

What about These Fancy ECE Classrooms?

(Draft of an article to be submitted for publication based on a conversation with Nancy Spangler and Arlae Alston in Santa Cruz, CA)

Six weeks after my son and daughter-in-law had their third child, Katie reluctantly returned to work. Her schedule as a counselor at the homeless shelter had been reduced to just one evening per week. Then my son got laid off. We were able to help a bit, but all of us knew they had to seek public assistance. They accepted the help that was available, and with the pride of working class kids, kept their worries and stresses to themselves.

Poverty is shameful in America. But why do we blame the poor?

We have all heard the messages: "Try working!" "Stop having children!" "Finish your education!" 65% of us will live in poverty at some point during our lifetimes. 1 in 4 Hispanics and 1 in 4 African Americans live in poverty. And those numbers are on the rise. That is shameful. 15% of all Americans live in poverty, 40% of young children. It has gone beyond the hard-case street folks, the marginalized, and struggling immigrants, this new poverty touches all of us. Under-employed, under-housed and underfed Americans belong to all sectors of our community.

Last week I told a colleague, a wonderful preschool teacher, about my son's family. I knew she had struggled to make a go of it as a single parent with two kids in our underpaid field. "It's really hard on our family to have one of "our own" struggling for survival." I told her. "And, oddly, I feel a little embarrassed. Last week I helped them move out of their two-bedroom rental into a single room in a house they share with four other people. We all felt an unspoken shame. When I discovered they had no diapers for baby Daniel and were using napkins from fast food restaurants and old t-shirts as diaper liners, I was shocked." Then got angry. "I am angry at a system that allows this to happen while so many other items on their government agenda get massive funding. This is not the fault of the poor!" I broke down in tears of frustration.

She shared with me that over her career she has seen many families experience these feelings. And invited me to come see her program. She and her staff have developed skills over time that include class-sensitive practices in support all families and children.

"We openly address the disparity between the "haves" and "have nots" in our daily practice. It is essential, to be advocates for equity in every aspect of our work. One simple example is that we provide all types of work accessories in our dramatic play area- garden tools, work boots, lunch bags, aprons and coveralls, caps and road signs. We reflect the work our children's families do as honorable and important. They bring in containers from food service industry

jobs, pots from gardening work and old traffic cones from a construction job site. Respectful practices include never playing with food items, using re-purposed furniture and materials and encouraging family-made projects and activities. We don't focus on cute haircuts, pretty dresses or new shoes; instead focusing on what children are doing in their play. What stories they can share, rather than fancy new toys. These are all sound practices of an Anti-Bias curriculum. And things we are passionate about."



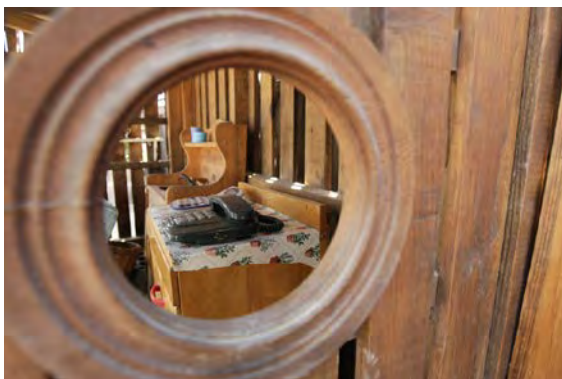
She told me that, sadly, there is no help with diapers even for the most economically challenged families. "I have seen babies with sopping wet diapers wait for their child care to open each morning to get a fresh diaper. And then change into a double dry one at pick up time."

I visited a few subsidized programs with my daughter-in-law, Katie, and couldn't help but notice that it was full gorgeous furniture and toys. It confused me. They serve low-income families with no resources for fine furnishings of their own, yet the kids program is all high end. How does that work for families? Programs feed the babies, provide the food, provide diapers while the baby is there and offer all kinds of social services. But then these people, these families go home to their ill-equipped small homes and marginal meals, or maybe no meal. "We have to get our public priorities straight," I told her.



She shared a different perspective. “These families deserve beautiful things, their children get to share lovely surroundings.”

I told her that my son’s family qualifies for subsidized childcare and will use it for infant care too once he finds a job. So together we peeked into the infant care room. It looked like it had been designed by a professional decorator; the colors mellow and soft, carpets and fabrics artistically arranged and the babies lay on the floor with caregivers nuzzled close. She agreed to check their agency’s available infant care.



I was very interested in her approach to classroom equity and the way she and her staff convey the message that being poor is something that happens, not who they are. “It’s not their fault. And we need to stop blaming the poor and talking about the

struggle. It's our social and moral responsibility to one another. We need solutions, recognition. And acceptance. We need to have the "it's-hard-to-be-poor" conversation out in the open," she suggested. "Stop the shame cycle."

It made me wonder about the staff themselves and how negotiations about materials and furnishings used in the room might stimulate their own histories. I never had experience with matching furniture, no experience buying lighting and fixtures, pieces that matched or how to care for finished wood products. If they are anything like I was at that stage of life, I'd go home to my hand-me-down goodwill apartment and maybe be glad I'd had crackers and juice at work before I went to bed.

I stopped in and visited her program again. I told her I was thinking a lot about the beauty of the spaces here and asked her about her staff and if they worked together to design the space and select materials. I couldn't imagine that everyone arrived with the same sense of aesthetics. And she surprised me with her thoughtful response.

"It's so funny that you bring this up, because this is a really hard piece of staff development for us right now. We have just hired four new teachers and I had forgotten how much time the integration of new ideas and thinking takes. It's a constant negotiation, lots of mentoring and letting go, too. It can be exhausting. One of the new teachers is an immigrant and left everything behind when they moved here under duress. Her own passions center on the natural world, plants and flowers. Another teacher lives in a small trailer and as a child moved to foster homes and cares little for material possessions. Another is this crazy artist, loves color and loud prints. Talk about different. At least we can count on shared pedagogy."

It made me aware of the layered issues in sharing an educational space. It has to reflect the philosophy, promote care practices and also set the stage for learning. And, each adult carries a sense of his or her own histories, values and aesthetic. Whew.

"I think a study tour looking at environments might help develop some good conversations," I offered.

"Yes, that's a good way...and then there's the family perspective," she added. She wants families to see the beauty that they deserve in their lives; flowers, beautiful natural objects...and to be involved in setting it up, if they'd like. She includes a few families in her set-up and re-organizing days. "I encourage them to say what they like, what feels homey or special to them. I invite them to bring in an old vanity, lamp, and fabrics from home. They collect natural objects and we sort and arrange them. We shop at garage sales together." Most of the natural objects in the yard and inside on shelves came from families. "We don't only use new things. We re-

purpose old things all the time,” she explained. “And the families see children use what they brought.”



I was satisfied. I understood that all families appreciate being honored by beautiful surroundings, that all of the adults participate in crafting the space with items they select and mentoring supports the aesthetic whole. Pedagogy be first or secondary, but its always there as an underpinnings in support of decision-making. I can appreciate the complexity and the learning that takes place as adults work together on behalf of their children. And I appreciate my colleague’s work more that ever.



“Hey,” she said, “back to the diaper problem. Maybe our well-off families could donate diapers and we could start a diaper drive collecting diapers for deserving little bottoms here at my agency. Maybe it could become a project associated with community churches for broader outreach. I heard about a successful diaper project in San Francisco.

But, families like my son’s would be too proud to ask, I told her. “A sense of pride can retained and grow into a community pride if they join me in building the project” I like that.



I sure hope they have space in their program for my grandchildren.