

Progressive Early Childhood Leadership: From Aspiration to Implementation

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May 13, 2021

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- **direct child care funding** allowances to families,
- provision for **free universal PreK** for all three and four year old children, and
- **free two year community college** for young adults.



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These proposals will dramatically alter the landscape of early childhood education including:

- **increased financial assistance** to families to purchase child care,
- opportunities to create a **more educated work force**,
- ultimately **the need for high quality Early Childhood Leaders** who will lead and implement high-quality early childhood programs in child care centers and public school settings.

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Progressive Early Childhood Leaders will be called upon to support and implement programs that:

- incorporate **play-based emergent curriculums**
- **engage in ongoing family engagement activities** that are culturally responsive
- **involve all staff in continuous professional development** that is supportive of personal and professional growth
- **advocate for programs** at local, state and federal levels.



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Progressive education is not to be confused with a political agenda but is rooted in early 20th century pedagogical framework that emerged in opposition to more standardized, regimented forms of education. In this new framework the understanding of child development is the core principle.



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What do we mean when we cite Progressive Early Childhood Education as an effective way to enhance the education of young children?

Progressive Early Childhood Leaders understand that Child Development is at the core of the mission for implementing progressive early childhood education.

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The **mission or core belief in progressive early childhood programs** is founded upon **understanding the role of child development** in early learning.



The questions we ask are:

1. who is this child before us?
2. what are this child's interests?
3. how do we provision for this child's enhanced experience?

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Understanding development requires our ability to recognize the child and their developmental abilities within the context of their age range rather than accepting prescribed external based programs of skill-based learning.

"Growth of cognitive function cannot be separated from the growth of personal and interpersonal processes."

Biber, B., E. Shapiro, and D. Wickens (1971)

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The earlier quote—from 50 years ago—by Bank Street College educators at a NAEYC conference is just as relevant today as it was then. At Bank Street College, we utilize an approach that is known as **Developmental Interaction**.

This approach, **Developmental Interaction**, is the outcome of the early struggles to bring progressive education into the field of early childhood education.

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The **central mission of the progressive leader in programmatic implementation** is to assist, support, promote young children in activities that acknowledge who they are culturally, respect their developmental spaces while providing opportunities for their wider social interactions with the world.

Developmental Interaction is based on child development theory and emphasizes the interaction of the relationships among children, teachers, the environment and materials.

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Optimizing an early childhood program with a progressive lens happens when leaders and teachers hone their observational skills. The key to responsive leading and teaching lies in the ability to observe, with thick description, the activities of children and teachers within the classroom and on field experiences.

Dorothy Cohen, a pioneering Bank Street faculty member authored her groundbreaking book **Understanding and Recording the Behavior of Young Children**.

Descriptive inquiry processes are essential in undertaking this work as described by **Patricia Carini**, another key figure in highlighting the critical importance in observing young children, so that we can better understand their dispositions, proclivities and interests.

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Early Childhood Leaders support teachers and classrooms that are filled with activities like organic art activities, music, blocks, dramatic play areas, writing centers with multiple writing tools, science areas that are interactive as well as manipulatives, puzzles and table activities.

More activities and classroom chatter are recognized as experiments in developing social and emotional growth while children are engaged in purposeful activities. This is what is meant by a **play-based curriculum**.

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I worked as a consultant recently with a traditional kindergarten program in a charter school. The principal and teachers wanted to find more effective ways to counter the acting out behaviors and suspensions of a number of their students.

By incorporating the concepts of **Choice Time** developed by **Renee Dinnerstein** and utilizing the text **Powerful Interactions with Children**, the climate within the classrooms changed dramatically over the course of one year.

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The introduction of just one hour of **Choice Time**, where children worked in centers resulted in the complete absence of suspensions, acting out behavior and children who left the school in the second year.

Instead children were engaged in activities of their own choosing for one hour of their school day.



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Effective leaders know that they can achieve change:

- by **listening** to their staff,
- by using their **powers of observation** in gauging positive family engagement,
- and **engaging** with leaders of community resources.



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First we will consider Reflective Supervision:

In supporting teachers and staff the effective leader serves as a facilitator of both individual growth and full staff involvement in the collective endeavor.

Leaders meet regularly with teachers in individual, collegial, mentoring sessions that are planned around teacher interest and concerns. Checklists and judgmental evaluations are not a part of this process of reflective supervision.

Eleanor Drago-Severson and **Jessica Blum-DeStefano** use a developmental approach to feedback for educators.

Their strategies, "**Ways of Knowing**," help leaders use adult development strategies to influence teacher growth.

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Leaders support teachers in peer observations, inter-visitations, and coaching teams. **Leaders understand** that the collective process of sharing concepts and practices is at the heart of designing a school or center that promotes creative programming.

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Mentoring of new staff by senior staff develops a cohesive network of shared practice. **Staff meetings** and **focus groups** are used to address issues of **equity** and **social justice**.

- How diverse is the makeup of the staff?
- What is the makeup of teaching staff versus the makeup of assistant/para/kitchen/custodial staff?

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Progressive leaders **promote teachers' and staff active relationships** that are in reality partnerships with families that eschew expertise as a relational stance.

To achieve this, progressive leaders will **pursue a learners stance** in their own academic and scholarly pursuits o understand and disseminate research into curriculum, family relationships, and adult learning experiences for all staff.



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Finally, consider this view expressed by **Robert Starrat** on the power of the collective endeavor:

"Distributed leadership implies a saturation of the institution with individuals who exercise in a multitude of ways, within an institutional culture that supports and expects that many, if not all in the culture will be contributing to the work in exemplary ways."

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Too often parents are required to come to school for meetings that stress a child's academic performance and perhaps a negative assessment on behavior leaving parents with an uncomfortable feeling of facing school power that undermines their confidence in the center/school authentic interest in their child.

The progressive leader **creates a different climate** in the program.



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Next, we will outline the pursuit of **social and equity issues** in our relationships with family and community. Some of the most challenging undertakings of the progressive early childhood leader, is to embrace the concept of partnership with families in our programs.

The progressive leader is able to **engage families on a personal as well as a professional level.**

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Progressive early childhood leaders understand the issues of **diversity and changing demographics** in the population at large:

Rather than insisting on a mainstream approach, progressive early childhood leaders **seek out opportunities** to relate to families and caregivers within their cultural contexts.



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Progressive leaders assure families that children will be seen as **emergent bilingual students** whose home language is valued. For children whose home language is other than English translanguaging, as described by **Ophelia Garcia**,



will be used as an effective strategy for children to language acquisition in English while experiencing acceptance social emotional growth within classroom.

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Progressive early childhood leaders will be able to enact the philosophies of **Luis Moll's Funds of Knowledge** that acknowledge the **resilience** and **expertise** that families in the non- dominant culture bring to educational settings.

Parents who are made to feel welcome can share childhood experiences in their child's class with or without the help of a translator.

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Tara Yasso's brilliant article details the cultural capital of communities of color and urges us to **explore community wealth** through our interactions with parents, to move past our zones of comfort to take part in the art, music, philosophy of other cultural communities.

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At **Castle Bridge**, a dual language elementary school in the Washington Heights neighborhood of New York City, leaders, teachers and families get together to discuss issues around race, social justice, and racial consciousness.



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The schools of **Reggio Emilia** are governed by a non-hierarchical, egalitarian structure that supports an **active parent body** that advises on curriculum, assists in developing policy and political activities to ensure the stability of the schools. These schools were established by mothers following World War II.

They and their husbands literally built the schools with scarce materials and remained involved in the design of the school as a place that guaranteed that their children would be allowed to practice dissent but would also learn to live as a group and care for each other.

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Finally, **progressive leaders** should be looking within the **parent body for future leaders and teachers**. As the demographics of our country change our schools should represent more and more of the diversity we embrace in our school/center leaders and teachers. Our diversity is our strength.



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Implementing a stable program requires a sense of business acumen.

In **writing grants or budgets**, I always began with the cost of personnel and benefits. Once that essential expenditure was met I could begin to plan for other needs.



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Take stock of your program needs:

- Are you in a public school where you have indirect costs?
- Are you in a multi-age community center or agency where you have to submit a budget?
- Are you a owner/co-owner of a private center?

In each case you need to understand the ramifications of your budgetary needs.

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Who are the people that you need to work with in developing your financial plan. It is important that you have an ongoing relationship with those who are responsible for budgetary decisions.

What are the policies and procedures that govern your program?

- In NYC we have the policies of the DOE as the Lead Educational Agency for Pre-K through 12th grade.
- In NYC child care centers are governed by Article 47 through the Board of Health.
- In New York State, outside of New York City early childhood programs that meet for more than two hours a day are governed by the Office of Children and Family Services of the NYS Education Department.

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Each of these governing regulation bodies contain **policy requirements** that determine staffing credentials, class/staff ratios, indoor and outdoor space requirements, meal and nutrition guidelines, and other policies that have a bearing on the costs associated with running a program.

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All early childhood programs, whether in public schools, agencies or in private ownership suffered severe disruption this past year due to the pandemic.

Resiliency and flexibility were key factors in helping programs survive. Leaders struggled with opening/closing schedules, serving the children of essential workers, and maintaining some equilibrium due to rising costs associated with social distancing.

Funding from the government was mainly to assist in paying employees but other funding was lost, including a decrease in tuition. For many centers that struggled to stay open they found that they had no choice but to eventually close their doors.

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The experience of the pandemic underscored the need for early childhood leaders to be out in the community and know the resources that are available in times of dire need or in times when we feel the need to ensure that our programs are stable and that our families are served.

Who are the politicians, or even more important, who are their legislative aides serving your district? My story of the assistance of councilman Richard Torres serves as an example of the necessity of interlocking relationships.

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The progressive early childhood leader of today needs to develop the skill of advocating for the program within several spheres of influence:

- Meet regularly within a professional network to strengthen political clout on the local and state level.
- Introduce yourself and meet regularly with community leaders within the business community and religious community to plan events that increase the visibility of your program.
- Become familiar with your city council member and your borough president so you can access government funds and influence.

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We have reviewed the many elements of what is necessary to achieve in a high-quality early childhood program with a progressive lens. In considering the personal qualities of a leader I would posit that **the early childhood leader of today needs to be:**

- a person of strong conviction,
- dedicated to issues of social justice and racial consciousness, a believer in the democratic processes of school leadership and collective endeavors,
- and profoundly influenced by a love for children and respect for their families.

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