

## Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: When Values Become Actions

There has been a spotlight on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) since the murder of George Floyd in 2020. On a personal level, I now work to build reflection on my biases into my decision-making processes. I interrogate my occasional discomfort when interacting with people who differ from myself, an able-bodied, cisgender, white woman, with many decades of experience under my belt. On a professional level, I am now aware of the vital and growing need to promote anti-bias and anti-racism practices in evidence-based assessment tools used to measure and support quality in early childhood programs. The *Program Administration Scale*, which I co-authored, was recently revised, in part, to address these social justice concerns.

While I am more aware of my personal biases and am making better decisions as a result, I only recently became aware of how a social justice reckoning occurs within many organizations as well. Organizations, like the individuals that comprise them, develop a heightened awareness of social justice issues and reflect on their organizational norms and practices. Finally, some take action to embed more equitable and inclusive practices throughout their organizations and within their strategic priorities.

After the highly visible murder of George Floyd, many organizations began posting on social media attesting to their commitment to racial equity and empowering people from under-resourced communities. Next, some organizations reviewed their mission, vision, and values statements. A commitment to DEI was added or enhanced accordingly. Some organizations hired a DEI administrator or engaged a consultant to lead anti-racism discussions among the staff. At the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, we created a DEI Committee that suggests readings and leads discussions among staff. We read books chosen by staff on topics related to social justice. We often struggle to connect these readings to our own work. It should be noted that these DEI discussion sessions take place during the workday and therefore represent a financial commitment on the part of the organizational leadership. But, as Ibram X. Kendi states in *How to Be an Antiracist* (the first book selected for discussion by our team), action is the only way to be antiracist. You are either racist or antiracist as determined by your actions.

I agree with Kendi about the critical need to act. I also believe that organizations (like people) develop. This developmental process within organizations involves intentional group reflection, a shared commitment to change, and a systems perspective to implement sustainable actions. This is the journey of an organization committed to become more diverse, equitable, and inclusive.

I can only speak to my organization's DEI journey, but I suspect it is not unique to the McCormick Center. This past year, some of the program services offered by the McCormick Center became equity-focused. The professional learning team aimed to enroll a majority of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color

(BIPOC) administrators in three cohorts of *Ready to Lead*, a six-month leadership academy offered in Illinois for new early childhood education and care (ECEC) administrators. The curriculum content, delivery, and grading practices were reviewed from an inclusion and equity lens. The professional learning team worked with the marketing team to ensure a welcoming and inclusive message.

Over the past year, I worked with a diverse team of researchers on a qualitative research project—*Leading with Equity, Building Leaders*—that examined the racial equity impact of potential policy recommendations to implement a unified professional framework for ECEC program leaders working across early childhood settings and sectors. This project built on research conducted the previous year to build consensus on a set of recommendations to strengthen and unify ECEC program leadership. The sample for *Leading with Equity, Building Leaders* (N = 65) consisted entirely of program leaders of color. In contrast, the sample for the first phase of the study, *Building Leaders* (N = 207), consisted of a diverse but majority white group of program and system leaders.

In the second phase of the Building Leaders project, *Leading with Equity*, I was honored to participate in 13 focus groups (facilitated by a co-researcher who is Black) and learn from BIPOC leaders from around the country about the impact of race, culture, and language on their personal leadership journeys. These journeys included experiences of bias, discrimination, persistence, mentorship, and achievement. It was enlightening to realize that many leaders of color were empowered as well as constrained by their race, culture, or language in achieving their leadership goals. These findings, as well as the findings regarding a unified professional framework for all ECEC program leaders, were recently presented at the National Research Conference on Early Childhood. You can find the iPoster presentation [here](#). A [PDF](#) of the presentation is also available.

I have shared only a few examples of how the recent work of the McCormick Center has been guided by its commitment to DEI principles. I believe we are beginning to take action to live our DEI values. The next stage in our organizational development is ensuring that the commitment to DEI through action is sustained. What more do we need to learn? Which internal systems at our organization need to be strengthened? How can our structures and processes be aligned with what we are learning both from inquiry and lived experience? When an organization is viewed from a developmental perspective, there is always a new chapter to discover.

**Dr. Teri Talan, J.D., Ed.D.** holds the Michael W. Louis Chair and is senior policy advisor at the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership and professor of early childhood education at National Louis University (NLU). She promotes action by state and national policymakers on early childhood workforce and program administration issues. Previously, she led a child advocacy organization and an early childhood program accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). She holds a law degree from Northwestern University as well as a master's degree in early childhood leadership and advocacy and a doctorate in adult and continuing education from NLU. She is coauthor of the of the [Program Administration Scale](#); [Business Administration Scale for Family Child Care](#); [Escala de Evaluación de la Administración de Negocios](#); [Building on Whole Leadership](#); [Who's Caring for the Kids?](#) [The Status of the Early Childhood Workforce in Illinois](#); and [Closing the Leadership Gap](#).