



## Addressing Disparities in Early Childhood Education through Early Childhood Resources

### Key Takeaways

**By Stephanie Adams, Pilar Alamos, Parnia Ashari, Jayla Hart, Alita Robinson, Amanda Williford\***

\*Authors listed in alphabetical order

Program leaders and teachers fill early childhood classrooms with books, images, print, music, and activities. Trainers, coaches, and researchers create teacher professional development materials that portray classrooms through videos, vignettes, and role-plays. In all these resources, we send messages –implicit and explicit– to teachers, children, and families about what is valued and accepted in early childhood classrooms.

Intentionally reviewing these materials through a diversity, equity, and inclusion lens – and adjusting materials to more equitably reflect the experiences of marginalized teachers, children, and families – is a professional responsibility, needed to advance equity in early childhood classrooms.

## The Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Tool

**A framework and process for reviewing classroom resources ([DEI Tool, available free online](#))**

Researchers at the University of Virginia’s Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning (CASTL), in partnership with the Virginia Department of Education’s Early Childhood Office, developed a framework to guide equity improvements to early childhood resources. Through this framework, reviewers examine sets of resources for:

- **Representation** of teachers, children, and families from three specific marginalized groups: (1) Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), (2) people with disabilities, and (3) multilingual or English Language Learners (ELLs);
- **Accurate portrayal** of these three marginalized groups in ways that are authentic, value within group differences, and avoid tokenism and stereotyping; and
- **Challenge of the status quo** or whether the resources explicitly highlight the assets of BIPOC communities and children with disabilities, carefully address topics that are historically problematic, and/or explore social justice topics.

## Process for Reviewing Early Childhood Resources



This process may raise strong emotions for both BIPOC people (e.g., frustration, vulnerability) and white audiences (e.g., resistance, uncomfortableness). Therefore, we recommend that all partners in this process foster a sense of belonging and an environment where all perspectives — particularly those coming from members of marginalized groups — are listened to and validated.

# Addressing Disparities in Early Childhood Education through Early Childhood Resources

The early childhood classroom is a key context for children to develop and reach their full potential as engaged learners and valued members of our society<sup>1</sup>. Unfortunately, not all children are provided with the academic and social-emotional supports they need to thrive. Three groups are particularly marginalized in early childhood settings, and the focus of the work described in this brief:

1. **Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) children are more harshly and disproportionately disciplined when compared to their white peers,**
2. **many children with disabilities still receive services in segregated rather than inclusive settings, and**
3. **children who are multilingual or English Language Learners (ELLs) often have inadequate access to bilingual or multilingual learning opportunities<sup>2</sup>.**

Over half of the United States' 74 million children are BIPOC, but their educational experiences are often unreflective of their cultures or lack an understanding of their academic or social needs<sup>2</sup>. Further complicating this scenario, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated the inequities<sup>3</sup> prevalent in early childhood classrooms. As researchers and practitioners (leaders, providers, teachers, coaches, or others) who care deeply about our youngest learners the next logical question is: What can we do?

Advancing equity in early childhood education requires an all-hands-on-deck solution. One important and very concrete path towards advancing equity is **ensuring that the resources used in early childhood education settings work towards supporting each and every child's learning**, and particularly those marginalized by systemic inequalities and oppression.

The goal of this brief is to share one process that we are implementing in this direction: to review and revise early childhood education and teacher professional development resources through a diversity, equity, and inclusion lens. We undertook this work as part of a research-practice-policy-partnership with the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) Office of Early Childhood. Our hope is that describing our process will help early childhood education programs, content developers, and/or researchers who are also working towards advancing equity in materials and resources to be used within early childhood programs.

## A Process to Advance Equity in Early Childhood Education Resources

Preschool classrooms are often rich in materials: books, posters, pictures, toys, musical instruments, and art supplies. Many teachers label classroom objects with print, provide children with art supplies, and sing special songs during circle time. Trainers or coaches typically show videos or read vignettes to portray common classroom scenarios during teacher trainings. However, children, teachers, and families from marginalized groups often do not see themselves represented in these resources. Alternatively, marginalized groups are represented in negative or stereotypical ways that serve to perpetuate systemic racism



*The implicit and explicit messages that we communicate to teachers, children, and families with our resources send powerful information about what is valued and what is accepted in the classroom.*

<sup>1</sup> National Association for the Education of Young Children (2019). *Advancing equity in early childhood education position statement*. <https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/position-statements/naeycadvancingequitypositionstatement.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Children's Equity Project and Bipartisan Policy Center (2020). *Start with equity: From the early years to the early grades data, research, and an actionable child equity policy agenda. Executive Summary*. <https://childandfamilysuccess.asu.edu/sites/default/files/2020-07/CEP-report-execssummary-071520-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Cipriano, C., Rappolt-Schlichtmann, G., & Brackett, M. A. (2020). *Supporting school community wellness with social and emotional learning (SEL) during and after a pandemic*. Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center, The Pennsylvania State University.

and white privilege in early childhood education. The implicit and explicit messages that we communicate to teachers, children, and families with our resources send powerful information about what is valued and what is accepted in the classroom. These messages serve to either challenge or perpetuate the status quo.

#### **Advancing equity in early childhood resources requires openness to:**

1. Recognizing that each person brings a unique perspective and experience to the table,
2. Acknowledging the necessity to validate and listen to marginalized voices, which include but are not limited to BIPOC people, people with disabilities, and multilingual or ELLs, and
3. Understanding that advancing equity is an ongoing, reflective, process rather than an evaluation with a final score or yes/no outcome.

Carefully and intentionally selecting resources to represent teachers, children, and families from marginalized groups is: (1) a professional responsibility, (2) needed to start dismantling systemic racism and white privilege, and (3) imperative to creating an inclusive environment. Below we describe the framework that we are using to critically examine and improve sets of resources we develop, the process that we created to implement this framework, and a concrete example of its application.

## **Framework: The Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Tool**

We evaluate resources as a “set” that addresses a specific topic or theme, such as resources focused on fostering social skills or learning about different jobs in the community. No single book, poster, or video needs to address all forms of diversity (e.g., race, disability status), but when we look across each set of resources, we seek to ensure that, collectively, they portray an inclusive vision of teachers, families, and families and do not reinforce harmful stereotypes.

We developed a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Tool ([DEI Tool, available free online](#)) to guide our resources evaluations through our partnership with VDOE. When reviewing each set of resources, the DEI Tool focuses our attention on three areas: (1) Representation, (2) Accurate Portrayal, and (3) Challenge of Status Quo (see Table 1). These three areas were derived from a systematic review of rubrics, checklists, self-assessments, and other tools that look at diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) across a variety of settings and materials including children’s media, storybooks, curricula, and classroom interactions.

Each area is defined using specific criteria. We further unpacked each criterion to include examples of how this area may look in early childhood resources. Reviewers rate each criterion on the following scale: “Good to go,” “Minor changes needed,” or “Major changes needed” and provide specific recommendations when they consider potential changes to the resources are needed. Having a clear definition and concrete examples have been critical to: (1) building a shared vocabulary and lens through which to view and describe equity issues in early childhood resources and (2) raising awareness of the pressing issues that we sometimes struggle to recognize and address within our early childhood resources (e.g., sparse representation of children with disabilities, stereotyping of Black children, or the need to carefully approach practices and/or strategies that are historically problematic for marginalized communities). Although we are using our own [DEI tool](#), listed below are alternative tools that can be used in this step:

- [Culturally responsive curriculum scorecard](#) (Spanish version available [here](#))
- [Return to school - Planning equity audit](#)
- [Criteria for an equitable classroom](#)
- [Pyramid model equity coaching guide](#)

*The DEI Tool focuses our attention on three areas:*

- 1. Representation,*
- 2. Accurate Portrayal,*
- and*
- 3. Challenge of Status Quo.*

**Table 1.**

*From the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Tool: Definition and examples of representation, accurate portrayal, and challenge of status quo.*

	Definition	Examples
<b>Representation</b>	The set of resources represents children, teachers, and families who are BIPOC, have a disability, and/or are multilingual or ELLs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Video of classrooms used in teacher training show a diverse racial/ethnic makeup that includes BIPOC teachers and children.</li> <li>• Images of children using supports that may denote a disability (e.g., wheelchair, glasses, service animals, etc.) and/or with a visible disability.</li> </ul>
<b>Accurate portrayal</b>	The set of resources represents teachers, children, and families who are BIPOC, have a disability, and/or are multilingual or ELLs in ways that are authentic and that value within group differences; avoids tokenism and stereotyping.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not all multilingual or ELL videos come from the same child, teacher, or classroom.</li> <li>• Examples of children’s misbehavior in the classroom or conflicts with the teacher are not limited to Black children.</li> </ul>
<b>Challenge of status quo</b>	The set of resources explicitly emphasizes the assets of BIPOC children, children with disabilities, and multilingual or ELLs; carefully addresses topics that are historically problematic for marginalized groups; explores social justice topics.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Activities and/or examples include discussing topics such as equity or privilege.</li> <li>• Songs, poems, routines, etc. that are coming from marginalized groups are explicitly acknowledged in ways that demonstrate cultural understanding and respect (e.g., Talking stick comes from Native Peoples).</li> </ul>

## Process – 5 Key Steps

We review each set of resources following five key steps:

**1. Identify a set of resources.** The framework is most useful for conducting a holistic or “big picture” review — when reviewing sets containing multiple resources — compared to a detailed review of an individual resource. In our case, the sets of resources are a combination of professional development resources around a specific topic (e.g., teacher-child relationship, emotion regulation) that are organized together in the context of our partnership work with VDOE. However, a set of resources could also include a collection of family engagement materials or an array of routines, lessons, and activities. Identify the topic your resources will address, or the resource category your set will include. Gather together the audio, video, print, and other materials that will be included in the set.

**2. Organize a team of reviewers.** We create teams of 3 to 5 reviewers from racially/ethnically diverse backgrounds to ensure different perspectives are represented and acknowledged. In our case, reviewers have been students and project staff, but they could also be teachers, families, or other members of the community.

### **3. Review each set of resources independently.**

Next, each reviewer independently applies the framework to the set of resources. Reviewers familiarize themselves with the framework prior to watching, listening to, or reading and critiquing each resource. Then, they synthesize their review and specific recommendations using the DEI tool. It is important that each reviewer does an independent review because different people may identify different strengths and areas of concern within resource sets.

### **4. Compile reviewers’ feedback to identify the main takeaways.**

Reviewers meet to discuss their ratings and agree upon specific recommendations to improve the resource set. It is critical that reviewers be open to each other’s comments and treat each other respectfully, because hearing perspectives from diverse reviewers allows us to identify issues that one reviewer might have missed. Takeaways could include DEI issues raised across reviewers, DEI issues considered as “major” by a specific reviewer, and suggestions for improvements/recommendations.

**5. Advance equity by improving the set of resources.** This is the most important step. We put the reviewers' takeaways and recommendations into practice by adding additional resources, editing current resources, and

switching out materials that are not aligned with our goals. This step should be clearly communicated to all relevant audiences (e.g., educators, families, colleagues developing content, trainers, etc.) so that everyone understands what is happening and the importance of this work.

## Example: Our Framework in Action

Table 2 provides an example to illustrate how a framework and process like this have been useful to advance equity in early childhood education resources. The left column describes one takeaway that emerged from the review process for each area of our framework and the right column highlights how the set of resources was improved as a result of the DEI review feedback.

In this example, we reviewed a set of teacher professional development resources designed to support teacher-child relationships. The set included videos (e.g., short classroom clips, webinars), written guides (e.g., activity cards, brief articles), storybooks, a podcast, and pictures of teachers and children.

### Table 2.

*Example of one DEI review process: key takeaways from the DEI review by area and the corresponding improvement made to the set of resources.*

Takeaways from DEI review	Improvements to resources based on DEI review
<p><b>Representation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Across resources, children with disabilities are not represented in the images, videos, or written text.</li> </ul>	<p>Images representing children with visible disabilities and additional resources relevant to supporting children with disabilities and their families (videos, guides) were incorporated to improve representation.</p>
<p><b>Accurate portrayal</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The only video in this set of resources that showed a child misbehaving portrayed a Black boy, which reproduces the stereotype of Black children as problematic.</li> </ul>	<p>The module that this video was part of was edited to remove the example portraying a Black boy misbehaving to avoid perpetuating the stereotype.</p>
<p><b>Challenge of status quo</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There are missed opportunities to include multicultural references that welcome and support multilingual or English language learners.</li> </ul>	<p>Across resources, references to children's cultural backgrounds were included, such as examples in other languages, to explicitly highlight children's cultural assets.</p>

## Limitations

We acknowledge that educational resources per se do not guarantee that children have equitable early childhood educational experiences. Indeed, **it is the use of early childhood resources in the context of culturally sensitive, positive teacher-child, child-child, or teacher/program-family interactions that is necessary for success.**

## Recommendations

In applying a DEI framework and process to the pivotal area of early childhood resources, we have learned that it is possible to take one crucial step towards advancing equity in early childhood education. Even when materials were created with the best

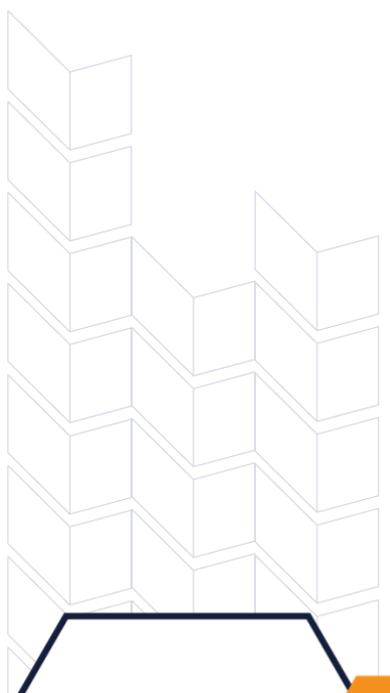
intentions, if they do not represent marginalized groups, portray these groups accurately, and explicitly challenge the status quo, their impact is harmful in that they perpetuate existing inequities in early learning experiences. The DEI review process creates necessary discursive space to thoroughly analyze how systemic racism and white privilege can —and do — manifest in early childhood education resources.

When implementing a DEI review process, we recommend that researchers and practitioners working with early childhood resources:

- **Create systems and processes that allow for a regular review of their materials from a DEI lens.**
- **Define a framework and focus on equity issues relevant to early childhood education and the local context. Equity is one of those terms that everyone seems to understand, but few people share the same definition.**

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that examining our resources and finding instances where we are reproducing inequities feels like “riding a roller coaster.” People of color may experience frustration, vulnerability, and racial battle fatigue. For a white audience, critically examining early childhood resources may bring up feelings of resistance, confusion, and uncomfortableness. Given this, we recommend that all partners in this process foster a sense of belonging and an environment where all opinions —particularly those coming from members of marginalized groups— are listened to and validated. To do so, we advise continually reinforcing that all perspectives are valid. For example, what appears as “major” for one reviewer may not be for another, likely depending on their own backgrounds and experiences. This does not make one perspective more or less valid than the other; neither does it suggest that they cancel each other out.

Similarly, we advise continually reinforcing that diversity, equity, and inclusion are nuanced topics. For instance, a Black child misbehaving could be seen as stereotyping Black children in some resources but not in others, depending on many contextual factors that give meaning to the behavior and interaction. This is why **it is important to have reviewers with diverse backgrounds and experiences** who are willing to share their insights and recommendations openly and content developers who are willing to listen to and accept feedback. The efforts to listen to diverse opinions, take the time to reflect, and attend to nuances have no doubt been key to conducting the review process and improve our resources to ultimately advance equity in early childhood resources.



For more information,  
contact Pilar Alamos, Ph.D.  
[pma9gv@virginia.edu](mailto:pma9gv@virginia.edu)  
University of Virginia  
School of Education and  
Human Development,  
CASTL