



Aisha Ray
Senior Vice President for
Academics Affairs & Dean of Faculty,
Erikson Institute

The NASBE Interview

Aisha Ray is professor emeritus of child development at the Erikson Institute, and former senior vice president for academic affairs and dean of faculty. She studies cultural and situational contexts of child development, early childhood professional development, father-child relationships in urban communities, and early childhood services for immigrant children and families. She co-leads the Equity Leaders Action Network for the Build Initiative. NASBE interviewed her during the annual conference in Atlanta.

Where have you seen the most progress in the last decade in the early childhood education space?

We understand more about the value of high-quality yearly education for young children, and we're beginning to tease out specific components. For instance, teacher quality is huge, so there is increasing focus on the capacities of teachers. Implicit bias shapes their interactions with culturally, linguistically, and racially diverse kids—particularly boys—and that influences outcomes for children. We know more about teachers' capacities to create real communities within their classrooms and the power of that for advancing learning. We know that kids have unequal childhoods, and those unequal childhoods lead to unequal outcomes. Part of what makes childhood unequal is the quality of the school, the district over all, and its capacity to respond.

This is a place where state boards of education can have influence. Too many children—particularly kids in poverty—are going to schools that are poorly resourced with teachers who are less well prepared than those who teach middle class children. To come to school already

behind and then to be in a school that does not have a rich curriculum or an effective teacher exacerbates the problems kids have. Over time, it becomes a cumulative effect of disadvantage and inadequacy that leads to and reinforces the negative outcomes we see in high school graduation rates. So that foundation in early childhood and the quality of it are critical. We need to get that right to improve outcomes in fourth, sixth, twelfth grade.

Many advocates have urged streamlining teacher competencies and qualifications and requiring bachelor's degrees. Are these efforts leading the system in the right direction?

The answer to that should be yes. A teacher's qualifications are critical. If you look at Head Start, the Abecedarian Project, the Perry Preschool project, The Chicago Child Parent Center Project, those programs all had a set of characteristics: high-quality teachers who were credentialed, rigorous curriculum, depth and duration—there was greater impact from a full-day program over a full year than from a half-day program;

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wraparound services; small teacher-to-child ratios; and teachers who understand and can use children's culture and language in instruction and as a platform for learning. There's evidence to show that these characteristics matter.

The reality is that the vast majority of U.S. children do not receive high-quality education in early childhood. Having a great teacher will help, but it's not sufficient. You have to have a broader set of supports for kids who are already starting behind. The thing for state board leaders to understand is that that's the majority of kids now.

In early childhood, the key demographic imperative that is driving a lot of concern about the quality issues is that young children of color—African American, Latino, Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, Asian Americans—they're going to drive this demographic change. For my age bracket, the diversity is 18 percent. But for young kids, it's 50 percent. States like New Mexico and California already have a majority of kids of color. We need to understand this complex dynamic between quality, teacher qualifications, who the kids are, and what they need. That is not just a teacher but a teacher with another set of supports.

So having a bachelor's degree doesn't necessarily touch that question, right?

The quality of the education teachers get matters. It also matters how supported they are in those first couple of years. We also know—for example, from the research by [Thomas] Dee—that kids of color and children for whom English is a second language may feel more attached to school, do better on assessments, and do better generally if they have a teacher who shares their language and their culture, ethnicity, and race. The implications are profound. We have an overwhelmingly white teacher workforce. We don't want white teachers not to work at schools—we want them to improve their practice with all children—but we also want to increase the numbers of teachers who represent these diverse communities

children are coming out of and who come with what Dee calls “cultural capital” and are able to use their capital for children's instruction.

How do you increase the cultural competence of those who don't have it?

All teachers need to develop cultural competency because all teachers are going to encounter children at some point for whom they will not share a culture and language. The typical early childhood classroom right now in the major U.S. cities is multicultural and multilingual. Not Spanish-only or English-only. They are classrooms in which the majority of kids may be Spanish speakers, but there are kids who speak Urdu and Haitian Creole and Twi. Teachers may have the cultural and linguistic capital for some, but they also have to know how to support the child who speaks Urdu or Haitian Creole if that's not their cultural/language background. We tend to think, “If we've got kids who speak Spanish, we just need to go find a great bilingual teacher who can do instruction in Spanish and English.” That's important, but we have to think about how we serve all kids.

What levers can state boards pull to bring cultural competence to the early childhood classroom?

There are a couple of examples. A number of years ago, Minnesota passed legislation that every teacher who worked in child care had to take cultural competency courses. They wrote a curriculum on cultural competency in Minnesota that is quite good. That is the kind of thing state boards can do. You might have teachers who work in rural communities who say, “Well, we don't have to deal with diversity because we don't have any here. We're all the same.” The reality, of course, is that diversity is a complex thing, but there's diversity everywhere—family structures, even dialects within communities where people feel they all speak the same language or they understand each other, and other social class issues.

State boards have to feel that this is a standard all teachers have to meet and create the opportunities to do that, working with institutions of higher education. In all 50 states, they are primary sources of the expertise and the mechanisms for delivering professional development. The University of Arizona School of Education passed a requirement that all teachers who graduate from their teacher education program have to speak a second language at the sixth-grade level—not with the idea that they are going to be proficient at the level of instruction. The idea was really to be able to communicate effectively with children who speak the language you've learned and to work effectively with families. It is a powerful message to the field and to educators generally that bilingual education is beneficial for all children. There is a lot of research on this that being a dual language speaker makes your brain better. But we keep relentlessly pushing this “we're all going to speak English” strategy, so we're not incorporating the evidence into our teacher education programs.

The second piece—which is probably more practical and right in the moment—is that teachers need to be able to communicate with children on all kinds of things. A kid is crying in your class. Whether he's six years old or sixteen years old, you need to be able to find out why he is upset. Very often the language we use when we are emotionally distressed is the language in which we are most comfortable. Teachers educate children but also care for them. They are our children for those moments to make sure that they're safe and feel good and supported. It is helpful if the teacher can speak to the child about what is bothering the child. It's a critical piece of this interaction.

Third, communicating effectively with families is enormously important. We use this language of parent engagement. If you can speak to them—even in basic language and even if you make mistakes—parents appreciate it.

Is cultural competency more than linguistic competency?

They are linked. You can be a monolingual speaker and be highly culturally competent as

an educator. For most people who are working in classrooms right now, lifting that group up to the point where they're culturally competent—even if we don't get them to all speak at the sixth-grade level—that would be fantastic. The extra level of expertise and competency is being able to get teachers to speak at this level of sixth-grade language to gain the benefit of being able to communicate effectively with families and communities and to understand much more what's going on inside of kids' heads when they're in their classroom and to manage the interaction between children in an effective way.

From work that Walter Gilliam has done, we know the rate of suspension and expulsion is higher in preschool programs than it is in elementary school. Three- and four-year-olds are being kicked out of programs for perceived behavioral problems. The data are quite clear that African American and Latino boys and maybe Native American boys—although they are in smaller numbers so it's harder to tell—have the highest expulsion rates, followed by black girls, almost always around behavioral issues. But it's unclear whether the behavioral issues are developmentally appropriate and the teacher just doesn't know how to manage it, or whether there really are more serious issues behind the behavior that need an IEP or more intervention from a psychologist or some other expert. Because kids get kicked out, there isn't follow-up.

Gilliam had teachers look at video clips of racially diverse groups of kids and then make attribution about what they thought was going on. But he also monitored teachers' eye movements. They found that both black and white teachers scrutinize the behavior of black boys more than they did other boys. Teachers were unaware of these eye movements of course, but this is connected to implicit bias research. We all carry around in our heads these very unconscious ideas about others. We project those ideas in our interactions with them and our judgments about them, and teachers are doing this all the time. It's not just the teachers who are walking around with these ideas. All of us are. How is that shaping the way in which we look at certain children and not

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other children? Look at their futures? Look at them in the present? I think what state boards might do is support professional development for districts or make available conferences or speakers. Having workshops on implicit bias doesn't always change behavior, but it makes people more aware of it.

The fourth leg of the stool is the fact that there is pretty strong evidence that kids of color are more likely to get a less-qualified teacher. In Montgomery County, Maryland, [then superintendent] Jerry Weast improved outcomes for black boys. He changed the way teachers worked together to learn how to be better teachers—more teacher-built professional development, teacher involvement, communities of practice, coaching. But he also moved good teachers toward the kids having the biggest challenges. That is an intervention that can work. You can incentivize teachers' pay to do this—things districts can do to make this happen.

But the idea of having the least experienced teachers with the kids who are having the biggest challenges is an equity issue of enormous implications that are all bad. State boards at least can raise it as an issue: “How are we distributing our best teachers? Where are they? Who are they? How do we make them take what they know, and give it to those teachers?” You don't have to necessarily move people. There are things one can do to improve weaker teachers, but it needs to be a target of change.

What questions should state boards ask when they're looking at these preparation programs for early childhood teachers?

Most institutions of higher education want to do a good job preparing teachers. They are challenged in many ways.

One is faculty. People are hired onto faculties because they have an area of expertise. They're the person who does early math, who does literacy, or they are a bilingual/ESL expert. They're not necessarily hired because they have cultural competency and the ability to educate students about it. Institutions of higher education need a lot of support to get better at that.

States have done things. For instance, Pennsylvania's Head Start office partnered with

institutions of higher education on a yearly conference for three years to focus on cultural and linguistic diversity. Faculty came from all over the state, worked on syllabi, had expert speakers, and then went into workshops to ask, “What should we do in this course we're teaching; should we scrap it and start all over?” It stimulated conversations. That's one piece that state boards need to think about: How do you increase the expertise of faculty around cultural competency, understanding how culture shapes early development, and the implications for teaching and learning?

The second one is language. Multilingual children, bilingual children, and bidialectic children are in our classrooms. We tend right now to only be on the bilingual lane, but there's a lot of research that shows that bidialectic children—who are learning school English but speaking Appalachian or Hawaiian or African American English—are disadvantaged if they're not intentionally taught to code switch. If you speak Hawaiian English, you are less likely to get hired. Same is true of African American English. Linguists recognize them as languages, but kids are punished when they speak them. DeKalb County, Georgia, had a program for many years teaching kids to code switch. Again, how do educators make sure children get all the tools they need to succeed in society and hold on to their second language because that actually helps build their brains?

The District of Columbia adopted a policy requiring teachers in childcare centers to have an associate's degree by 2020. What do you think of the timeline?

The time line is probably unrealistic, and everyone knows it's not realistic. Without question, the field needs to increase the knowledge and expertise of people who work with young children, and we need clear career pathways. Setting goals like “by 2020, everyone has an AA degree” sends a signal that that's an important thing, and it does get people moving in the direction of getting credentials. One of the challenges is this issue of creating a diverse workforce that's highly competent. When we

look at who is working in childcare, these are mostly women and very likely women with lower family incomes. Many of them are the primary breadwinners. They are earning insufficient amounts of money, and they have other kinds of life issues—kids, parents they are taking care of, transportation challenges.

If we create an expectation of an AA degree by 2020, we need to build in supports that help them get there. We know that the average student these days in higher education is an older adult—not a 19-year-old. That's driven a different conversation in higher ed. How do we need to make courses available to them? What are the cost points around what we're going to charge for tuition? One of the challenges we had in Illinois, or still have, is that low-income students are having a much harder time paying back their student debt. They also are more likely than students who go to elite universities to have terrible academic advising. One of the challenges at the AA degree level is that students tend not to be adequately advised about how to get through the program efficiently.

Just an anecdotal example: In work we were doing in community colleges on early childhood curriculum for culturally, racially, linguistically diverse children in Chicago and Illinois, a large number of students reported having poor advising, high debt they could not pay back, and they could no longer get loans. They were trapped in a particular spot. That reality creates problems for the profession.

In your work with the New York Board of Regents, what have you learned about the state board's role?

New York is unique in many ways, because they historically have had and continue to have a state board of education that is powerful, highly organized, and politically respected. The fact that New York is focusing on early childhood is a wonderful thing because of the stature they have nationally. They are struggling with many of the challenges I've already mentioned: inequality and how that gets expressed within early childhood education and elementary education, preparation of the

workforce, and fragmentation of the workforce. There are two very large populations—teachers working in childcare versus those working in a preschool program in a public school—that are having different experiences around income and security of position. About two million people in the United States take care of young children in this country in all these sectors. We need to pay attention to it.

New York is identifying the real struggles districts are having when they decide to take this issue on and improve outcomes for children. They have lots of kids who are dual language speakers, multilingual speakers, and second-dialect speakers. The New York Board of Regents is definitely an activist board, and they already recognize how important it is to get behind the issue of early childhood. It can be instructive to other state boards as to what drove them to focus on early childhood and how they exercise their authority. I hope they will have lessons to teach all of us about how these things may be resolved.

Should states focus on narrowing licensure by, for example, offering preK-3 licenses?

Licensure reflects a set of assumptions teacher educators make about the knowledge clusters that teachers need to work in certain grades. There should be a process that engages higher education in the discussion—amongst other partners, but certainly state boards of education—of how expertise and research are driving licensure changes. That process needs to be inclusive.

There are many early childhood educators who believe birth to age 8 is the important developmental continuum. Their rationale is that what occurs in those first eight years in terms of all the domains of development needs to be understood in a deep way by people who work with young children. Third grade children are going to be assessed on the NAEP. Therefore, early childhood educators and early childhood education need to lay down the developmentally appropriate foundation for literacy and numeracy in particular, social and emotional development, and executive function so that we don't see the fourth grade drop in achievement.



There are all sorts of arguments in between, where people say, “Infancy is a special developmental domain. People working with infants should be experts on that.” This circles back to the other problem with the brackets, and this is a more practical problem. People at the district level and principals—particularly in rural communities and suburban communities—want the maximum amount of flexibility in the preparation of people. They do not want a teacher who simply comes with an infancy certificate. This is why you see K-6 certification. It is a labor force capacity issue at the district level.

Could an endorsement be a good add-on to a certification?

It depends on what the endorsement contains, how many hours, and how much thinking has been put into what the endorsement should be. Endorsements have typically

been a strategy in states where there is no early childhood certification. Teachers take maybe 12 hours in early childhood, and that’s considered the early childhood piece. The last time we did research on this, only 12 states had an early childhood degree certification. There were many more states that had elementary education with an early childhood endorsement.

Do you have expectations for the field?

We’re going to get our act together and make the world better; that’s my big expectation. Little children will be coming out of our programs fully prepared. We need all hands on deck, including state boards of education. They can become more aware of the importance of early childhood and begin to make a significant contribution to how professional development is provided in their state, the quality of it, and address those inequalities. That would be lovely. ■