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At the Garden of Learning and Discovery (GoLD) Pre-K Center in Highbridge, Bronx, we have chosen to focus on instilling a sense of social responsibility and advocacy into our teaching to enhance children’s learning and development. Our belief is that we must go beyond the current status quo to drastically change outcomes for our most marginalized students; we also believe that our children are never too young to champion a cause. Because disparities in school performance can often be traced back to early childhood, growing appreciably during the primary and middle school years (Heckman 2011; Grodsky et al. 2017), we embraced a pedagogical stance that focuses on social justice, that is knowledge-rich, and that promotes positive identity development. It is leading to fundamental changes within the district, which “[s]ince 2010 . . . has been the poorest . . . House district in the country” (Santiago, 2019).

In this article, we provide a look into our community and the contexts in which young children are growing and learning. Then, we describe our journey toward social justice advocacy and the process through which we developed a knowledge-rich curriculum to support positive identity development of our students and our beloved Highbridge community.
The Highbridge community

In 2015, a New York City mayoral initiative led to more than triple the amount of pre-kindergarten spots available to NYC students and families. To meet this need, the GoLD Pre-K Center opened its doors as the sole Community School District 9 stand-alone center in Highbridge, Bronx. Highbridge is located in NYC Community District 4, and its residents are 96 percent families of color. While our community contends with a plethora of long-standing, systemic issues impacting quality of living (high levels of homelessness, minimal quality nutritional sources, and increased levels of disease), we found strength in concentrating on our communal cultures that are inclusive of resiliency and social capital. From a strengths-based perspective, we were able to “challenge inequity and disrupt unfair circumstances and situations” (Howard 2018, 28). We understood that we could not ameliorate all these structural inequities immediately, but we came to the conclusion that promoting justice and knowledge in our youngest learners (and ourselves) could lead to lasting and deep community engagement, empowerment, and evolution.

Our journey into a social justice and knowledge-rich curriculum

Our journey began in the fall of 2018, when GoLD partnered with the Center on Culture, Race & Equity (CCRE) at Bank Street College of Education. The CCRE and our staff embarked on a yearlong professional development series that guided our staff’s learning about knowledge-rich curriculum, families as partners, culturally responsive practices, and children’s identity development. This work resulted in our staff having a research-informed plan to engage students and families in a critical discussion about social justice and advocacy.
Knowledge-rich curriculum

In exploring aspects of knowledge-rich curriculum, we examined the interdependent relationship between concepts, content, knowledge, and skills. For example, we looked at how a lesson on water could be used to build knowledge of history, science, geography, art, literacy, social justice, and music. Through intentional curriculum mapping and careful planning of activities like read alouds, we learned to support our students in deepening their critical thinking skills and knowledge base.

In exploring the possibilities of a knowledge-rich curriculum, we also discussed the importance of teaching subject knowledge that foregrounds social justice. The knowledge we introduce to students should be powerful, equipping students to liberate themselves. According to Robertson (2016, n.p.), “Any young person needs knowledge to thrive, and there is no reason why it can’t sit alongside their own culture, their own identity, non-elite stories and knowledge.” He goes on to state, “A radical curriculum would be knowledge-rich, and would leave its students empowered by the knowledge they were taught at school, not perplexed, years later, as to why nobody thought to introduce them to it while they were at school.”
Families as partners

As we participated in this professional development, we gained insights into what the research showed about positive, reciprocal partnerships with families. We learned:

- Authentic home-school partnerships result in better student performance, healthier behavior, fewer behavior problems, and higher levels of enjoyment in school (The Fatherhood Project 2015).
- “School life should grow gradually out of [family] life, [and] it is the business of the school to deepen and extend the child’s sense of values bound up in [their family] life” (Mooney 2010, 5).
- Authentic family engagement is a cornerstone of culturally responsive teaching (Bennett et al. 2018).

Equipped with this perspective, GoLD committed to enhancing an already-strong foundation of family engagement. We sought to engage the families of our students and the entire Highbridge community that surrounds and supports our youngest learners.

Culturally responsive practices

Our yearlong studying also revealed key elements of culturally responsive practices, including:

- Culturally responsive practices that use families’ funds of knowledge as educational assets to help children learn (Gonzalez 2010). Integrating funds of knowledge, or the cultural assets of children’s home lives, into school-based learning experiences means understanding and applying a strengths-based lens to each child and their family. Furthermore, using funds of knowledge and multiple modes of communication and learning can enhance educators’ efforts to engage and empower families.
• Partnerships with local organizations devoted to social justice initiatives that serve the communities of students and their families in specific ways. These organizations can help to target issues and promote solutions that are in conjunction with the desires, perspectives, and assets of the community.

• Curriculum that places importance on text drawing from minoritized cultural and linguistic capitals might be used to empower students in different ways; not only encouraging their identity investment in this learning, but also to shift the balance of authority and expertise among teachers, students, and families (Taylor et al. 2008, 272).

In order to deeply understand and internalize the tenets of culturally responsive practice, we began by exploring our own cultural practices and norms, including from “the positions of privilege we occupy—such as being White, having grown up in an economically comfortable household, speaking Mainstream American English, being heterosexual, or being Christian” (Souto-Manning 2013, 12). Once we understood more about our positions of privilege and cultural identities, we could more deeply explore how our own upbringings and experiences influence the classroom and school climate, the content taught, and the methods used at GoLD. Certain research helped guide us to examine the impact of White middle-class norms on school culture and standards, for example:

When students of color are rewarded (or sometimes chastised) for conformity to white norms and standards, whiteness becomes an alienable property. This can specifically be seen in what is often referred to as students “acting white,” or in depictions of Asian Americans as “model minorities,” because they adhere to an array of characteristics endorsed by white society and attributed to whiteness. (Rector-Aranda 2016, 7)

Too often, schools have sought to prepare students for the “real world,” stripping away cultural assets that could support children in navigating and thriving in life (a second language or code-switching). In examining the origins and functions of typical academic standards for “success,” GoLD peeled back the layers of deeply ingrained schoolwide cultural beliefs and sought to create a learning environment that nurtured and built upon the existing cultural assets of our students and families.
According to Robin DiAngelo (2016), “Minoritized [refers to] a social group that is devalued in society. This devaluing encompasses how the group is represented, what degree of access to resources it is granted, and how the unequal access is rationalized. The term minoritized (rather than minority) is used to indicate that the group’s lower position is a function of active socially constructed dynamics, rather than its numbers in society” (82).

Identity development in early childhood

Finally, our yearlong professional development included research about identity development, and we learned:

- Children develop conceptions of race at a young age, beginning with knowledge of color categories, to a conceptual awareness of racial categories, to ultimately an awareness of group identity (Swanson et al. 2009; Farago, Davidson, & Byrd 2019).
- Understanding oneself is inexplicably tied to understanding where one fits into a group (Baldwin et al. 1991).
- The concept of “stereotype threat” is about “being at risk of confirming, as a self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one’s group” (Steele & Aronson 1995, 797) and about its impact on the academic performance of students of color. For example, the threat that the judgements of others or their own actions would negatively stereotype them resulted in underperformance of Black participants taking a standardized test.
- Children as young as 5 years of age are susceptible to stereotype threat—predicting, for example, that an Asian student would outperform a White student on a math exam (Ambady et al. 2001).
• A child’s sense of self is correlated with the development of cognitive and noncognitive abilities and academic outcomes (Ladson-Billings 2009). Too often, the stereotypes of children from minoritized communities shape their feelings of academic inferiority and uncertainty about whether they belong (Walton & Cohen 2011), adversely impacting their motivation to learn.

Based on this research, we knew that our children at GoLD would learn best with the confidence that they belong in our learning community and have a voice and agency here. While we believed that most of our children felt a sense of belonging, we dove deep into questions about identity and belongingness for children who stood outside of the margins; we wanted to ensure that, at GoLD, all of the children felt included, represented, and empowered in our center, including children whose social identities are not typically reflected in school.

We emerged from our time of study and reflection with a new and deeper understanding of families as partners, knowledge-rich curriculum within the context of culturally responsive practices, and children’s identity development. However, there are few examples of developmentally appropriate approaches that address all of these areas of the curriculum and learning environment. For that reason, GoLD decided to develop a school-wide social justice project to support children’s positive identity development through a knowledge-rich curriculum, outlined below.

Seeds of Change: A social justice, knowledge-rich approach

With the understanding that identity-affirming spaces for our children and families contribute to positive child outcomes, the “Seeds of Change Initiative” was born. GoLD’s Seeds of Change Initiative aimed to build individual and collective agency amongst children by bringing awareness to the local and global health crisis affecting our community. Children researched and actively contributed to the creation of practical solutions to local and global challenges. Our goal was to positively connect with and support our families and bring wakefulness to micro- and macro-instances of environmental and social injustices. We began by exploring the nutritional deficiencies present within the community of Highbridge, and we decided that we had to address the lack of affordable and nutritional food options.
To launch our “Seeds of Change Initiative,” we organized a planting party for our community. Over half of the families of our students attended the planting party, and many of them led the organization of the event, supported the event with food donation, offered assistance with program design, and provided translation of materials. At the planting party, families discussed their own experiences with environmental injustice and learned about ways they could support their children in making a difference. Families and children took their first step in making change by painting pots and planting seeds for the indoor garden. Through this initiative, GoLD was able to strengthen a sense of belonging, engagement, and activism amongst children and families.

Based on the energy of our launch event, GoLD inaugurated a wide-ranging edible indoor garden in May 2019 to supplement the nutritional and physical needs of our community. As our students learned about their community and themselves through themes such as “My Community and Me” and “5 Senses,” they expanded their ever-changing palates by learning how fresh food is planted, grown, cultivated, distributed, and prepared. They also learned about their place within a local and global community. They learned about how they have a role to play in the larger environmental ecosystem.
We did not stop our transformative change project there. GoLD understood that we needed to integrate social justice practices into our thematic units throughout the school year as a way to expand and enrich our curriculum. We decided to introduce global issues such as water accessibility and conservation by holding informative sessions for families and participating in a whole-school, reusable-water-bottle challenge. Our desire was to raise awareness about the scarcity of water throughout our international communities, making sure our children knew that there are 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds that have to walk miles every single day for a luxury our students just had to turn the faucet to obtain. As the students became more knowledgeable of the factors that plagued others, we began to see an increase in the level of empathy shown toward their peers and a desire to bring change to their community as a whole.

The GoLD Walk for Water

On June 12, 2019, GoLD concluded the first year of our social justice, knowledge-rich approach to teaching and learning with a televised Walk for Water. Joined by our students, staff, families, and community members, we walked across the High Bridge, a historical aqueduct that once transported water between Manhattan and the Bronx, to bring awareness to the global water crisis. To further contextualize why we were embarking on this Walk for Water and what it meant in a global context, the school partnered with the We Movement, a social activism organization who contends that more than 840 million people worldwide are living without access to clean water and 40 percent of the world’s population is affected by water scarcity. As we walked and chanted on that June afternoon, our community supported us with cheerful applause and genuine surprise and delight at the thunder of preschoolers’ feet that passed their buildings. At that moment, the students at GoLD joined the ranks of other young social justice organizers in history, totaling 90 4- to 5-year-olds participating. The GoLD Walk for Water was a culmination of months of introspection, transformative change, and conservation efforts. One community member reflected, “The children may be small, but their message is big!” A GoLD teacher commented, “The transformation in engagement and agency is clear. Kids are never too young to learn about activism. Our children now know their voices matter and that they can make a difference.”

Reflecting back and looking ahead
This process of collective investigation and action allowed us to further support children in critically understanding their identity and how it intersects with the world. They were able to see themselves as authors of their own narrative, empowered to create change in the face of challenge. Looking back at the four key elements learned during our professional development work, we found that they, indeed, contributed to our success in implementing this social-justice advocacy process.

Knowledge-rich curriculum

Through this project, we were able to enhance the impact of existing curriculum through culturally responsive practice. Children talked about the role of food and water in their lives and communities. They learned about the process of recycling through creating usable recycling systems for their community. This interdisciplinary approach enhanced engagement and impact for our youngest learners.

Authentic family engagement

New York City has the largest school district in the United States, as well as the most rapidly evolving, diverse demographic groups of student populations (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). It is important for educators to appreciate what each child brings to their school and how these experiences can be used to foster learning and inform instruction. This project would not have been successful without this support and investment from GoLD families. They dedicated their time, expertise, and resources to creating transformative experiences for the children and community.

Community partnerships

In addition to family engagement, GoLD sought out community partnerships to support the innovative work of our school community. Our partnerships with CCRE and the We Movement allowed us to think outside of the box and utilize existing funds of knowledge to create transformative change in our community. These outside partnerships not only introduced new ideas and concepts to inspire action, but they also provided the critical thought-partnership needed to dream big and inspire action.
Understanding the importance of identity

Children form a sense of identity from an early age. Our students carry group identities across a range of categories: race, gender, age, and income. We know that children develop conceptions of race at a young age and this impacts their understanding of self and the world. Therefore, we decided to take an active role in helping to shape a positive identity through agency-enhancing, social justice curriculum. We want children to view themselves and their community as empowered agents of change in this world. Our young children can hold the complexity of two powerful ideas at the same time: sometimes unfair things exist in this world (there is a lack of access to healthy food options in our neighborhood) and we can make a difference and change things (we can build an indoor community garden).

Through this work, we realized that early childhood is the perfect time to begin the establishment of a collective and empathetic mindset. As stated earlier, our children are never too young to learn about activism and social justice. As early childhood educators, we need to introduce this work organically, to weave it throughout our instruction and interactions, and to ensure it is developmentally appropriate. At GoLD, we believe it is never too early to provide our youngest learners with the tools necessary to become environmental advocates and global ambassadors because we understand that this should be an integral part of what is learned in early childhood. A knowledge-rich and action-oriented education lays the foundation for an indestructible and more equitable society.

References


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**Audience:** Administrator (director or principal), Teacher, Trainer

**Age:** Early Primary, Kindergarten, Preschool

**Topics:** Child Development, Social and Emotional Development, Other Topics, Developmentally Appropriate Practice, Subject Areas, Social Studies, YC

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