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INCORPORATING CHILDREN'S LIVED EXPERIENCES IN THE CLASSROOM

Findings from Teacher Interviews on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Early Care and Education Curricula and Professional Development

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High-quality early care and education helps establish a solid foundation for future learning, showing particularly strong positive impacts for children affected by poverty and those who are dual language learners.[1] However, children's educational experiences vary widely in terms of quality. In communities of color or those with high rates of poverty, there are disproportionately fewer high-quality, early care and education options.[2]

An important element of effective early care and education programming is instructional systems, such as curricula, instructional materials, and professional development (PD).[3] These systems can help teachers to create meaningful learning experiences for young children that allow them to thrive. However, implementing a new curriculum or PD requires guidance, materials, resources, and supports that are aligned with the authentic experiences of teachers and children. To date, there is little evidence about how to best implement curricula or PD practices that take into account the lived experiences of both teachers and young children, especially those who are Black or Latine, speak languages other than English, or are affected by poverty. The communities to which these teachers and children belong have strengths, assets, and resilience, as well as shared experiences of poverty, racism, and other trauma. When fully recognized in instructional systems, these community characteristics may serve to strengthen the principles and design of early care and education instruction.

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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

To explore how these community characteristics are used in the instructional systems of early care and education programs, MDRC, with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, conducted the Enhancing Professional Development Supports and Curriculum Design and Implementation in Early Care and Education and Preschool Systems from an Equity-Informed and Culturally Responsive Perspective Project (Equity-Informed PD and Curriculum Project). As part of the project, an MDRC study team sought to learn more about how early childhood teachers engage with concepts of equity and inclusion, with the goal of informing the design of curricula and PD through the application of a culturally and linguistically responsive lens. Specifically, the team wanted to understand how to better align curricula and PD with the lived experiences of teachers and young children in communities of color or those affected by poverty to promote more equitable outcomes for young children. In doing so, the study team aimed to identify opportunities to enhance the design of supports for teachers and children as well as potential areas of misalignment in existing curricula and PD.

The study team recruited and interviewed 18 early care and education teachers working with three- and four-year-olds in an effort to understand their experiences with curricula and curriculum-oriented PD as they relate to equity and inclusion in the classroom, learn more about equity and inclusion in early care and education settings, and ultimately help make the design of curricula and PD more culturally and linguistically responsive. This provided the study team an opportunity to evaluate how curriculum-related materials and PD may or may not support equity and inclusion in classrooms.

This brief provides an overview of the project's findings. Through these interviews with teachers, the study team found that the curricula and related PD and supports that teachers received did not place a strong emphasis on children's background and lived experiences (that is, race, ethnicity, culture, home language, and family income). Unsurprisingly, only a few teachers said they plan or adapt lessons with children's backgrounds in mind. Yet half of teachers expressed wanting to know more about the children's home life to best support them in the classroom. The curricula and related PD and supports offered the teachers limited resources on these topics. They thus may not have had the needed guidance to carry out activities that were aligned with and responsive to children's backgrounds and experiences. These findings suggest there is an opportunity to include more activities and supports in curriculum-related materials and PD that guide teachers on how to incorporate children's backgrounds and lived experiences in classroom learning.

Background

Despite a wave of government investments in early care and education,[4] the quality of children's experiences in these settings nationally still varies widely. Communities of color or those with high rates of poverty disproportionately lack high-quality, early care and education options.

Many early care and education programs opt for "whole-child" comprehensive curricular models, which place the child and the child's interests and needs at the center of the selection and implementation of curricular content and activities. However, in recent years, there has been growing interest in domain-specific, play-based curricular models that include a defined scope and sequencing of activities, coupled with regular teacher training and coaching. Many consider such models to be one of the "strongest hopes" for improving the quality of children's learning experiences and opportunities in early care and education programs.[5] Yet, despite a growing base of evidence indicating the effectiveness of domain-specific curricular models,[6] early care and education programs have not adopted such models on a wide scale nationally.[7] Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, implementing these models was a complex endeavor. These models involve new pedagogical approaches, materials, and domain- and skills-specific content (e.g., content specific to mathematics, language, literacy, science, and social emotional development), as well as specific instructional practices and activities (e.g., small group activities and differentiated and scaffolded instructional practices), that teachers must understand and master in order to execute such curricula in classrooms with fidelity.

To adopt new curricular models and align the related content and activities with children's lived experiences and needs, program staff and teachers must be open and willing to engage in PD and change their practices, bearing in mind existing resources.[8] Those in the early care and education workforce—mired by low wages and often demanding and stressful working conditions and with limited PD opportunities—already experience high rates of burnout and turnover.[9] Moreover, early care and education systems are often fractured and economically fragile,[10] which, in essence, may create inhospitable work environments that may inhibit the cultivation of psychologically safe spaces for teachers to try out new things, such as taking on new curricular models.[11]

At the same time, some young children in early care and education settings experience significant stressors stemming from poverty, racism, abuse, and other trauma and adversity.[12] As a result, these children may perceive new ways to play, engage with teachers and peers, and learn new content as threatening.[13] While the issues related to these stressors were notable before the COVID-19 pandemic, in the post-pandemic world, they have become more pronounced and are a pressing concern. Young children in communities of color or those with high rates of poverty, which were disproportionately hard hit by the pandemic, are likely to have experienced traumatic stress related to the pandemic such as the loss of a loved one and family economic insecurity.[14] Further, those in the early care and education workforce are primarily women with low incomes, and a third of them are women of color.[15] Many of these women also experienced severe social and emotional duress and economic hardship during the pandemic.[16] These intersecting stressors may only compound the challenges inherent in designing and implementing effective curricular and PD models that are aligned with children's needs and improve the quality of their early learning experiences across early care and education systems. Yet, to date, the mainstream curricular and PD models currently in use have likely not been designed with an intentional grounding in the lived experiences of teachers and children from communities of color or those with high rates of poverty.

The Equity-Informed PD and Curriculum Project sought to engage teachers in Head Start and community-based child care centers who received curriculum-focused PD in the prior year or two on Connect4Learning® or The Creative Curriculum® for Preschool. Connect4Learning is an integrated, domain-specific curricular model that follows a defined scope and sequencing of activities, while The Creative Curriculum is a "whole-child" comprehensive curricular model. The teachers received training and biweekly coaching for the respective curriculum models over the course of a year to help ensure the models were implemented with fidelity.

For the project, the study team sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do teachers' and children's backgrounds (that is, race, ethnicity, culture, home language, and family income) shape their experiences in the classroom?

2. How did teachers implement and adapt curricular models, content, and activities in the classroom to align them with children's lived experiences?

3. How did teachers experience PD, such as teacher training and coaching, related to implementing the curricular models in the classrooms?

    a. How did the activities reflect teachers' needs, beliefs, values, and experiences, as well as the experiences of the children enrolled in the early care and education centers?

    b. What is missing in the current approach to PD in terms of helping teachers implement and adapt curricular models in ways that best align with children's lived experiences in their communities (commonly, communities of color or those with high rates of poverty)?

4. By recognizing the value of these experiences, how might the Connect4Learning and Creative Curriculum curricular models, and their related instructional materials, guidance, and PD be more aligned with the authentic lived experiences of teachers and children?

These questions guided the study team as it examined and learned about the teachers' experiences with professional training and coaching and with implementing the curricular models in the classroom. Applying a culturally responsive and equity-informed lens, the team sought to understand how curriculum implementation and PD can be enhanced when they are intentionally informed by the realities, beliefs, values, and lived experiences of teachers in early care and education centers and the families they serve. The team also set out to highlight the ways in which the design of curricular models can be strengthened when they are centered on the experiences of teachers and children in communities of color or those with high rates of poverty. In doing so, the team aimed to show that, by applying a culturally responsive and equity-oriented lens in curricula and

PD, stakeholders can enhance the design and implementation of the models and better serve the teachers and children.

Recruitment and Sample

The project's target population was teachers employed by Head Start or community-based child care centers that participated in a randomized control trial of curriculum and professional development interventions. Centers were randomly assigned to one of two curricular and PD models—Connect4Learning or The Creative Curriculum—which they then implemented. The study sample was recruited from the population of teachers at these centers.

Recruitment was conducted in two phases. The first phase took place between August 2021 through January 2022. The study team recruited nine teachers in this phase. The second phase took place between October 2022 through December 2022, during which the team recruited an additional nine teachers. In total, the study team recruited and interviewed 18 teachers.

The team aimed to recruit teachers from a mix of racial and ethnic backgrounds and regional locations, as well as from both types of auspices (Head Start or community-based child care center) and curricula (Connect4Learning and The Creative Curriculum). Table 1 presents the teachers' characteristics. While the characteristics of the sample were varied overall, the study team did not recruit as many Latine teachers as it would have liked.

This limitation is partly related to how and when recruitment occurred. The study team's approach was to seek approval from the centers' directors before contacting teachers about the interview opportunity, which is a fairly standard protocol when recruiting participants in institutional settings. This limited the team's ability to reach teachers easily. Several directors did not respond to the initial outreach, reduc-

Table 1. Teacher Characteristics by Race and Ethnicity, Auspice, Curriculum, and Regional Location

Teacher Characteristics	Number of Teachers
Race or ethnicity	
Black (non-Hispanic)	8
White (non-Hispanic)	5
Asian (non-Hispanic)	1
Biracial	2
Hispanic	1
Middle Eastern	1
Auspice	
Head Start	10
Child care	8
Curriculum	
Connect4Learning	10
The Creative Curriculum	8
Regional location	
East	1
Mid-Atlantic	1
Midwest	4
West	5
South	7
Sample size (total = 18)	

SOURCE: Interviews with teachers conducted by the MDRC study team.

ing the number of potential teachers the team could contact. Additionally, the timing of the outreach overlapped with a teacher shortage that was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The teacher shortage also made the directors extra protective of their staff's time.

Despite these limitations, the interviews conducted with the 18 teachers offered a variety of perspectives on equity and inclusion with regard to curricula and PD. The majority of teachers interviewed had at least 10 years of experience and worked with children of color, children who spoke different languages, or children from families with low incomes. The findings below reflect this diversity in the classroom and shed light on how teachers did or did not use the curriculum and PD to align their teaching practices with children's backgrounds.

Interview Questions

The interview with each teacher focused on five topics: (1) the children's and teacher's backgrounds and the community's characteristics, (2) children's learning styles, (3) teacher's approach to teaching, (4) the teacher's implementation and adaptation of the curriculum, and (5) PD.

Children's and Teachers' Backgrounds and Community Characteristics

The study team designed these questions to elicit more detail about the children's and teachers' backgrounds and their lived experiences and whether and how these experiences manifested in the classroom. The team also wanted to understand how, if at all, the centers interacted with the communities they served. The questions asked included the following:

- Tell me a little bit about the children in your classroom this year. Could you tell me what their different backgrounds are, like race, ethnicity, family income, and home language? Does race, ethnicity, culture, or family income status come up in your classroom or center?

- Tell me a little bit about the community where your center is located. What kind of role does the center play in the larger community? What are some ways the center engages with the community?

- What is your cultural, ethnic, racial, linguistic, and gender background?

Children's Learning Styles

The study team designed this set of questions to find out whether teachers see differences in how children respond to curricular materials, specifically with regard to their own backgrounds and lived experiences. The team also wanted to understand how children

like to learn, what they dislike, and any barriers to learning they face. The questions asked included the following:

- Do you see differences in the way that some groups of children respond to the curriculum materials?
- How do the children in your classroom like to learn?
- Do you think there are barriers to learning for some of the children in your classroom?

Teachers' Approach to Teaching

These questions focused on the teachers' approach to teaching and were aimed at better understanding their priorities and how their backgrounds and lived experiences influence their teaching. The questions asked included the following:

- What are you teaching that you hope the children in your classroom will learn at this young age? Why do you think it's important to learn these skills?
- Often, one's life experiences can shape approaches to teaching. Do you think this is true for you?

Implementing and Adapting the Curriculum

The study team designed these questions to find out whether and how teachers implemented and adapted the curriculum to better align with the backgrounds of their children, and how, if at all, the curriculum supported them in their teaching. The questions asked included the following:

- How does the curriculum draw upon the backgrounds and lived experiences of the children in your classroom?
- Describe how you implement or adapt activities for your children.
- Does the curriculum provide supports for you to make planning decisions with your students' backgrounds in mind?

Professional Development (PD)

These questions focused on curriculum-specific training and coaching supports and whether these supports were responsive to children's backgrounds. The questions applied to PD in general, as well as PD that teachers received during the study. The questions asked included the following:

- What kinds of coaching supports do you feel help ensure that what you are doing in the classroom authentically aligns with the needs and strengths of the children in your classroom?

- What kinds of training materials or support from trainers do you feel help ensure that what you are doing in the classroom authentically aligns with the needs and strengths of the children in your classroom?

- How relevant did you feel the trainings provided in the study were to you and the children in your classroom?

Analysis

The study team transcribed and coded the 18 interviews using a narrative summary approach. Accordingly, the team summarized each participant's responses to the five sets of questions described above. The team then compiled these summarized responses in a spreadsheet to easily compare all teachers' responses across the five topics. While reviewing and comparing responses, the team identified themes that came up across the teachers' responses, and counted these themes to measure how common they were. When examining the data, the team recorded each theme's overall mentions or counts, as well as the counts by race, ethnicity, auspice type, and curriculum type.

The findings focus on these themes. The themes are described by how many teachers spoke about them as follows:

- Most or majority of teachers = More than half of teachers (10 or more teachers)

- Half of teachers = 9 teachers

- Close to half = 7 to 8 teachers

- Some or several = 4 to 6 teachers

- Few = 2 to 3 teachers

Findings

The findings are grouped by the five topics of the interview questions. Overall, the study team found that there was not a strong emphasis on race, ethnicity, culture, language, or family income in the curricula. And without an emphasis in the curricula, there was also not a strong focus on these background characteristics in the training and coaching that teachers received.

Not surprisingly, only a few teachers said they plan or adapt lessons with children's backgrounds in mind. Close to half of teachers said they do plan or adapt their lessons to accommodate children who speak other languages. This was true for teachers across the two curricula. This finding is notable, especially given the pedagogical differences in the two curricular models. The Creative Curriculum, for example, takes a "whole-child" approach that aims to offer teachers flexibility to tailor and select curricular content and activities in line with children's needs and interests. However, if the curricular materials do not offer background-specific activities or resources that teachers can fold into the day's lesson, there is little explicit guidance otherwise to help them plan in this way. Thus, teachers may not integrate culturally responsive and relevant practices into their instruction and activities, despite the diversity of children in their classrooms, in part because of the limited emphasis in the curricular and PD models.

Nevertheless, teachers expressed an interest in wanting to know more about the home lives of the children in their classrooms, recognizing the important role that home life plays in a child's learning. However, this interest appeared to sometimes stem from biases that teachers had about the communities they serve. For example, a few teachers expressed deficit-oriented views of the children's families (e.g., wanting to know if there were problems at home or believing that families were doing little to create supportive learning environments), even though their intent was to better support children in the classroom.

Taken together, there appears to be an opportunity to design curricula and PD to better support children by providing teachers with more anti-bias and strengths-based perspectives of the children and their families, as well as clearer guidance and activities on how to include their backgrounds in curriculum implementation.

Children's and Teachers' Backgrounds and Community Characteristics

To better understand and contextualize teachers' responses, the study team asked teachers about their backgrounds and those of the children they teach, and to share information about the communities in which their centers were located. From these conversations, the study team found the following:

- **Teachers want to know more about children's home life.**

Half of teachers expressed a desire to know more about the children's home lives as a way to better support them in the classroom (e.g., who lives in the house, what has the child experienced, or where is the child developmentally). These teachers recognized that home life plays an important role in a child's learning, and several viewed their teaching as a means to address any related issues. As one teacher said:

> When they're screening [parents], they don't tell teachers then, 'This child, she have [sic] an IEP [Individualized Education Program] that needs this, or the family [is] going through this, or . . . they're a foster, or they're living out here.' Basic things that we need to know of this particular child [are] not talked about until we

> have to find out last minute . . . it will help if we were to know, so then it could be easier for us to address it.

Teachers did not explicitly express an interest in learning about the families' race, culture, language, or household income. Rather, they prioritized understanding the children's home life as an opportunity to incorporate family experiences in their classroom teaching.

- **Centers contribute to families' economic well-being.**

Similar to the teachers, the centers also wanted to support the families they serve. Most teachers had children from low-income communities in their classrooms. As such, most centers provided a lot of resources to families (e.g., food assistance and connections to jobs) or hosted events for the community, such as Thanksgiving dinner. As one teacher explained:

> There was a situation where a couple weeks ago, one of the mothers, there was a couple of canned foods in our site that we had . . . And she was like, '. . . Are these free to take?' We told her, 'Yeah, they were for whoever needed them.' And she was like, 'Good because we were kind of low,'. . . So, us being their providers . . . we feel necessary to pitch in and provide them with more groceries for their need.

- **Teachers do not talk about children's backgrounds.**

The majority of teachers worked with children of different races or ethnicities, usually Black, White, and Hispanic, but also Middle Eastern and Haitian. About half of teachers had children in their classroom who spoke another language, which was Spanish in all cases. As mentioned previously, most teachers served children from families with low incomes. Despite this mix of backgrounds, some teachers said that conversations about race, ethnicity, culture, and family income do not come up in their classroom or at the center. While the children may read books about other cultures or books that feature pictures of different families, children's backgrounds were not an explicit topic of discussion. One teacher shared, "I never try to make it [children's backgrounds], like, a thing with any of the kids. I just always tell 'em, we're all the same, you know? We might look different but we're all the same.'"

Children's Learning Styles

In the interviews, the study team sought to understand how children learn, what they like and dislike, and whether their backgrounds play a role in their learning styles. Teachers shared the following insights:

- **What happens in the home can dictate children's interests and learning.**

Some teachers noted that what parents do in the home influences children's interests and learning in the classroom. A few explained that when children do not get enough

support at home, they may be behind on certain skills or struggle in the classroom. This finding relates to teachers' desire to learn more about the children's home life. Having a better understanding of a child's background and home life could enable teachers to better support students. This could help, for instance, with language. As one teacher noted:

> When we do the individual child plan, we keep in our mind that maybe he or she is behind with speaking. He has the speak [sic] problem or because they are following two languages, one at home and one at school. So, they have the two languages, sometimes the kids when they have two languages, they don't want to talk that much. They are confused which one they're gonna pick. So, we encourage the kids when they are in the classroom, we always talk our one language, the English. Then he can pick some words, some letters and numbers, and I always talk to the parents what is it they use at home, what language they use at home most of the time.

- **Children like hands-on activities.**

About half of the teachers said that their children like hands-on learning, and several others noted they like play-based learning. A few more Connect4Learning teachers noted these preferences as compared with the Creative Curriculum teachers.

- **There are barriers to learning, but they can be addressed.**

The most common learning barrier that teachers mentioned was that not all kids are developmentally ready for certain activities. Several teachers across both curricula made this observation. Some teachers who had Spanish-speaking children in their classrooms also noted a language barrier (that is, the teacher did not speak the same language as the child). But a few noted that they felt they could adapt activities to address any obstacle. As one teacher put it, "I don't really think there are any true barriers. That would be the only thing, it's just making those adaptations."

Teachers' Approach to Teaching

The study team also asked teachers to think about their approach to teaching: what they prioritized and how, if at all, their experiences shaped their approach to teaching. During the interviews, teachers highlighted the following:

- **Social-emotional learning and school readiness are teaching priorities.**

Most teachers reported prioritizing teaching social-emotional skills, noting that these skills help children interact with others in school and in society more broadly. Several teachers also stressed the importance of teaching children to express themselves and solve problems. Interestingly, a few more Connect4Learning teachers emphasized problem-solving skills than the Creative Curriculum teachers. Half of the teachers also reported prioritizing school readiness (e.g., letter recognition and writing).

- **Teachers prioritize teaching skills not learned at home.**

Some teachers noted that children may not get the help they need with learning at home. Therefore, they prioritized some skills in the classroom because they felt that the children will not learn them at home. This, again, relates to teachers' strong interest in knowing about children's home life so as to better support their learning in the classroom. As one teacher noted, "Because the generation today, a lot of them don't get the help that they need at home . . . I see that they don't get the help at home, so I'm gonna do my part."

- **Teachers did not mention different backgrounds or cultures as a teaching priority.**

When asked about their teaching priorities broadly, only one teacher talked about placing an emphasis on teaching children about different cultures. This teacher's statement may have been related to her background: She identified as multicultural and so teaching about diverse cultures was a priority for her. She explained:

> Obviously, it [her experiences] helps me teach them more, teach them more languages, open their eyes to different backgrounds and different cultures. So, they all know that I am Lebanese and, they like, I've showed them Lebanon on the globe and we've listened to Lebanese music and we have belly dance. And so, it just opens their eyes to different cultures.

Implementing and Adapting the Curriculum

In the interviews, the study team sought to understand how the curricula relate to children's backgrounds and how teachers plan and adapt lessons with children's backgrounds in mind. The team found the following:

- **The curricula provide limited resources for including a diversity of backgrounds in lesson plans and activities.**

Some teachers said that the curricula provided supports for incorporating a diversity of backgrounds into classroom activities. The most common resource mentioned was books. Teachers might translate stories from books into Spanish, or the books might depict families of different cultures. As one teacher said:

> I can read stories about, you know, culture. They can learn more and to accept each other, because, you know, where I used to be, we [were] used to African Americans and Latinos, too, and Asians too, but for the most part it was Latinos, but I still, you know, with the stories, we can help them to accept each other.

A few teachers said that the curricula did not provide such supports. A few others noted that the curricula were broad enough to apply to all children. One teacher explained:

> It's [the curriculum] for everyone. So, they have to make it as general as possible to meet everyone's needs. This is where my job comes in, like where I have to personalize it based on my kids . . . . So, it's normal. I mean, I feel like it's as good as it can be for such a wide range of education things.

When asked if they had thoughts on how the curricula could incorporate more about the children's backgrounds, only some teachers had any suggestions. One teacher who reported that she did not actively highlight children's backgrounds in the classroom did indicate a willingness to do so if the curricular materials included those topics. The teacher explained:

> It [the curriculum] possibly could [be changed to draw on children's backgrounds], but I think that we just touched the tip of the iceberg with your Creative Curriculum because we only used the materials that were sent to us . . . . So maybe if we had reached out to other things in that [Creative Curriculum] Cloud, we may have been able to touch on other cultural things.

This response might explain why teachers commonly cited books as a resource where they could include children's backgrounds into lessons; centers may have books with a variety of characters and storylines that reflect diverse backgrounds, and these books can offer an easy way for teachers to bring that diversity into a lesson. But without other specific activities or materials to prompt and guide them through these topics, they simply may not incorporate these topics into lesson plans. Explaining the limited opportunities in the curriculum to address diverse backgrounds, one teacher said:

> When we talk about, like, family traditions . . . we can kinda get full-fledged into race, culture, ethnic background, you know, just in like the activities that we do within the classroom, the things that we request from home to be brought into school. And then like, when we're teaching something such as, like, rhyming words, you know, it's kind of hard to get, like, those family involvement . . . into that type of curriculum. Because it's so straightforward, it's like, you know, how creative can you get with teaching rhyming words?

- **Teachers focus on adapting curricular activities to children's skill levels, interests, and language needs, but they may need support to adapt them to other background characteristics.**

Teachers largely reported focusing on adapting the curricula to children's skill levels and interests. A few more Creative Curriculum teachers emphasized interest-based adaptations than Connect4Learning teachers. Few teachers said that they plan or make adaptations based on children's race or ethnicity or family income. Examples of adaptations the teachers interviewed made included asking children to bring items specific to their cultures to class, putting together activities during Black History Month, or skipping a unit on clothing to be sensitive to children who may not have nice clothes. Explaining why lessons were not planned with children's race or ethnicity in mind, one teacher said:

> I don't make [adapt] the curriculum as far as when it comes to the different ethnic groups because, to me, all the kids are the same . . . If they were speaking . . . for instance, for Spanish, I'll teach them the colors in Spanish. And I'll teach them the numbers in Spanish. So as far as ethnic, I just don't base it upon that, I guess I would say.

Although most teachers did not report planning or adapting curricular activities with race or ethnicity in mind, nearly half of teachers said they adapted activities based on language. Teachers said they typically translate materials for children who need it, or assistant teachers who speak children's home language might work with these children in small groups. It is possible that teachers reported not making adaptations based on children's other characteristics (e.g., race or ethnicity or family income) because they do not have guidance on how to do so. Teachers may also feel uncomfortable discussing these topics. As one teacher said:

> For my Spanish children that I did have last year . . . if it was words that I knew in Spanish, I would say in Spanish or my assistant would tell them in Spanish . . . But regarding . . . their family income . . . I never try to make that thing in the classroom because . . . that's a touchy situation for anybody.

That said, half of teachers wanted to connect classroom learning to their children's backgrounds: Teachers repeatedly expressed wanting to know more about the children's home life. And while a few teachers reported making these connections or adapting curricular materials based on race or ethnicity or family income, some wanted more support from the curriculum. One teacher noted:

> They [curricular materials] could do more like multi-culture, add more of that in there because we didn't really have that in there . . . . Like a lesson on multi-culture. A lesson on more of dealing with different backgrounds and races.

Professional Development (PD)

The study team asked teachers about their experiences with training and coaching related to the curricula. Generally, most teachers indicated that they found the training and coaching they received to be supportive. Both training and coaching helped them understand how to use different components of the curriculum. A few teachers enjoyed the training videos that depicted scenarios from real classrooms because it was relatable to their own classrooms. A few others also enjoyed collaborating with and hearing from other teachers who were using the same curriculum during the training sessions. Teachers showed great appreciation for the coaching they received, particularly the feedback and additional resources that coaches provided.

However, only a few teachers said that the PD provided supports to help them align their teaching to children's backgrounds. They gave examples such as setting up multicultural boards in the classroom and labeling things in different languages. But some teachers

said that these topics did not come up, which may be a result of how the curriculum was presented. One teacher explained:

> When she [the coach] would come out for our coaching, we had, like, goals that we were working on, on how to, you know, utilize the curriculum, like in the classroom, but even the curriculum itself didn't focus a lot on like race and, you know, things like that. So that wasn't something that we discussed in, you know, or had conversations on improving. That wasn't like anything that was openly, openly stated, or related to the curriculum.

Without clear guidance in the curricular materials or PD, teachers may not think to bring up children's backgrounds in the classroom or may not know how to do so. If the topic is not reflected in the curriculum, training or coaching likely will not touch on it either. Without explicit support from the curriculum or PD, teachers will likely only address children's backgrounds in the classroom when it is the center's or their own priority.

Limitations

This small set of interviews was conducted to explore issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the design and implementation of curricula and PD models aimed at supporting teachers in early care and education settings. The project sought to capitalize on prior MDRC studies where teachers received PD related to a specific curriculum. However, there were some limitations, which are important to consider in the interpretation of the findings and that warrant further follow-up study.

A broader sample of teachers with more diverse background characteristics would be helpful to replicate the findings and ensure generalizability. In the present project, the study team initially aimed to interview a sample of teachers in which the majority identified as Black or Latine. While close to half of the teachers in the sample identified as Black, only one teacher identified as Latine. As a result, the findings represent the experiences of Latine teachers only to a very limited extent. Future work should ensure that this group is well represented in the sample.

Additionally, there was variation in the length of time between when participating teachers received the curriculum-specific PD and when they were interviewed for this project, from a few months to a full year. Thus, it is possible that some teachers may have forgotten experiences related to equity and inclusion relevant to the present project.

Lastly, for some teachers, particularly those implementing Connect4Learning, the curriculum was new. As such, experiences with a curriculum during the first year may have been more about simply learning and implementing it, and less about adapting the lessons to be culturally relevant to the children in their classrooms. Thus, it is possible that interviewing teachers with more years of experience with the two different curricula may yield different results.

Conclusion

By interviewing teachers who had recently implemented two different curricula and had received related PD, the study team sought to understand how these resources align with the lived experiences of teachers and young children of color and from communities affected by poverty as a way to promote more equitable outcomes for young children. The study team found that the curricula and PD teachers received did not place a strong emphasis on incorporating children's backgrounds and lived experiences (that is, their race, ethnicity, culture, home language, and family income) into lessons. And only a few teachers said that they plan or adapt lessons with children's backgrounds in mind. Nevertheless, half of teachers expressed interest in knowing more about children's home life to better support them in the classroom. The absence of an explicit focus on making these types of adaptations in these curricula and related PD offers curriculum developers, trainers, and coaches an opportunity for growth and improvement. By designing curricula and PD that address children's home lives—which inherently involve the family's race, ethnicity, culture, home language, and income—teachers can learn more about the children in their classroom, bring this knowledge into their lessons, and help support children's learning.

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