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Moving toward Inclusive Practices for Children and Families: A Preschool's Journey

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Abstract: As a college of education was charged with transforming a campus preschool program into a teacher-educator lab school, a community of practice was formed to look at current practices and make changes to create a more inclusive program using culturally relevant pedagogy and blended practices. Using a qualitative case study, data were collected for one year to determine what was taking place in the program. In years two through five, changes were implemented and reflected upon. Transformative learning guided data collection and analysis to support the process of reflecting critically on experiences, engaging in reflective dialogue, and taking action toward increasingly deep levels of authentic inclusive practices. Findings indicate that changes in the environment, curriculum frameworks, considerations for teachers, and bringing families in were the keys to developing a more inclusive program for elevating children and families.

Keywords: inclusive; preschool; blended practices; school change



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1. Introduction

Meeting the needs of all children in an early childhood classroom is a continuous challenge for teachers. It is imperative not only to meet children's basic needs but also to ensure children are seen and celebrated within their school space. Every child has areas of strength that should be recognized and celebrated at school. As schools explore the need to embrace diverse learners, they tend to rely on one-time state-agency-led professional development [1]. Interpretations of this information have varied greatly from site to site. Some schools have created spaces that embrace and uplift all the people within the school; however, some have missed the mark. All too often, stereotypes or inauthentic approaches are used in the classroom to create an unintentional facade of inclusivity. Such practices, observed in a multitude of classrooms, include utilizing superficial means for representation such as the ubiquitous picture of a person in a wheelchair playing basketball, adding sushi and tacos to the dramatic play center, and including "culturally representative" figurines in the block center dressed in traditional garb that serve to further solidify cultural stereotypes. Such forms of representation serve to further stereotype in their simplification of diversity, rather than drawing from the unique elements of the children's and families' experiences and traditions.

Schools, administrators, and teachers need authentic examples of what an inclusive space looks like. As part of the accreditation processes, schools are called to demonstrate the ways they consider student needs, families, and curricular decision-making, among other aspects of the school's function. For some, this process remains a superficial practice—going through the motions with the intent of obtaining a checkmark on an accreditation checklist or achieving 'gold seal' status. Recognizing that this approach does not embrace families, children, or teachers in an authentic way, as we approached the accreditation process, we sought to use this time to reflect on the practices in place and the ways they could be shifted

to address inclusion and diversity more intentionally for all children and families. In this study of our practice, we utilized a wide lens in our exploration of the ways we supported the diverse needs of children and families. This included addressing race, ethnicity, gender, abilities, and approaches to learning. It was important to program administrators, teachers, and faculty to holistically address equity and inclusion to support all children and families at the school.

In our desire to address inclusion and diversity, we first had to ground ourselves in the conversations that address the needs of children both with and without disabilities. Blended practices support the integration of field-based ways of knowing from early childhood and special education to work toward the common goal of supporting inclusive, high-quality education for all children [2]. In alignment with the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Exceptional Children's Division for Early Childhood's joint position statement on early childhood inclusion, the goals of ensuring access, participation, and support for each child and family are to provide "a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning to reach their full potential" [3]. The blended focus on supporting universal developmental needs in supportive and engaging environments, while simultaneously creating an intentional focus on addressing individual needs, works to ensure each child is provided space for growth and development in ways that foster participation in the context of the early childhood classroom [2]. Utilizing this lens, we were able to explore the structures that drove our instructional practices on both a universal and focused strategies level, the environment we developed within our school, and the policies that shaped our program. Entering into the study of our practice, we hoped to address the visible and hidden elements of our practice in order to develop and refine those that furthered our goal of inclusion, to intentionally critique and reform those that served as superficial access points, and to identify areas that stood in the way of achieving those goals.

The purpose of this study was to explore the evolution of a preschool's attempt to create an inclusive space celebrating all children in an authentic way. "If we can get beyond the idea that one way is necessarily best, we can consider the possibilities of other ways, seeking to understand how they work and respecting them in their time and place" [4]. This study took place over the course of five years, as the preschool underwent a change in leadership to be guided by the college of education in partnership with the campus preschool. One step in this was to pursue NAEYC early childhood program accreditation. The NAEYC's accreditation process calls upon programs to demonstrate the ways they meet 10 standards via observations and portfolios created at both the classroom and program levels. These standards were developed to collectively "provide a definition of quality for early learning programs serving young children birth through kindergarten" [5]. Beginning with self-study, programs seeking accreditation study current practices, their impact, and spaces for improvement. As we began to unpack these standards, we found ourselves questioning the authenticity of the ways we had been meeting these standards and how we could authentically infuse blended practices to provide a more inclusive setting that moved beyond surface levels of diversity and inclusion. For the purpose of this study, we utilized UNICEF's [6] definition to operationally define inclusivity, which states that inclusive education means all children in the same classroom have real learning opportunities. This definition recognizes multiple means of inclusion (i.e., ableness, race, language, gender, etc.) and highlights the "value [of] the unique contributions students of all backgrounds bring to the classroom and allow diverse groups to grow side by side, to the benefit of all" [6]. We define authenticity "as a set of experiences in which teachers and students engage in contexts and content that align with real-world experiences, and students have choice in the experience" based on the notion that levels of authenticity are enacted to an evolving degree [7].

For this self-study, we formed a community of practice (CoP) made up of university faculty, administrators, and teachers. The CoP is formed by stakeholders for the purpose of collaborative inquiry that allows for the formation of tension and discomfort while

transformation occurs [8]. In this group, we began to question and reflect on policy, curricular approaches, teaching practices, and relationships with children and families. Using a blended practices approach [2], we began engaging in conversations about inclusion and representation within the context of the NAEYC accreditation standards [9]. Within the space of our CoP [10], we acknowledged our lack of knowledge about blended practices and communities of belonging. Through our discussions, we decided this was important to our school culture and placed priority on creating a community that values and is enriched by the cultures of all students and families. We entered this work guided by [11] notion that issues of culture and community require a mentality of constant reflection and growth, which is under ongoing exploration. In our context, it was important to not only consider how we connect culture to school but also to recognize the needs of the third-culture children at our center [12]. Through building upon the various cultural influences children bring to our school in conjunction with a framework that democratically recognizes the voice of all stakeholders as influenced by [13] Pedagogy of Belonging, we strove to create a community where everyone is accepted, valued, and important.

2. Methods

Servage [14] looked at the potential for both critical pedagogy and transformative learning theory to inform the work done in a CoP. In this work, she pushes beyond the critical reflection of practice to critically reflect on decisions as situated and informed by contexts including society and policy. This aligns with Biesta's [15] description of critical pedagogy as work committed to transforming society by way of addressing issues of justice, equity, and liberation. CoPs have been utilized in both education and other fields. We draw from Wenger's [10,16] CoP theory to inform our understanding of teachers' experiences in professional learning communities. This perspective rejects the assumption that learning is a distinctly individual cognitive process and argues instead that learning is fundamentally a social phenomenon that occurs in the context of our experiences that vary within the CoP based on our unique roles.

Brookfield [17] describes transformative learning as learning that critically reflects on and reorders assumptions, leading to changes in the way one views and interacts with the world. Schools provide places in which issues of society can be unpacked through dialogue, such that learners are exposed to the experiences and voices of those beyond their peer group. Transformative learning can center on the ideas of children themselves [18] as the sharing of their ideas to promote learning for others. This journey of coming to a new understanding that challenges previously held assumptions about society and groups of people is at the core of transformative learning that moves it beyond just improved pedagogical practices. The effectiveness of a CoP needs specific and articulated objectives and an explicit focus on knowledge, practice, and participation from stakeholders through CoPs [19,20]. CoPs were an important aspect of the self-study process to provide a space for discussion, reflection, and debate on how to move the school forward.

The overarching research question guiding this study was: in what ways can the preschool integrate inclusive practices to benefit all children and families? In order to describe and explain the process of reflecting on current school practice and making systematic changes, a case study was the appropriate methodology. A case study looks at the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances [21,22]. The use of a case study allows us to dive deep into the process, and through the single case, we are required to look at the subject of the study from "many and varied angles" [23].

The preschool program was a working bounded unique case, whose study was undertaken by researcher-participants in a variety of roles [21]. The intention of this research was to inform and assist in taking a critical look at current practices and in identifying how to improve inclusive practices as a program. Case study methodology supported our inquiry via its recognition of the complexities of the researcher-participant role [21,24]. The director of the program oversaw the case study through systematic data collection and

continuous analysis. The teachers in each classroom were involved in the study through their engagement in action research. Throughout this research, they investigated their practices and utilized their findings to alter their teaching and the classroom. Each week, the teachers collected data in their classrooms that included their lesson plans, classroom portfolio progress, child artifacts, and shared classroom experiences. The teachers met with the director weekly as a CoP to discuss their data and the strategies to implement in the classroom. These CoP meetings were recorded as part of the research data. This research report weaves together a case informed by action research; bringing together these research methodologies expanded our dataset and allowed deeper investigation into the particulars of the case from multiple points of view. This was supported by a collective inquiry stance that situated each member of the research team as a unique lens through which to authentically explore the current practices with the intention of implementing transformation designed to increase inclusive practices at the preschool in support of our goals for inclusivity [25]. Faculty who were not a part of the everyday life of the school engaged in this study from a macro level in which they were updated and gave input into the process of the transformation by sharing research-based practices.

3. Context

This study took place at a teacher-educator lab school situated on a large urban university in the southeast US. For years, the school was positioned as a daycare on campus. However, the college of education formed a partnership with the program to create a teacher-educator lab school that would serve as a site for student field experiences, research, and exemplary early childhood teaching practices. To achieve this goal, an initial strategic plan was created with steps to create this specialized teacher-educator space. One step of this process was for the school to obtain NAEYC accreditation. The school began hiring teachers with a minimum of a bachelor's degree, specifically in early childhood education. At the beginning of the study, the school had a mix of CDA-qualified teachers and four teachers with bachelor's degrees. As changes were made within the school, there were teachers who chose to leave the program. Additionally, throughout the course of the study, teachers who were working in the lab school were simultaneously students in the university's early childhood education undergraduate and graduate programs. At the conclusion of this study, our classroom teachers' educational backgrounds included one doctoral candidate, four with a master's in education, three with bachelor's degrees, and one CDA. Our teachers come from several ethnic backgrounds and speak multiple languages. The teachers worked with the director, early childhood faculty, and a graduate assistant to study their practices and make strategic changes to their classrooms as a part of their job description. Families were invited into meetings quarterly for this purpose. The school serves 76 children from 20 countries who speak many different languages. Children in the program come from a wide array of socioeconomic backgrounds, abilities, and cultures. The school serves the children of students and faculty members, as well as children from the local community.

As we embarked on implementing changes to address inclusion and diversity within the program, our aim was to look closely at four primary areas to identify current practices and areas for improvement—the study of teaching practices, classroom environments, administrative practices and policies, and family engagement.

4. Data Sources and Analysis

Data collection and analysis for this study were an iterative process aligned with Meziro's theory of transformative learning moving through four phases: experience, critical reflection, reflective discourse, and action [26]. Transformative learning aligned with our desire to look more closely at current practice to work toward change in its intention of "becoming aware of one's own and others' tacit assumptions and expectations and assessing their relevance for making an interpretation" [27]. Undergoing this process meant data collection and analysis would be an ongoing process with the analysis of early data leading

to change and the collection of later data. Given the span of time over which our data were collected and the ways analyzation was relevant to the time in which it took place, we have detailed our collection and analyzation process chronologically to show how various forms of data spoke to decision-making that would ultimately lead to new forms of data arising for analyzation.

This study began during a time of major transformation at the preschool, which included shifts in the curricular framework and pursuing NAEYC accreditation. Drawing from the current experiences, a CoP was formed by the preschool director, college of education faculty, and the pedagogical liaison—a graduate student who worked in collaboration with the preschool and the early childhood education faculty. Initial data collection included the self-study portfolios created by the teachers and the administrator, which were investigated to look for gaps in practice. The process of the self-study required meeting with teachers weekly to discuss the NAEYC indicators and how they were meeting them in their classrooms. The portfolios were analyzed closely to look at what was currently taking place in the classroom. Classroom observations were also conducted to identify current classroom practices. During the observations, anecdotal records were taken to gain a deeper understanding of teachers' practices and children's engagement in the classroom. The administrative portfolio was analyzed by looking for gaps in practice through self-study. There were many sections of this portfolio that the school was not currently undertaking, and this led to conversations within the CoP to create structures and policies to meet NAEYC requirements. Surveys from families and board feedback were collected to identify what stakeholders thought was working at the center and areas for improvement. The researchers read and reread all the documents line by line with initial codes. This process was repeated as we funneled the data down into larger categories. These categories were condensed in subsequent readings until primary codes were identified. The data were then analyzed again to code the data using the themes that emerged.

From these conversations, action was taken to move toward more inclusive practices within the school. This action spurred further leadership changes and job-embedded professional development around a new curricular framework intended to support blended practices, inclusion, and diversity, as well as a renewed focus on the development of home-school partnerships. As these shifts took place, we returned to data collection that included updated self-study portfolios, classroom observations, and weekly planning meetings with teachers. In addition to the portfolios, the data records from this period include observation notes, researcher journals, and recorded professional development meetings. These data were read and reread to create categories, which were once again categorized to form primary codes for re-analyzation and the development of themes.

Following the second round of data collection, the school received NAEYC accreditation. The teachers went on to engage in action research around their classroom practices with the guidance of school leadership. This created a data record of action research discussions and findings that were coded using line-by-line coding to identify primary codes, which we reanalyzed to identify themes in the data. Classroom observations and photographs furthered the data record in this phase and served as both standalone data and elicitation material used during action research conversations. Surveys from board members and families became an ongoing practice at the preschool, creating a renewing data source that provided insights into stakeholders' perspectives on the program. Given the cyclical nature of transformative learning, the data record continued to grow throughout our study, moving us through multiple iterations of the learning cycle.

As we progressed through each phase of the study, we continued to evaluate our practices through observations, children's work samples, family surveys, and faculty feedback. An ECE faculty member developed a coaching tool for self-evaluation and observation. This tool was given to teachers once a semester, and they were asked to evaluate themselves. The director then conducted a one-hour observation in the classroom and completed the same tool based on what was observed. The director used the self-report and evaluation and set up a meeting with the teachers to discuss their responses. The director and teachers

then co-constructed goals for the next semester. The cycle continued each semester as the teachers continued to grow and learn. Work samples from the children provided a window into classroom practice. These work samples were used for the NAEYC self-study and gave us an indication of best practices taking place in the classroom. At the end of each school year, a 15-question survey was distributed to the families. This survey asked questions about satisfaction with the teachers, classroom practices, children's learning, and administration. This feedback was used to make continuous improvements. Additionally, the board would meet every semester to discuss the changes and progress the school made. The faculty would provide feedback and suggestions for the next steps. These tools have been used continually to look at the school's progress and now continuous practice.

5. Findings

The first year of the study was spent identifying current practices and beginning the NAEYC self-study process. During this time, a lead faculty member of the early childhood education program created a new vision and mission for the school. The changes created in the school were directly aligned with this new vision and mission. In years two through five, changes were implemented systematically and slowly. The researchers want to emphasize that these changes did not happen overnight. The program continues to be reflected on and improvements continue to be implemented to this day. Below are the primary areas of change we identified and implemented to create an inclusive space for the children and families of the program. We acknowledge the format of the findings presented are nontraditional. However, in order to unpack the extensive changes made to the program over the 5 years and to address the multiple layers of creating and supporting an inclusive setting, a rich narrative was required. In presenting this unique case, we hope to provide insights that are beneficial and applicable to researchers, administrators, and teachers wanting to undertake this work.

6. Environments

As a part of the initial improvement plan, the environment was at the top of the list for change. The building first opened in the 1990s and consisted of a bold primary color theme. Each room had a different color theme. There were red, blue, yellow, and green rooms. Each room had a countertop, trim, and doors in their respective color. The furnishings in the room were very institutional with several tables and chairs, shelves, and colorful alphabet rugs taking up most of the space. The materials were closed-ended and primarily store-bought; they were also very colorful and made of plastic. The photos on the walls were stock photos, calendars, and schedules bought from a traditional school store. The space was very overstimulating and filled with stereotypic images with no real representation of culture or of the children filling the space.

6.1. Physical Space

The team decided to invest in reconceptualizing the entire look and feel of the school. We wanted to move beyond the call for a space that meets the basic requirements of providing well-maintained, safe spaces physically into spaces that are inviting and create a sense of emotional and educational comfort and joy. The first step was to paint over the colorful doors, trim, and counters with a light brown color. Vinyl flooring replaced the old carpets. The colorful rugs were replaced with neutral shades. A great deal of the traditional furniture was removed. It was replaced with more home-like tables and shelving. Lamps for soft light were added, as well as plants. The purpose of this process was to lower the overall stimulation of the classroom and make it more welcoming to both children and families. Once the neutral palette was set, the room was decorated with images of children and their families within the classroom, as well as with children's work.

As a group, we realized there were many stereotypic photos on our walls to "meet" the NAEYC criterion that requires "Classroom materials show persons with differing abilities engaged in activities that counteract stereotypical limitations" [5]. We were uncomfortable

with this idea. We posed the question: how can we meet the criterion for accreditation while avoiding stereotypes and authentically representing our students? We noticed in many classrooms that there were store-bought photos from education companies on the walls. This was due to a recommendation from a state “quality coach” who previously came to the center. For example, every classroom had an image of a boy in a wheelchair playing basketball. That in and of itself is not problematic; however, this image seems to be showcased in all “diversity” packets by school suppliers. We recognize the importance of displaying people with varying abilities; however, we thought that this image was clichéd in nature, and we wanted to provide a more authentic representation. We again reached out to our own families. We asked for photos of their own families that showed their working roles, as well as those in their families with varying abilities. Again, the children were proud to see their own family members on the walls. These images sparked conversations with the children about where their parents worked or why their grandpa had a cane. Once we received these photos, we asked families to come in and share more about their roles and abilities. We were careful with our language, moving away from using words like “disability” but rather highlighting the abilities of the individual as a whole person, not defined by their mobility or even neurodivergence.

The children were also represented in the rules and schedule for the day. The teachers started taking time at the beginning of the school year to take photographs of the children engaged in the norms of the classroom. The teachers then laminated these photographs and posted them for the rules. The same was completed for each part of the day. The teachers snapped photos of different children undertaking different things throughout the day. This was used to create a visual schedule for the children. The teachers used Velcro so that each photo could be turned over. This helped support students who needed the visual cue of what part of the day was taking place. It also helped children who were anxious about when their family members would be arriving to pick them up. For those children, teachers would add an additional photo to the schedule with the face of the family member. If a family member came between snack and outside time, a photo of the family member would be placed between those two events. This simple act helped greatly in reducing the child’s anxiety about pick-up time.

6.2. Classroom Materials

An element of the environmental study requires schools to identify the ways they provide materials to “show persons of different ethnic or cultural backgrounds engaged in activities that counteract stereotypical limitations” [5]. On our original viewing of the school and materials, we noted that the school had plastic figures in each classroom of people from various ethnicities in “traditional” and stereotypic clothing and roles in the block center. While these figures present people from multiple cultures, they provide children with a fixed image that does not adequately represent the various roles people fill. To counter this limited model of diversity, we turned to elevate and exemplify the diversity within our own program, opting to create figures of each child in the school. Teachers and volunteers went to the hardware store and bought 2 × 4 boards and cut them into a rectangle block. Pictures of each child and teacher in the classroom were taken and printed. The images were then affixed to a block using decoupage glue. These were then placed in the dramatic play area of the classroom. In addition to these blocks, the school also purchased wool people of various shades that did not have faces and were not gender specific. This way the children could make the dolls anyone they imagined, and this provided additional open-ended dramatic play opportunities.

As we looked closely at the materials within the classroom, we noticed that many of the puzzles the quality coach previously recommended were also stereotypical. There was a set of puzzles that showcased foods from different cultures. The cultural food puzzles depicted images of Asian people only eating sushi and Latine people eating tacos. We decided to remove these puzzles and replace the puzzles with varying levels of brain teasers and more open-ended puzzles. The group then decided that foods would be incorporated

into the classroom in authentic ways. To do this, the teachers asked families to bring in empty boxes and cans from their own homes. The children were very excited to bring in things that they ate at home and were familiar with. There was a huge array of different types of cuisine that the children could explore, and the children who ate the foods could talk to their peers about them. This also provided all the children in the classroom with an expanded view of food options, which alleviated the need for children to ask about their peers' lunches that were different from their own.

Through the process of analyzing our program, we decided to look closely at the books that we were using in the classroom. We wanted to make sure that all children and families were represented in our classroom. This went beyond having books about children of color or from different backgrounds. Rather, we wanted to make sure that the authors and illustrators of the books were representative of our children. Finding children's books by authors/illustrators from each child's home country was central to our goal. We wanted to make sure all different types of families were represented in our library, as well as being representative of both rural and urban environments. We identified books that discussed varying abilities, as well, to ensure that all our children and families were seen and heard. Over the course of three years, we completely revitalized our school library and resources with high-quality, diverse, and representative texts.

7. Curriculum Framework

Rethinking the way that the curriculum was enacted at the school was a significant area of change over time. Using research on blended and best practices, new strategies were used in the classroom to facilitate learning. These strategies were implemented slowly by teachers and then reflected on during their weekly planning sessions. The teachers reflected on what was working and on the areas of improvement to support student learning. To enact our ideas of teaching and learning through inquiry, we utilize the project approach as a framework to enact our curriculum [28]. The project approach is a mode for facilitating inquiry with young children that involves conducting in-depth investigations into a deliberately focused topic of interest. Through project work, a collaborative community is formed that allows us to listen to children and their families' voices and to explore their funds of knowledge, as well as our own [29]. Project work allows children to represent their learning through multiple modes of representation that can be shared throughout the school community.

7.1. Project Approach

As the university worked to reinvigorate the ways in which children were learning in the center, the CoP discussed curriculum possibilities in great depth. There was much discussion about what curriculum to use and the framework we would align our program with. There was debate about whether to use a boxed curriculum or to create our own. Although faculty liked the idea of creating their own unique curriculum, the current program did not have enough teachers or faculty with the time and expertise to write an emergent curriculum for the school. Therefore, it was ultimately decided that the school would use Creative Curriculum. This curriculum was chosen because it was open-ended in nature and made room for the curricular framework the CoP wanted to follow; it had a set of standards to allow for authentic assessment focusing on student change over time, and it was also a widely used curriculum in the state.

After choosing the curriculum, the CoP decided the project approach would be the framework used to align with the new inquiry-based vision and mission of the program for both children and teachers. The project approach is an in-depth long-term investigation of a topic [28]. A project can be as short as a month or could possibly take place over several months. Projects are broken down into three distinct phases that include finding out what children know and developing research questions, collecting, and analyzing data from the research questions posed in phase 1, and the final phase allows children to demonstrate their learning on the topic to others. During the three phases, the teachers facilitate learning

and provide provocations through the project topic to engage in science, math, social studies, literacy, art, and social-emotional development. Projects are hands-on explorations of a topic that is child-directed. Teachers listen to what children are interested in and what is a part of their daily lives to determine a project. The project approach mirrors the inquiry approach used to engage in research as adults [30]. This framework was chosen specifically because it allows teachers to meet each child where they are and scaffold learning to meet individual children's needs.

Since this framework does not include skill- and drill-learning methodologies, children are provided opportunities to learn content areas through an assets lens where each child is valued. For example, in a two-year-old classroom, four children went outside with a teacher to observe and count tires for a car project. The children may be engaging in this experience in different ways. One child might simply point at the tire with the teacher helping the child say "one" while they point. Another child may be able to count independently for all four tires. The third child may be able to count higher and count the lug nut holes of the tire up to eight. The fourth child may be able to tally the tires and lug nuts on a piece of paper, demonstrating one-to-one correspondence. All four of the children are learning in this activity, they are all contributing, and they all are valuable members of the group. The teacher is there to support and help expand understanding and learning based on where children are regarding their mathematics knowledge.

7.2. Classroom Schedules

From classroom observations and speaking with teachers, we realized the daily schedule for each class needed to be revised. The original schedule had small blocks of time designated for each part of the day with multiple transitions. It was evident the length of each daily event and the moving from one transition to another required a lot of behavior management and redirection. We decided that the children needed longer blocks of center and outside time, with shorter time allotted for circle time. We moved to have a 10–15 min circle time and a minimum of an hour of center time that did not include clean-up. For the older children (4–5-year-olds), an hour and a half was designated for center time. This longer work time allowed children to investigate topics and content deeply, while also exploring independently. We designated an hour in the morning and the afternoon for outside time. This provided children the opportunity to run and play freely for longer periods of time to expend energy and study the outdoors. With longer blocks of time devoted to play and center learning, transitions were minimized. The teachers and director talked about ways to make each transition as short and seamless as possible. Once these changes were implemented, the need for constant behavior management was greatly reduced.

7.3. Centering Children

Projects were focused on children's interests and took many twists and turns based on what they learned in each phase. We wanted to elevate children's voices and strengths. Through the project approach, the teachers provided space for children to share their knowledge, ideas, and understanding of the curriculum being enacted. This became the central focus in each classroom. When a project began, the teachers would spend a few weeks finding out what children knew about the topic and create provocations for the whole group and center time where children shared what they knew about the topic through webbing. Teachers would ask probing questions and listen to children's conversations or look for other cues from children. For example, a less verbal child might not answer a question directly about what they knew about snakes, but when playing with their friends they would slither on the ground, indicating they knew that snakes moved differently than people did. The teachers would indicate this on the web and place the child's name next to what they added. Later, when they reviewed the web, they would talk about what they saw each child knew about the topic as they continued to add to it. Children who were able to write themselves might come and add to the web. Children who were not yet able to write as well might draw a picture that teachers would caption with what the child was

representing. This approach ensured all children were included through multiple means of representation. Some other ways children shared their knowledge and understanding were through memory stories, drawings, 3D representations with recycled materials or clay, digital storytelling, and bringing in artifacts such as photographs or items from home. This approach allowed all children to have shared experiences with the topic, even if they had minimal initial exposure to the topic. The multiple mediums for representation of knowledge allowed all children to participate in ways they felt comfortable and confident with.

Children's home cultures were also central in the classroom, which aligned with the NAEYC's standard calling for the inclusion of multiple perspectives in the way of bringing in families' home languages, as well as their "values, beliefs, and experiences" (2.A.04) [5] into planning and instruction. Instead of holding stereotypic cultural events, teachers emphasized each child's family and encouraged them to share with the class. This was done within a real-world context, rather than just as an add-on to the classroom. Families were invited into the classroom regularly to share about their homes pertaining to project topics. For example, when a classroom was studying houses, families were asked to send in a photograph of a home from their country of origin. The children then looked at how the homes were similar and how they were different as a center choice. Another day, the children undertook a lesson where they looked at the world map on the wall and put a pin in the country with a string attached and with the house on the end. They also had small photographs of the heads of each child on the pin on the country so the children could see the places all over the world their class was from. As they continued to study homes, they created 3D representations using multiple mediums to show their understanding of the similarities and differences of the houses they were studying. One child who was a dual-language learner drew a blueprint of a home and shared words in his home language for a stove and refrigerator. This was added to the blueprint, and the child shared the words with the class. This led to other children labeling words both in English and their home language. Another child decided to bring in money from their home country, some rupees. This was shared with the class and led to children bringing in all different types of money from their homes. The teachers facilitated conversations about the different types of money. Similar things were done in all projects to bring families in and show the value of each individual child and their culture.

7.4. Focused Instructional Strategies

The ways in which content was taught in the classroom were transformed during this process of re-envisioning the school. NAEYC standards call on programs to utilize "teaching strategies that best fit each child's learning style" (3.E.04) [5]. We saw space to move this beyond a traditional top-down teaching style to view learning from a more holistic approach that places value on the uniqueness of each child. We moved away from traditional circle and center times as we enacted the project approach. Instead of conducting rote activities such as calendar and ABC memorization during circle time, we made this time short and focused on things related to the project. Teachers or a child would share an artifact or a story that was related to what would be taking place in center time for the day. Children would have the space to share and talk together about the topic, instead of requiring children to sit perfectly and keep quiet. This helped to support students in the classroom and reduced behavior management issues during circle time. At the end of circle time, the teachers would share the different opportunities for exploration during center time. Teachers would set out provocations in some centers where children could explore and experiment on their own. A teacher would then float between these centers to provide support or extend learning throughout this elongated work period. The children were able to move from center to center by using the choice board set up in the classroom. Embedded learning opportunities were available during all parts of the day with teachers listening and jumping in to extend learning intentionally. This also carried over into playground

time, as well as lunch. Teachers would always be listening to children and identifying ways to extend learning.

During center time, the second teacher in the classroom would facilitate an intentional small group activity with which the children could engage related to the project topic or a content area. In these small groups, the teachers would support children based on where they were developmentally. The small group activities were open-ended in nature to allow for this flexibility with children. For example, children might be at the table creating an observational drawing of an item they brought in from outside. Children at the table may vary in their ability to write and label their drawings. The teacher would work with each child individually to support and expand their learning. If one child struggled to hold a pencil, the teacher would provide support to help the child be successful. She might ask the child what he wanted to label and provide some light lines for the child to be able to make his own words. Another child may need help sounding out the letters of what they wanted to label; the teacher would then help that child to sound out the label, and the child would draw independently. Another child at the table might already be writing using inventive spelling. For this child, she might challenge the child to write more than one word to describe their drawing. All the children are working in the same space and on the same standards but at different levels of the continuum.

Teachers embedded learning opportunities for the children in every aspect of the day from lining up to eating lunch and everything in between. The children worked on skills in every domain as they went through their day. When planning, the teachers discussed what they would do in those “in-between” spaces such as transitions, family-style meals, and outside time. The teachers thought about things that one or several children might need additional practice with and embedded them into the everyday life of the classroom. Teachers would challenge children with new vocabulary by asking them to line up in different ways such as making parallel lines or forming a rhombus. They would support this with images for children who were dual-language learners or needed additional support to ensure their success in the process. During lunch and snacks, the teachers would infuse topics such as sustainable practices or other content areas into their conversations.

Another strategy used by the teachers was peer modeling. Children in the classroom had a wide range of talents and areas of need for additional support. The teachers took time early in the year to identify children’s areas of strengths and interests. This information was used to develop peer modeling within the classroom environment. For example, if a child struggled with reading but demonstrated exceptional visual arts skills, the teachers would make sure the child was viewed as an expert in this area. They would show drawings the child created and let him demonstrate the technique he used to create his drawing. Another child may have in-depth knowledge of block building and would show other children how to create tall buildings and unique structures. In this classroom, a few children were working on self-regulation. The teachers and the children would practice together various self-regulation techniques. If one of these children started to engage in an outburst, the teachers would facilitate modeling self-regulation with a peer they had a strong relationship with who also demonstrated strong social-emotional regulation. This peer coaching was often effective in helping the child to self-regulate.

As we continued to develop our new curricular framework and supporting structure, we also looked at the ways in which we documented children’s learning. We decided to use a work sampling approach to look at the progress of each child over time using the Creative Curriculum continuums provided. To capture learning, teachers were taught to use a software called Kaymbu. This software allowed teachers to take photographs of children engaging in an activity or a sample of their work. The photograph could then tag the child and be tagged to a standard. Within each standard, a rating could be applied and/or the teacher could write anecdotal records about the child during the activity or learning opportunity. As work samples are collected, a digital portfolio is automatically created when you tag and write about each activity. This allows for a view of the child’s change over time in each domain. For children who might otherwise be labeled “behind”,

this approach instead focused on what the child had accomplished every few months. This portfolio could be sent to families for review prior to their bi-yearly conference. This provided space and time for the teachers and the families to work together to create goals for the child for the upcoming semester based on the progress the child had made.

8. Considerations for Teachers

As the school restructured the ways in which the curriculum was enacted to ensure blended practices, special considerations to elevate teachers' knowledge and practices needed to be considered and structured into each week. In the previous environment, teachers planned on their own with minimal time out of the classroom. The plans did not include all the teachers in the classroom. A strict hierarchy was in place separating the roles and clout of the lead teachers and assistant teachers, creating a top-down environment in the classroom. We knew that restructuring was essential to support teachers in learning the project approach, documenting children's learning, and enacting the curricular framework. The following areas were critical in supporting teachers to enact the changes in the classroom.

8.1. Time and Space for Planning

The first and vital change that was made was in teachers' planning time. Instead of lead teachers planning in isolation, the teaching teams planned with their co-teachers. The teachers planned once a week with the director for one hour. The director was a part of the planning process to support teachers through a job-embedded professional learning community. The teachers would talk about what the children learned during the current week and look closely at work samples. From these discussions about children, the teachers and director would brainstorm ideas for the following week. As they thought about the following week, they would discuss the phase of the project they were in, what content areas they wanted to cover, what content could be integrated, and how to support individual students. The teachers left the planning meeting with the director and then had an additional hour to write their plans for the following week together. This additional time allowed them to reflect on children's work and their teaching together as a team and then make informed decisions based on those reflections.

8.2. Documenting Children's Learning

Teachers were also allotted an hour-and-a-half block weekly to work on documenting children's learning and create documentation panels for the classroom to capture the story of the project. The teachers would reflect on the images they took using the Kaymbu software take time to tag the children's work to standards and write anecdotal notes about what the children said or did during the lesson. This qualitative data captured the full picture of the child's experience beyond how the child rated the item. The act of reviewing this documentation provided a time for teachers to reflect on the week and their teaching and on how children responded to lessons throughout the week. This was additionally emphasized through the act of creating documentation panels for the classroom that showcased various events, linking the activities to standards, and selecting which photographs and work samples to include. This was a learning opportunity for teachers to think deeply about their teaching and the students in the classroom.

8.3. Inquiry-Based Teaching and Learning through Action Research

As we worked toward creating a teacher educator lab school, we wanted the teachers to be up to date on the latest research practices and engage in the research community. We wanted highly qualified teachers who had experience working with children with varying abilities through blended practices. This led to the creation of action research projects for each classroom. The lead teacher from each classroom met weekly with the director to learn about action research. They conducted a group book study to look closely at the process of action research. After learning about the process, the teachers piloted their own

action research project for their classrooms. Teachers met with the director and discussed what they wanted to learn more about, what areas they thought they could improve in, or a particular situation taking place in their classroom. The teachers then identified research questions they would investigate in their classrooms. The teachers then read the literature on the topic they chose. The director helped them plan the project to include what classroom data they would collect, as well as how they would analyze the data. The group met weekly as they went through the action research process. Some examples of initial action research projects included a wide array of topics from learning more about engaging preschoolers in STEM to supporting dual language learners and their families in the classroom and authentic exploration of the arts in the classroom. The teachers had one project they worked on throughout the entire school year that included planning, data collection, analysis, and dissemination. When the teachers completed their action research, they would prepare proposals to submit to share their work at the university, state, and national conferences. This provided an additional layer for the teachers to be viewed as professionals and experts in the field of early childhood education.

9. Bringing Families in

From initial surveys and meetings with families, we knew we needed to improve the way we engaged with families in an authentic way. To address this, we updated the policy, provided multiple means of communication to families in a variety of formats, designated a staff member to be a family liaison, and prioritized the use of families' funds of knowledge to be incorporated into our program. Throughout this process, we continued to survey families to see if the changes implemented better met their needs.

9.1. Communication

Since we had families from all over the world and with very different schedules, we decided that it was important to disseminate information in various formats. First, we wanted to make sure at least one teacher was available at drop-off and pick-up time for brief check-ins. This was not designed for long conversations but rather a quick exchange of information for both teacher and family. If larger issues needed to be addressed, the teacher would work with the family to schedule a 30-min Zoom meeting that week. Next, families were given access to the classroom email and were encouraged to send any questions or concerns they may have. The teacher would respond within 24 h. If the email was beyond the scope of something that could be resolved via email, then a Zoom or in-person meeting was scheduled. As an additional resource, we formed a partnership with the university to provide a translator for families that wanted to utilize the service for conferences and family events in most languages. For example, we had two members of a family who were both non-hearing. The school hired an ASL translator for all family events, such as the spring festival and ice cream social, so that the family could communicate with other families and the teachers at events.

As an effort to improve communication, the school purchased Kaymbu software. This interactive software provides two-way messaging, storyboards, and authentic assessment portfolios. This software was a game changer for communicating with families. First and foremost, the teachers started to create weekly storyboards. These storyboards told the story of what the children did and learned that week and could be sent out in over 50 languages. It contained photographs and videos of the children, along with dialog from the teachers and children. Additionally, it had work samples the children created that week, with the learning standards they were covering. This helped parents to see the learning that took place through play, which can sometimes be hard to recognize. When the storyboards were sent out, the families could respond back about what they thought or questions they may have. This software also helped teachers document children's learning by taking photographs of an artifact or of a child undertaking something that can then be tagged according to early learning standards. It automatically creates individual child

portfolios. These portfolios were then sent out to families a week prior to their conferences in the fall and the spring.

The administration also sent out a monthly newsletter and worked to be more accessible to families. This newsletter was primarily aimed at sharing important events taking place at the school and within the community. It also included local resources related to children and families. We made a conscious effort to move away from newsletters as a source of guidance or education for families. The administration also was available outside to meet and greet families in the morning or the afternoon. The director wanted to make sure families knew she was available if they had a question or concern. Forming these relationships helped the school learn more about the child and the family. Trust was built between the school and home, which helped greatly in times when difficult conversations had to take place. The families knew the school was there to support them and their child, and suggestions were made or plans put in place to help foster child success.

To get families engaged with each other, we created a private social media community. All new families were invited to participate in the private groups. On these sites, we would share posts about projects the children were engaged in within the classroom. We also provided special notices, like closures and school events. We noticed that families started communicating with each other through these outlets. For example, when the school was closing for PD one day, the families posted the need for care on that day. The families then organized a playgroup that some parents ran while others worked, and then they switched off. The families would also invite others to days at the park or the library during school hours. They would also post things going on that they knew about that the school did not. We found this was a great way for families to connect with each other and form a community with each other.

Another change that was initiated was having a staff member with time allotted weekly to serve as the family liaison. This person oversaw planning events, sharing the notice of events in multiple formats, staggering times of events so all families would have an opportunity to participate around their work/school schedules, and organizing community outreach. The liaison also met with families to gather information and ideas about what events they were interested in attending and served as a resource center if a family needed outside support such as counseling, developmental screening, or health needs. This person developed relationships with each family to help connections between the school and home life of the child. This small shift in having a designated person helped us significantly to improve our support of families within our program.

9.2. Funds of Knowledge

We moved away from a top-down model of the school as experts and parents as receivers of information and knowledge. This was grounded in the notion that families are the experts of their own children. We moved toward a model of resource provider instead of telling families how they should parent. We knew that to center the children in our program we also needed to center families. We worked from the idea that all our families bring value to the program and have important things to share. This asset lens helped us to tap into the unique knowledge and backgrounds of all our families that could be shared with everyone in the school. As relationships were built with families, we learned about their professions and hobbies. We would then invite families to come and share their expertise with the classes. Some examples included our non-hearing family coming in and teaching children sign language, a violinist playing music for the children, a contractor coming in and showing children how to use tools to construct an object, and an archeologist coming in and sharing fossils with the class. Through this connection to the experiences of families grew additional connections to local knowledge available to support children within our community, in alignment with NAEYC standards [5]. In addition to sharing personal skills, we also wanted to elevate every child's home culture within the school. To do this, we invited families to come and share traditions and artifacts from their home countries. This was often infused into projects the children were working on in the classroom. By

undertaking this, the children saw their home culture valued in the hundreds of examples of families coming in to share their knowledge. This provided a space of learning for all teachers, children, and administrators, as well as other families. Teachers would connect with all new families and gather a list of basic words from a child's home language to use with new students and to share with the other children. These words were also used to label materials. For example, in every classroom, the bathroom, chairs, tables, and doors were all labeled in every language spoken by the children in the classroom. The teachers also asked families for a copy of their alphabet. These were laminated and added to the writing center for all children to access. On significant holidays celebrated by a family, the teachers invited the family to come in and share these traditions and teach the children and teachers about their tradition and why it is important for their family.

10. Conclusions

Authentic responsiveness and representation of children and families is never static, rather it is constantly shifting based on reflection, growth, and the children we serve. The transformation of the school took a great deal of time with small changes put in place slowly over time. There were many moments of tension along the way. When initial changes were made to curriculum and strategies, some teachers were not on board with the shift. They did not see the need to change their practice because they had been conducting it a certain way for years. This notion of doing it right or in a certain way made change difficult [31]. However, most of the teachers welcomed the shift, especially those who were also enrolled in our graduate-level programs. They embraced the challenge of questioning notions of teaching and classroom practices.

Job-embedded professional development with the director and teachers was critical as changes were implemented. The teachers had to learn about the project approach, authentic assessment, and action research as we added layers and complexity to our program. The act of meeting weekly and discussing planning, projects, children's learning, and teaching strategies supported continuous reflection and growth [32,33]. The project approach was introduced first and teachers worked exclusively on learning the approach for the entire school year. As they became more skilled with project work, documenting children's learning was brought to the forefront, which was the focus of year two implementation. At this time, we brought in the Kaymbu software. One teacher was particularly interested in piloting the technology, so she began to try and document learning. She then introduced it to the other teachers, and they worked together to document just a few standards to become familiar with the process. As their skills grew, they started documenting all standards and creating rich storyboards to tell the story of the classroom each week. During this time, we also introduced action research to the teachers, and they began studying their own practice. Inquiry was initially implemented as a new policy; however, as teachers engaged in the act of reflection, they realized the value of looking at how things were going and seeking out answers to improve their practices [34]. As a result of this process, the teachers began submitting proposals for conferences at the state and national levels. They continue to present their work on various platforms as a form of continuous professional development. Each step seemed to serve as a catalyst for the next as teachers developed a stance for inquiry, equity, and inclusion that shifted perspectives and impacted dispositions.

This process took a great deal of time and resources to enact the changes made within the school. To increase planning and documentation time, we had to hire additional staff. This was possible due to our location on a university campus where students were able to work in part-time positions to cover nap time so that teachers could leave the classroom. It is a constant work in progress, with the teachers and the director continuing to learn and improve their practice. Dedication to the cyclical nature of transformative learning and a willingness to move through the phases of critical reflection and reflective discourse are required of all members of the preschool team. The discomfort that comes with such a stance can be challenging and requires trust, open communication, and a level of validation for the learning process [1,16,34]. As the school continues to thrive, special considerations

are made for hiring new teachers. Instead of looking for years of experience, we seek teachers who are eager to learn and reflect and see inquiry as a stance [35]. We look for teachers who are curious, have an asset lens when viewing children, and believe in ongoing questioning and reflection. The more we learn about inclusion and blended practices, the more we question and seek to learn.

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