calling for concerted efforts from everyone to bring what is justifiably owed to children.

As answers emerge, the work of each one can become the response to a child needs. Will yours be amongst those answers?

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La Pobreza y los Niños Inmigrantes:

HACIA ADELANTE CON *ESPERANZA*

POR WILMA ROBLES-MELÉNDEZ Y WAYNE DRISCOLL

La Pobreza Sigue Siendo un Problema Social

A través de la sociedad, la pobreza sigue siendo uno de los factores más difíciles que afectan la vida de las personas. En comunidades, grandes o pequeñas, la pobreza continúa como una de sus realidades. A diario, personas con limitados o ninguna fuente de ingresos se esfuerzan para satisfacer las necesidades de sus familias y niños. Nadie está excluido de la pobreza, ya que puede afectar a cualquier persona más allá de factores de diversidad, grupos étnicos y culturales (Jensen, 2009; Seccombe, 2007). Hoy en día, las rostros de los niños que viven en la pobreza son un llamado a la acción, ya sea en países lejanos, cercanos o en las comunidades de nuestra nación. Para los docentes de la edad temprana la pobreza continúa siendo una realidad, que clama por respuestas y soluciones adecuadas. Como en el pasado, los docentes de la niñez temprana piden comprensión y esfuerzos socialmente justos que permitan cerrar el círculo de la pobreza.

Una Mirada a la Pobreza en el Contexto Global

La presencia de la pobreza se percibe claramente en la sociedad global donde las personas con recursos inadecuados continúan su lucha por la supervivencia. Durante décadas, las prolongadas desigualdades sociales y políticas han mantenido a muchos en la pobreza. En algunas partes del mundo, circunstancias difíciles ocasionadas por desastres naturales y la crisis social que se vive en muchos casos continúan llevando a muchas familias y niños a las filas de los pobres. Muchos de ellos se encuentran con escasos o ningún medio para superar sus situaciones, llevándolos a caer en el círculo de la pobreza. En busca de seguridad, los conflictos armados y la inestabilidad política han obligado a otros a dejar su patria, llevando a tantos a perder todo y enfrentándose a una vida incierta en nuevos entornos. Entre aquellos que inmigran se incluyen un número considerable de familias con niños pequeños. En la literatura sobre in-

migración con frecuencia apenas se recoge la presencia de los niños (Forbes y Sime, 2016), mientras que el enfoque se centra en torno a los adultos y sus concurrentes roles. En los últimos tiempos, la inestabilidad política, la violencia y el hambre en algunas naciones africanas y del Medio Oriente ha girado la atención sobre la suerte de las familias y niños que al ser desplazados se convierten en inmigrantes afrontando lo desconocido y a la probabilidad de verse en la pobreza. Forbes y Sime (2016) sostienen que en el caso de los niños, dada la situación de sus padres, muchos terminan siendo socialmente excluidos de las más necesarias oportunidades educativas. Para estos niños migrantes, su esperanza continúa mientras esperan a su Superman (Driscoll, 2017).

A nivel mundial, dado su devastador impacto sobre los más vulnerables, como es el caso de los niños, la pobreza es una de las situaciones de más urgencia que continúa demandando acción. Decididos a encontrar soluciones a este asunto crítico, la Agenda para el 2030 para el desarrollo sostenible de las Naciones Unidas identificó la pobreza como uno de sus objetivos, declarando su compromiso "... de terminar con la pobreza en todas sus formas y dimensiones, incluyendo la erradicación de la pobreza extrema para el año 2030" (Naciones Unidas, 2015).

Pobreza en los Estados Unidos

La pobreza es también una realidad en los Estados Unidos, donde muchos, considerados como pobres, continúan luchando cada día. En el año 2015, se reportó que 43,1 millones o 13.5% de la población vivían en la pobreza (Proctor, Semega y Kollar, 2016; Children's Defense Fund, 2016). A pesar de los esfuerzos de todos los sectores, público y privado, la pobreza sigue siendo una persistente prioridad en la agenda social y educativa del país. A diario, en la sociedad norteamericana, las imágenes de familias pobres y niños no están ausentes. Más allá de los esfuerzos de organismos locales y nacionales, la pobreza sigue siendo uno de los

temas requiriendo acción. En un país donde la inmigración es continua, los datos muestran que los inmigrantes también se cuentan entre aquellos que viven en la pobreza. Aunque los inmigrantes representan una gran variedad de realidades socioeconómicas, los informes indican que un número significativo de familias inmigrantes son considerados pobres viviendo con recursos escasos o muy limitados (Borjas, 2011). Demográficamente, durante la última década en los Estados Unidos se ha experimentado una afluencia constante de familias inmigrantes. Entre ellos, los hispanos representan la mayoría de los que inmigran, convirtiéndose hoy en el mayor grupo étnico en la nación (Borjas, 2011). Muchas de estas familias inmigrantes son padres de niños quienes en su mayoría nacieron en los Estados Unidos. Con muchas de ellas enfrentando situaciones económicas muy difíciles, hay gran preocupación dado a las repercusiones que tiene la pobreza sobre el desarrollo y futuro de los pequeños. Conscientes de esto, en este artículo traemos atención a las realidades de los niños inmigrantes y sus familias viviendo en la pobreza.

Pobreza Infantil: Una Realidad Social

En la actualidad, la pobreza es una de las desafiantes realidades para la infancia en los Estados Unidos. Actualmente, en las aulas a través de la nación miles de niños viven en la pobreza o provienen de familias con bajos ingresos y que viven con limitaciones económicas. Los datos socioeconómicos revelan que en los Estados Unidos más de 15 millones de las personas que viven en la pobreza son niños (Centro Nacional para Niños en Situación de Pobreza, 2017). De éstos, el 23% son niños menores de 6 años (Jiang, Granja y Koball, 2017). Ya que es primordial satisfacer adecuadamente las necesidades de todos los niños, esta realidad presenta serias implicaciones que preocupan a los educadores de la edad temprana. Crecer en la pobreza conlleva una multitud de repercusiones sobre

el desarrollo infantil, ya que es un factor influyendo directamente en el éxito académico y bienestar general. (Harris y Kearney, 2014; Borjas, 2011; Brooks-Gunn y Duncan, 1997). Para los niños que viven en condiciones económicamente difíciles los retos que presenta la vida en la pobreza son amplios y variados. Los mismos pueden llegar a ser situaciones graves que comprometen no solo el desarrollo individual del niño sino también sus oportunidades para el éxito en el futuro. Las consecuencias negativas de la pobreza en los niños y su futuro han sido evidenciadas por los estudios en el campo del desarrollo y educación infantil (McDevitt y Ormrod, 2013; Berger, 2011; Seccombe, 2007), un hecho que subraya la urgente necesidad para hacerle frente a la pobreza.

Las familias y niños que viven en condiciones de pobreza se enfrentan a múltiples desafíos. Algunos de estos incluyen limitaciones en el acceso a materiales y recursos, nutrición inadecuada, poco o no acceso a servicios de salud e inseguridad alimenticia (Wright Edelman, 2016; Academia Americana de Pediatría, 2013; McDevitt y Ormrod, 2013). Otro reto adicional son los muchos conceptos erróneos y prejuicios que prevalecen en la sociedad respecto a las personas viviendo en la pobreza (Robles Melendez & Beck, 2013). La severa realidad de la pobreza es resumida por Corsaro, quien afirma que para los niños "... la pobreza es el factor más persistente e insidioso" (2015, p. 297) contribuyendo a los desafíos sociales que puedan enfrentar. El multifacético impacto que tiene la pobreza en los niños subraya la necesidad para una toma de acción que permita eliminar la misma de la sociedad. En los Estados Unidos, así como en todo el mundo, la presencia de la pobreza sigue siendo tarea para todos, clamando por una solución que lleve a poner fin a su existencia. Esto es un reto que también corresponde a cada uno en el campo de la educación.

Las Realidades de la Pobreza Entre las Familias Inmigrantes y Niños

En una nación con raíces firmes en la inmigración, los inmigrantes continúan siendo una parte importante de la población de los Estados Unidos. En general, las contribuciones de los inmigrantes constituyen un factor de relevancia en el panorama económico, social y cultural de la nación. Al presente, un creciente número de familias inmigrantes y sus hijos viven en comunidades a través de todo el país. Dentro del conjunto social, los

niños de familias inmigrantes representan alrededor de una cuarta parte de la población infantil en los Estados Unidos (Centro de Derecho y Política Social [CLASP], 2017). A nivel nacional, aproximadamente uno de cada tres niños son de padres inmigrantes (Zeigler y Camarota, 2016). Entre estos, los inmigrantes de países de América Latina y el Caribe constituyen el grupo étnico de mayor crecimiento a nivel nacional. (CLASP, 2017). Alrededor del 23% de los matriculados en las escuelas del país son estudiantes con raíces inmigrantes, con muchos de ellos hablando idiomas distintos al inglés y donde la mayoría de estos habla español. Muchas son las razones que llevan a las familias inmigrantes y sus hijos a establecerse en los Estados Unidos. Algunos vienen en busca de mejores oportunidades para sus hijos, mientras otros, buscando una vida libre de inseguridad, huyen de la inestabilidad política y violencia en sus países. En tanto, otros, desplazados por conflictos armados y peligro, entran al país como refugiados.

Son incontables las familias inmigrantes que enfrentan serios retos mientras se adaptan a nuevas realidades. La pobreza, como mencionáramos anteriormente, es también un denominador presente en la población inmigrante. Los reportes revelan que muchos inmigrantes enfrentan limitaciones económicas con un 21% de estos viviendo en condiciones de pobreza en 2014 (Zeigler y Camarota, 2016). En su mayoría, los inmigrantes que viven en la pobreza en los Estados Unidos son de raíces hispanas (Camarota, 2012). Mientras los niveles educativos y habilidades de los inmigrantes varían, algunos de los que experimentan condiciones de vida más severas enfrentan desafíos por razones como lo son el tener un bajo nivel educativo, barreras lingüísticas, la falta de formación profesional y, lamentablemente, debido a la discriminación. En conjunto, estos factores afectan su seguridad económica llevando a algunos a la pobreza. Muchas de estas familias de inmigrantes terminan trabajando en empleos con baja remuneración o enfrentan inseguridad en el empleo. De acuerdo a los datos, los trabajadores agrícolas migrantes, quienes constituyen un segmento importante de la fuerza laboral agrícola, se encuentran entre los de menor remuneración (Ribando, 2002). A otros se les hace difícil obtener un empleo debido a la falta de familiaridad con las prácticas de empleo, las normas de trabajo o debido a su situación migratoria. A pesar de los retos, guiados por su deseo de buscar lo

mejor para sus hijos, hoy al igual que siempre, las familias inmigrantes continúan demostrando sus valores y tenacidad, encontrando maneras para continuar así como trabajando para asegurar que sus hijos alcancen las oportunidades y una mejor vida.

Panorama de Inmigrantes

A diferencia del pasado, donde antes la inmigración se concentraba en ciertas áreas, hoy los inmigrantes establecen sus hogares en comunidades a través de toda la nación. En la última década, los estados del sur han visto un aumento en el número de inmigrantes que hoy viven en sus comunidades (Vázquez, 2010; Zong y Batalova, 2017). Atraídos por las oportunidades de trabajo existentes en esta región, especialmente en el sector agrícola, muchas familias y sus hijos se han asentado en los estados del sur donde tradicionalmente la inmigración era menor. La década de 1990-2000 marcó un alto incremento en la población inmigrante en Atlanta, Georgia, donde la inmigración de hispanos llegó a multiplicarse (Vázquez, 2010). Estados como Tennessee, Kentucky y Carolina del Norte también han visto un incremento en el número de niños inmigrantes y familias que viven en sus comunidades (Zong y Batalova, 2017). Otros estados como Florida y Texas siguen siendo un continuo destino para generaciones de inmigrantes. En general, la región del sur del país ha experimentado un aumento en el número de niños con raíces inmigrantes que acuden a las escuelas y programas del nivel temprano. Para muchos de estos niños inmigrantes, escapar de un futuro incierto y de la limitación están entre las razones motivando a sus familias a inmigrar. Sin embargo, muchos hoy se enfrentan con la pobreza como parte de su realidad cotidiana.

Durante el verano de 2014, el número de niños inmigrantes no acompañados que ingresaron a los Estados Unidos llamó la atención a nivel nacional (Pierce, 2015). Este hecho sirvió como un testimonio a la urgencia evidente de la crisis política y social, acentuando la atención a la realidad de las existentes desigualdades sociales y la pobreza de la cual las familias buscan que sus hijos escapen.

Esfuerzos y Servicios de Calidad para las Familias Inmigrantes y sus Hijos

En los Estados Unidos, a través de los años, las respuestas a las necesidades de los niños en la pobreza han sido múltiples. Tal vez algunos de los esfuerzos en la educación temprana

con más larga duración son aquellos que surgieron de la Guerra Contra la Pobreza durante la década de 1960. Con uno de sus objetivos centrados en el mejoramiento y la fomentación de experiencias educativas para los niños, se patrocinaron las más importantes investigaciones en educación temprana. Sus objetivos fueron dirigidos a identificar modelos apropiados para la infancia temprana que respondieran a las necesidades de los niños viviendo en la pobreza, muchos de los cuales eran hijos de inmigrantes. El legado de este histórico esfuerzo fue la creación de una variedad de modelos de programas ejemplares para la educación temprana. Algunos de estos incluyeron el programa de High Scope Perry para Preescolares, el proyecto Abecedarian y Head Start, siendo todos programas de gran éxito que hoy sirven a miles de niños. Actualmente, Head Start, un programa financiado por el gobierno federal, presta servicios a casi 1 millón de niños y familias de escasos recursos, donde se cuentan miles de niños inmigrantes y niños de familias de migrantes agrícolas. Como resultado de la Guerra Contra la Pobreza, Head Start sirvió como un ejemplo de esfuerzos socialmente justos destinados a minimizar las diferencias económicas, proporcionando experiencias de calidad de forma equitativa a los niños participantes. En 2016, el 37% de su matrícula eran niños con raíces hispanas (Head Start, 2016). Como una respuesta directa a la población de familias de trabajadores agrícolas migrantes de temporada, Head Start inició el programa Migrant Head Start. En respuesta a los retos de las familias de trabajadores agrícolas migrantes de temporada, el programa tiene como meta proporcionarle a sus hijos experiencias educativas y servicios mientras sus familias trabajan en los campos. Fiel a sus objetivos, el programa sigue hoy garantizando el acceso a servicios y prácticas de calidad para los niños mientras sus familias van de estado a estado siguiendo el ciclo agrícola.

Hoy en día, a través de las comunidades, la presencia de los niños inmigrantes es evidente en casi todos los programas y servicios de infancia temprana. Voces de esperanza levantadas por muchos, han llevado a la creación de programas orientados a ofrecer experiencias educativas para niños inmigrantes. Algunos de esos primeros esfuerzos aún son hoy en día modelos de prácticas socialmente justas para los niños pequeños. Históricamente, muchos han respondido a la llamada para la acción en nombre de los niños inmigrantes. Jane

Addams, la primera mujer estadounidense en recibir el premio Nobel de la Paz, estuvo entre aquellos que respondieron a este llamado. Una activista social, durante la primera parte del siglo XX, Addams abrió Hull House en Chicago, donde se brindaban servicios a los pobres, la mayoría de los cuales eran niños y familias de raíces inmigrantes y viviendo en condiciones difíciles (Robles Melendez & Beck, 2013). Hull House fue una promesa de esperanza que Addams impulsara en el área de Chicago para aquellos en necesidad y que sirvió para inspirar muchos otros esfuerzos.

“Abrimos Puertas a las Oportunidades”: Un Programa Modelo para Niños Inmigrantes y sus Familias

A través de todo el país, hoy existen programas creados en respuesta a las necesidades de los niños inmigrantes. Muchos surgieron de iniciativas individuales mientras que otros son el resultado de los esfuerzos del gobierno a nivel local, estatal o nacional. En la Florida, la Redlands Christian Migrant Asociación (RCMA) es una de las iniciativas individuales que surgiera hace más de 50 años (Robles Melendez & Beck, 2013). Desde entonces, RCMA ha sido un modelo exitoso en la prestación de servicios a los inmigrantes y familias de escasos recursos en las zonas rurales de la Florida. Así como su misión lee, “Abrimos puertas a las oportunidades” (RCMA, 2017), RCMA está basada en los principios de justicia social de respeto, oportunidad, compasión, equidad y calidad. Actualmente, la RCMA ofrece experiencias educativas e integrales a más de 7.000 niños de familias inmigrantes y de bajos ingresos en el estado de la Florida. La RCMA continúa su misión en sus 68 centros de desarrollo infantil y dos escuelas chárter ofreciendo servicios de calidad a los niños en comunidades rurales de la Florida.

La RCMA nació en el año 1965 como una respuesta a la grave situación vivida entonces por los niños de trabajadores agrícolas hispanos en las fincas del área de Homestead en el sur de la Florida. En aquel entonces, las reformas migratorias que favorecían la reagrupación familiar impulsaron un aumento en la llegada de inmigrantes que sigue hasta la fecha (Lopez, Passel y Rohal, 2015). Entre aquellos grupos de inmigrantes hispanos, la mayoría eran procedentes particularmente de México. Algunos de aquellos trabajadores hispanos con menos cualificaciones que inmigraron a los Estados Unidos encontraron trabajo en

los campos. Este fue el caso de las familias que trabajaban en las siembras del área de Homestead. Muchos de ellos eran familias con niños muy pequeños que no contaban con recursos para cuidar a los mismos. Por ende, los padres se llevaban a sus bebés y niños a los campos donde eran expuestos a pesticidas y a las inclemencias del tiempo. Testigos de las amenazantes condiciones de vida y de la serie de accidentes sufridos por los niños, llevó a un grupo de voluntarios menonitas a abrir una guardería infantil. Ante la sorpresa de la comunidad, sus aulas se quedaron vacías. Intrigados por la aparente indiferencia, contactaron a Wendell Rollason, un conocido defensor de los inmigrantes en Miami (Florida), quien pronto reconoció como una desconexión cultural impedía sus esfuerzos. Fue entonces que se inició la práctica de reclutar a las madres para trabajar en los centros. Con los conocimientos de Rollason y el trabajo de los voluntarios surgió el modelo que es hoy RCMA. Como base fundamental del modelo de RCMA se encuentra la importancia de honrar y reconocer la cultura de las familias, propiciándose así el ganar su confianza y respeto.

Tres principios básicos sirven como fundamento para el modelo de la RCMA. Los mismos son el trabajar con los agricultores para mejorar las condiciones de los trabajadores, reclutar y contratar docentes y personal provenientes de comunidades migrantes, el respeto a las culturas de las familias así como su involucración en las experiencias de aprendizaje de sus hijos (Brammertz, Mendez, Eklund y Moonan, 2012). Fiel al espíritu de Rollason, estos principios siguen guiando los esfuerzos de la RCMA para ayudar a aquellos en necesidad (Judy Burleson, comunicación personal, 23 de abril de 2017). Adoptando la posición de ver las familias como primeros maestros de sus hijos, el modelo se basa en el respeto y la validación de la cultura de los niños y sus familias. Sus tradicionales tamaladas celebradas en diciembre son una de las muchas actividades donde se reconoce la herencia cultural de las familias y que reúne a todos en comunidad. El componente de empoderamiento de estas experiencias ha contribuido a la participación de las familias como colaboradores, mientras se destaca su orgullo como miembros de un grupo cultural. Como resultado de estas prácticas son los ejemplos de muchos que fueron trabajadores agrícolas y que motivados ahora sirven en cargos gerenciales y de liderazgo dentro de RCMA. Otros encontraron el apoyo y es-

tímulo para continuar su propia educación, pasando a formar parte del grupo de maestros.

Desde la perspectiva de sistemas, el modelo de la RCMA también fundamenta sus prácticas en el apoyo a las necesidades genrales de la familia. La variedad de servicios para los miembros de la familia ofrecidos a través del equipo de coordinadores de la familia ha sido un componente integral sus programas de educación temprana. Son cientos las historias de éxito de padres quienes encontraron ayuda para completar su diploma de equivalencia general (GED), que obtuvieron servicios para aprender inglés o que recibieron asistencia durante situaciones difíciles y que sirven como testimonio a la importancia que tiene extender los servicios a toda la familia.

Bajo la dirección de Barbara Mainster, una defensora apasionada de los inmigrantes y los pobres, quien sirvió como su primera coordinadora de educación y luego como directora ejecutiva de la organización, la RCMA continuó su misión, ampliando los servicios y promoviendo los derechos de los niños y sus familias. La misión de RCMA continúa hoy permaneciendo como una voz y esperanza para las familias inmigrantes y sus niños así como para aquellos con escasos recursos y familias en las comunidades rurales.

Hacia Adelante

Atender a las necesidades de niños pobres e inmigrantes es una meta incesante para los docentes de la educación temprana. La llamada a la acción es para movernos hacia adelante y a encontrar soluciones efectivas que permitan enfrentar los retos que presenta la pobreza. Sin duda, los desafíos son muchos y permanecen en la agenda educativa reclamando esfuerzos con determinación de todos para ofrecer lo que es justificadamente digno para los niños. Mientras las soluciones surgen, lo que cada uno hacemos puede llegar a ser la respuesta a las necesidades de algún niño. ¿Acaso estará la suya entre las soluciones?

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Meeting Learning Standards Through Dramatic Play

BY GENA PUCKETT AND MONNIE VAIL

Children in Poverty

“Today more than ever, education remains the key to escaping poverty, while poverty remains the biggest obstacle to education” (Birdsong, 2016).

Children attending early childhood programs are representative of different family configurations and income levels. Children living in poverty come into our classrooms with many stressors that may hinder their development academically, physically and socially. Hunger, illness, and even lack of sleep are stressors that keep children from being ready and able to learn in a classroom setting. This is amplified when children living in low-income neighborhoods do not have access to quality preschool programs to support their learning in these crucial early years.

As we look at early childhood education today, teachers are challenged to ensure children meet the learning standards set by each state for all children in their classrooms. Looking into the classroom, we see children on different levels of learning and teachers challenged to differentiate their teaching for the needs of all children. Teachers feel the need to push more teacher-directed activities that are presented using the same method of instruction for all children and not adapted to the level of each child. Early learning standards can help guide teachers to differentiate instruction for each child’s specific needs when they come into their classroom and prepare them for the next grade level.

Learning Standards

“**Early Learning and Development Standards** means a set of expectations, guidelines, or developmental milestones that describe what all children from birth until kindergarten entry should know and be able to do and their disposition toward learning. These standards must be appropriate

for each age group of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers and English learners, and for children with developmental delays and disabilities. In addition, the standards must cover all the Essential Domains of School Readiness, and must be developmentally, linguistically, and culturally appropriate”.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, “Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) Program (2011).

As defined by the U.S. Department of Education, early learning standards should guide the planning of activities based on the age and development of each child. These standards can be adapted to meet the needs of children on different levels. For example, if a math standard for a 4-year-old states they are to count concrete items up to 10 using one-to-one correspondence by the end of prekindergarten and the teacher observes a child who has not yet developed the skill of counting concrete objects by mid-year, perhaps they should consider modifying the current instructional strategy to help the child reach such a goal. For instance, they could adjust their goal to the 3-year-old standard of counting three objects, and when that is achieved, shift to five and 10 objects.

This can also be done by counting actions; how many steps to get outside to the playground or how many claps (syllables) did we make for the word “open”? At the same time, some children in the class would be counting up to 12 concrete objects or actions and need to aim toward achieving the higher kindergarten standards. However, it is important to continually assess each child on the progress they are making in mastering the standards so the progression is documented. A child may be excelling and surpassed the standards for their age/development level in math, but still need help meeting earlier standards in social, language, or science.

Early learning standards are indicative of a skill each child needs to successfully master at developmental levels, but doesn’t look at the environment and/or experiences from which a child comes. When we look at all the standard areas each child is needing to meet and how each child learns best, wouldn’t it make sense to teach using instructional strategies based on child-initiated play with teachers differentiating learning by the materials and guidance they provide?

Play-Based Learning

Through play-based learning, teachers set a plan for what early learning standards the children will be introduced to and given



Photo courtesy of Denise Mikovilje, Biloxi.



Photo courtesy of Clare Sisk, Jackson.

Photo courtesy of Hollee Hans, Bliloxi.



opportunities to master over a month-long study of a topic or theme, such as machines. The plan includes setting up centers with activities and materials needed to accomplish the standard.

The dramatic play center is a focal point in the classroom through which many early learning standards can be met. When deciding on a theme for your dramatic play it would be beneficial to “listen to children’s

POSSIBLE STANDARDS THAT CAN BE MET

Dramatic Play Theme – Pizza Parlor

Make order pads from blank pieces of paper, menus with pictures, words and prices, etc. for children to “take orders” and tell the cook what has been ordered – this can meet the following standards:

Writing Standards:

WS1a – Explore and experiment with a combination of written representations (e.g.; scribbles, drawings, letters, and dictation) to express an opinion

Allowing children to “act out” being a customer, waitress/waiter, cook, etc. and use appropriate manners for each person can meet the following standards:

Social Development Domain

SD4b – Sustain interactions with friends, allow others to join play activities, and play cooperatively with others in small and large groups

Setting up a Pizza Parlor with signs, menus, order pads, etc. and talking with the children about what they like or dislike, their own experiences in a pizza parlor, how to take orders, asking questions about how or why they made their order a certain way, or ordered a pizza a certain way, etc., making recipe signs (letters, numbers, reading left to right) can meet the following standards:

English Language Arts

Speaking and Listening Domain

SL2 – With prompting and support, confirm understanding of information presented orally, from read-aloud, or through other media by asking and answering questions about details

Language Domain

L1c – Understand and use question words (interrogatives) (e.g.; who, what, where, when, why, how)

Reading Domain

FS1e – Recognize words as a unit of print and understand that letters are grouped to form words

This only names a few of the standards that could possibly be met through this one dramatic play theme.

From the Mississippi Early Learning Strategies for Classrooms Serving Four-Year-Old Children and the Mississippi Early Learning Standards for Classrooms Serving Four-Year-Old Children.

everyday talk” to setup “culturally relevant dramatic play centers letting young children draw from their experiences to enhance their play” (Gonzalez, Arreguin-Anderson, & Alanis, 2018, p.4). Different materials can be changed throughout the year to promote the theme and adapted to help children on different levels of learning. By having a dramatic play center accessible for children to choose as a play area, teachers can observe children meeting different domains found under Approaches to Learning Standard, for example, “Cooperate with friends during play by taking turns”...under the Play Domain or “Make independent choices” under the Curiosity and Initiative Domain. By setting up a theme-related dramatic play center and changing out the props every time the unit or theme changes, children can meet and/or exceed standards. For example, setting up a pizza parlor to go along with “Our Community” theme can lead to meeting mathematics, social and emotional, English language arts, physical development, creative expression and social studies standards when the teacher facilitates the play while providing the needed materials. The highlighted box lists a few possible standards that can be met from the Mississippi Early Learning Teaching Strategies for Classrooms Serving Four-Year-Old Children.

Teacher Facilitation

Making a plan and providing materials is just the beginning of the teacher’s involvement when facilitating play-based learning. As the children begin their play in the dramatic play center (let’s continue using the Pizza Parlor as an example), the teacher is prepared to engage in the child’s play and guide the learning process. If the children are cooking and taking orders, the teacher can become a customer. She can guide the children as to how they play a waiter or waitress by asking for a menu, asking if the child plans to write down what she would like to eat on the order pad, or using descriptive words to order, “I would like a medium round pizza with 2 toppings; pepperoni and cheese.” Teachers also engage in conversations asking open-ended questions about experiences they might have had in a pizza parlor. If the children would like her help in the kitchen, she could guide the learning by asking how they are making a certain pizza or why they put the sauce on before the cheese. These types of ques-

Photo courtesy of Suzette Romano, Biloxi.



tions and/or conversations build children's experiences and allow them to begin to use higher-level thinking skills. This type of authentic interaction with the props in the center requires a child to do more than just repeat or memorize facts or words, but allows them to link the understanding and make connections to what they are learning. The plan and materials are a start, but it also takes the teacher facilitating, putting themselves into that child-initiated play, by asking questions and/or having those teachable conversations that brings it all together to meet the standards through play-based learning.

Conclusion

Working with children from different backgrounds can be challenging when teachers teach the same activity, the same way, for every child. Taking the time to know where each child falls within the early learning standards, making a plan which utilizes child-initiated play-based learning and differentiated instruction for each child ensures that all children have a better chance to succeed in school. Using dramatic play centers is a great place to start while teaching children how to self-regulate, build imagination, problem solve and so much more. You will begin to notice, after you have introduced and facilitated this type of play in the beginning, children's strengths will start to emerge and they will help others who need guidance without

you being involved. In today's world, this is what children need to continue to be successful in school and beyond. According to Barblett (2010), "Children who engage in quality play experiences are more likely to have well-developed memory skills, language development, and are able to regulate their behavior, leading to enhanced school adjustment and academic learning" (p.4).

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