



Equity and Inclusion

An Action Agenda for Youth Development Professionals

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Over time, afterschool and expanded learning programs have served multiple and evolving purposes: keeping children off city streets in the late 1800s, sheltering children from war in the early 1900s, filling a childcare void as more women joined the workforce in the 1970s (Halpern, 2002).

After the push of No Child Left Behind to focus on academic preparation, the field has moved to yet another phase: an expanding commitment to social and emotional learning. Fortunately, this out-of-school time (OST) trend is paralleled in formal education (CASEL, 2016). The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, for example, uses a broad definition of student success that includes safety, communication skills, and healthy relationships.

This new emphasis is an important one, but it cannot be fully implemented without attention to basic principles of respect and safety or to the need to value all children and youth. In recent years, American youth have witnessed a surge in racially charged violence and

discriminatory rhetoric. The OST field can and should respond with an explicit commitment to equity, inclusion, and culturally responsive practice. We must actively value and respect the identities of the young people we serve, including their race, religion, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, appearance, and ability. This essay proposes significant yet simple changes—grant funding *not* required—to support youth while embracing their diverse assets.

There are not enough pages in this journal to do full justice to every aspect of this sensitive topic. As one contribution, this article provides both immediate action steps and food for further thought and exploration. I offer a theory- and practice-based model for how OST

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professionals can approach their work using *critical social pedagogy*. This new pairing of existing frameworks, building on a tradition widely used in Europe, views educators as caregivers and protectors of children's rights. Framing OST professionals as critical social pedagogues, this article challenges us to take action both by attending to our own beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors and by designing programs with an antidiscrimination framework.

Toward a Theory and Practice of Critical Social Pedagogy

Cameron and Moss (2011) describe *social pedagogy* as “where education and care meet” and “as being concerned with children's upbringing” (p. 8). Educators in Greece, Hungary, and other European countries describe social pedagogy in terms that have no direct English translations but refer to concepts of “leading children” and “character development” (Bolger, 2015). Scholars in this tradition believe that education is a platform for addressing social ills. Learning contexts can either reproduce harmful social constructs or prevent them from being passed to the next generation. Social pedagogues place heavy value on empowering youth, building strong relationships, and fostering holistic lifelong learning—exactly the environment and relationships OST programs strive for. Using social pedagogy as a frame thus serves the OST field well.

In its most basic form, *critical theory* seeks not to simply understand the world, but to question the world in an effort to improve it (Bohman, 2005). A critical lens allows us to identify and change systems and power structures that restrain people from living their best lives. Scholars have argued that adults working with children must pay special attention to power: Even unintentional biases and insensitivities can wreak havoc on the young people who look up to these adults (Kirshner, 2015; Outley & Witt, 2006). In a recent analysis of culture-related incidents in youth programs, researchers described the multiple ways staff may react in these difficult situations. Reactions can range from being highly aware and taking action, to passively following rules while hoping the situation goes away, to ignoring discrimination altogether

(Gutiérrez, Larson, Raffaelli, Fernandez, & Guzman, in press). Critical social pedagogues are ready to address injustice immediately and have established practices and policies for doing so.

Applying a critical lens to social pedagogy shows the value of OST professionals' role in supporting youth to embrace their identities and to take action against discrimination. This framework does not suggest that OST professionals are responsible for teaching values or dictating feelings. However, a critical social pedagogue uses strategies that recognize youth autonomy, shift power to youth, build inclusive environments, and eliminate oppressive language and behavior. This stance is aligned with the field's emphasis on positive youth development, a prosocial approach that engages youth by recognizing their strengths and promoting opportunities for success and healthy relationships (U.S. Interagency Workgroup on Youth Programs, n.d.).

This article describes evidence-based ways critical social pedagogues in OST settings can take action to support healthy youth development. The first three recommendations rely on individual action, while the next three represent program-level efforts.

1. Build a personal understanding of our country's history of oppression
2. Adjust language to ensure inclusivity
3. Work to eliminate implicit bias
4. Use culturally responsive pedagogy
5. Address identity-based bullying
6. Recruit and develop staff who build and maintain a positive environment for all

How these strategies are applied and prioritized will vary by type of program, student population, and location—but they are not intended only for programs serving students of minority backgrounds or those in urban areas. All OST professionals across the country, whatever their setting, must collectively embrace an anti-discrimination stance by both protecting all children and promoting respect for all.

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Individual Professionals as Agents of Change

Before considering ways to design programs in an anti-discriminatory context, OST professionals must examine our own beliefs and practices. We must think of ourselves as agents of change. Sue and colleagues (2007) summarized the work of a number of scholars in stating that cultural competence for people in “the helping professions” (p. 271) means building an understanding both of our own identities and biases and of the worldviews of the people with whom we work.

Three strategies for OST professionals are presented below.

Explore, Understand, and Challenge Our History

The history of oppression in the United States is not adequately taught in schools. However, research suggests that a deeper understanding of that history is critical to eliminating racism (Burrell & Walsh, 2001). To be part of the solution, educators and youth developers must know about the historical practices that have hurt minority groups and that continue to have lasting effects today. Engaging with alternative texts reminds us that, although the U.S. is known for being the land of religious freedom, scratching the surface of history reveals tremendous religious persecution since the days of the earliest settlers (Davis, 2010). Reading beyond what we learn in school also uncovers continuing systemic racism, such as redlining practices that keep racial and ethnic minorities from owning property and living in thriving neighborhoods (Madrigal, 2014). I could go on, but instead I ask that you read widely and build a strong understanding of the challenges our country has faced and continues to face today.

It’s not only my opinion that suggests this knowledge is important. An extensive 2009 literature review found that teaching accurate history and acknowledging oppression are correlated with academic achievement (Hanley & Noblitt, 2009). That’s right: If your program is expected to support academic growth, using a realistic view of the world helps. Some may think it is not the job of OST professionals to teach what should be taught in school, but consider this anecdote from Marian Wright Edelman (2015): A 15-year-old Texas student recognized

that his social studies textbook ignored key elements of the slave trade because he had learned a more accurate version of history in his Children’s Defense Fund program. Not only did he explain the brutality of the slave trade to his classmates, but his protest led McGraw-Hill to issue an updated version of the text.

Check Your Language

Words matter. As a broad rule of thumb, OST professionals should subscribe to a philosophy of multiculturalism rather than color-blindness. Statements like, “I don’t see color” or “I treat everyone the same” may feel innocuous, but research and experience suggest that’s simply not true. Not recognizing individuals’ identities strips them of their experience and their sense of self. Moreover, studies have shown that people primed to have a color-blind perspective display more explicit and implicit biases than those primed with a multicultural perspective (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004). A body of social psychology literature affirms this finding. Creating a shared, “second” intergroup identity, such as “participant in ABC Afterschool Program,” while

acknowledging each person’s primary identity as, for example, “child from neighborhood X or Y” is a better strategy for intergroup harmony than ignoring primary identities (Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2000; Hewstone, 1996). In OST contexts, we can use language and norms that embrace children’s multicultural and other identities *while also* creating a shared identity through routines, rituals, and activities that are unique to the program.

How can we speak to create inclusive environments for all? The Opportunity Agenda (2015) suggest five guidelines:

1. Focus on realistic policies and solutions that spur action
2. Lift up unity as a value and practice
3. Reinforce prosperity over scarcity, showing that people can share resources and be successful together
4. Be accurate and respectful when discussing identities and societal roles
5. Retire outdated language (Opportunity Agenda, 2015)

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The Opportunity Agenda has curated a list of words and phrases that impede equity and inclusion, providing replacement terms to use instead. For example, such phrases as “low man on the totem pole” or “let’s have a powwow” refer to Native American culture in inaccurate ways. There are perfectly good alternatives. *Social Justice Phrase Guide* (Opportunity Agenda, 2015) should be distributed to staff in all OST programs so they can use this positive language both internally and with students and families.

Understanding and Overcoming Implicit Bias

Implicit bias is a challenging topic, as most of us genuinely hold no ill will toward others and find the idea that we could be biased difficult to swallow. Tropp and Godsil (2015), in extensive studies, found that many people simply have an in-group bias; that is, they have a slight inherent preference for people who look like themselves or who share certain characteristics with them. Implicit biases can also be developed over time when negative images, rhetoric, or behaviors are associated with certain groups, whether accurately or inaccurately. Implicit biases are, in part, cognitive shortcuts that our brains use to make sense of the world; we use associations and categories to process information all the time. However, because we use them quickly and subconsciously, implicit biases may better predict how we will act than our explicit values do (Perception Institute, n.d.). Negative biases must therefore be dealt with explicitly.

To explore and mitigate your own implicit biases, Tropp and Godsil (2015) recommend the following strategies:

- Spend time with others who do not fit the same demographics as you; exposure alone helps reduce implicit bias.
- Pause to view the world from the perspective of others who are different from you, taking time to consider their lived experiences and world views before acting or reacting.
- Experience counter-stereotypic group members, especially when negative stereotypes are involved. Seek out people who challenge dominant assumptions about their race, gender, religion, ethnicity, age, or other characteristics.

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OST professionals can also minimize implicit biases by recognizing that they exist, deciding that their influence on how we perceive others is unacceptable, and consciously acting differently (Law, 2011). In situations that range from assigning students to activities, to choosing who to hire, to having conversations with families, we have daily opportunities to think critically about how implicit bias affects our approach and to change how we act.

Redesigning OST Programs with an Equity Focus

Although the OST field professes inclusivity as a core value, research has documented many instances of students feeling marginalized or unsafe in programs meant to support them (Gutiérrez et al., in press; Lin et al., 2016). The following action steps can be taken to design programs that minimize discrimination and move toward a deeper realization of inclusion.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in OST Programs

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1992) is the author of the seminal writings on culturally responsive pedagogy (also called culturally relevant teaching). She writes:

Culturally relevant teaching serves to empower students to the point where they will be able to examine critically educational content and process and ask what its role is in creating a truly democratic and multicultural society. It uses the students’ culture to help them create meaning and understand the world. Thus, not only academic success, but social and cultural success are emphasized by the culturally relevant teacher. (Ladson-Billings, 1992, p. 106)

Citing a number of scholars, a New York University report affirms that children learn best when their identities, cultures, and languages are reflected in the curriculum. This report also suggests that programs create space for difficult but necessary conversations because “culturally responsive classrooms can create a space where harmful images can be deconstructed and positive self and cultural affirmations portrayed” (Metropolitan Center for Urban Education Studies, 2008, p. 3).

These frameworks suggest that culturally responsive OST programming extends beyond symbols, holidays,

and token gestures. In culturally responsive programs, youth are engaged with texts, artifacts, projects, and activities that use their own cultures to teach them about themselves and the world.

Cultural responsiveness is not a one-size-fits-all solution; each community has to determine what culturally relevant practice looks like for its own students. For example, Christopher Emdin's (2016) book *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood... and The Rest of Ya'll Too* suggests ways to teach Black students in specific urban communities, such as using elements of hip-hop culture and borrowing strategies used in predominantly Black churches. Such customization is key, and nuances within racial, ethnic, and other minority groups must also be attended to. However, there are exceptions; for example, African-

American, Latino/a, Southeast Asian, and Pacific Islander communities all use the spoken word and music to share their culture and history (Hammond, 2015). Therefore, opportunities to learn through music, theater, slam poetry, and other verbal platforms can be particularly effective for teaching diverse groups of children. OST leaders and their programs would benefit from further reading on this topic and from using a culturally responsive framework to evaluate activities and instruction.

Identity-Based Bullying and Behavior Management

Identity-based bullying includes insults, threats, or physical aggressions perpetrated because of who someone is. In a 2016 survey of over 1,000 middle and high school youth, 51 percent of respondents reported being bullied because of their appearance and 30 percent because of their race or ethnicity. Bullying based on gender, sexual orientation, and religion were each experienced by approximately 20 percent of respondents (Greytak, Kosciw, Villenas, & Giga, 2016). Ignoring identity-based bullying or treating it the same as other infractions misses a learning opportunity for all.

Jinnie Spiegler (2016) of the Anti-Defamation League offers several strategies for mitigating this type of bullying. One is to teach youth explicitly what identity-based bullying is and explain that it is caused, not by the victim's identity, but by the perpetrator's biases. Spiegler also recommends maintaining open lines of communication with students and establishing a norm of telling an adult when identity-based bullying occurs. Speaking to a staff member about an incident cannot be seen as tattling, gossiping, or betraying trust; rather, it should be viewed as an empowered decision to address behavior that will not be tolerated. Explicitly including such practices and norms in behavior management protocols communicated to youth will make the afterschool environment safer for all students.

Equity-Focused Recruitment and Professional Development for OST Staff

Most OST program leaders instinctively seek to hire staff whose characteristics reflect those of participating youth; they also expect staff to tend to the social and emotional needs of students. However, there are several additional ways to promote equity and inclusion through staffing practices. One strategy is to hire staff who are willing to engage in reflection, discussion, and action toward eliminating discrimination. Citing a long history of research, Gay and Kirkland (2003) note that, for educa-

FURTHER READING AND TOOLS FOR ACTION

PLANNING AND LEADING

- *Race Equity and Inclusion Action Guide*, Annie E. Casey Foundation
<http://www.aecf.org/resources/race-equity-and-inclusion-action-guide>
- *Racial Equity Tools*
<https://www.racialequitytools.org/home>
- "Supporting Youth with Special Needs in Out-of-School Time" by Jane Sharp, Elizabeth Rivera Rodas, and Alan R. Sadovnik, *Afterschool Matters*
www.niost.org/pdf/afterschoolmatters/asm_2012_16_fall/ASM_2012_16_fall_4.pdf
- *Social Justice Phrase Guide*, The Opportunity Agenda
https://opportunityagenda.org/files/field_file/SJPhraseGuide15_0.pdf

PEDAGOGY AND CURRICULUM

- Lesson plans aimed at reducing identity-based bullying, Anti-Defamation League
<http://www.adl.org/education-outreach/lesson-plans>
- Prevent religious bullying in the classroom, Tanenbaum Center
<https://tanenbaum.org/programs/education/>
- *Becoming Multicultural Educators: Personal Journey Toward Professional Agency*, edited by Geneva Gay, Jossey-Bass, 2013

tors, “knowing who they are as people, understanding the contexts in which they teach, and questioning their knowledge and assumptions are as important as the mastery of techniques for instructional effectiveness” (p. 181). OST leaders might shift their screening processes to assess whether candidates will engage in these individual practices. Leaders might also explicitly include these items in performance reviews, laying out expectations when staff are hired and using the review as an opportunity to hold them accountable to inclusive practices.

When it comes to professional development, Gay and Kirkland (2003) propose going beyond discussions about equity to ensure that educators “practice actually engaging in critical consciousness and personal reflection” (p. 186). Development opportunities for such practice include role playing, observation and feedback, and peer coaching. Professional development can also offer practical tools for staff to use when addressing incidents of discriminatory behavior, allowing them to feel prepared and confident.

OST program environments are almost entirely shaped by staff. It is therefore critical to hire well and to invest in in-service learning and development to build a program that values and supports all children.

An Action Agenda

These six strategies comprise an action agenda for youth development professionals in OST settings to fight discrimination and help youth value their own and others’ identities. Our field is built on the promise of social pedagogy; we are “the village” contributing to the upbringing of children in our communities. By assuming this role with a critical approach, we take responsibility for empowering youth and working against ideas and behaviors that negatively affect them. This article provides takeaways you can translate immediately into action, but I hope you will also discuss these strategies, adapt them, and question them. Together we can start an important dialogue that will change how the OST field supports children and youth.

Gay and Kirkland (2003) note that, for educators, “knowing who they are as people, understanding the contexts in which they teach, and questioning their knowledge and assumptions are as important as the mastery of techniques for instructional effectiveness” (p. 181).

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