



Community Care and Concern: Moving Outside School to Build Connections

Larisa Callaway-Cole

*Lecturer, Early Childhood Studies
CSU Channel Islands*

with

Valeria Huerta

Blanca Ramirez

Karina Ramirez

Ariana Seyssel

Brooke Shaffer

Emily Wilcox

*Students, Early Childhood Studies
CSU Channel Islands*

As an early childhood studies lecturer, I strive to help my students connect theory to practice and engage deeply in their learning with children and families. In my Family and Community Engagement course we spend much of our semester thinking about what it means to live in relationship with young children, their families, and our communities. We are reconceptualizing some of the traditional ideas about school and family partnerships as existing solely in the school or classroom. We know that many families work, making it impossible to be at school during the day. We know that for some families missing work means losing income and therefore the ability to provide for their families. Yet, still, there is an outlandish notion that families must be at school, participating and physically present for family engagement to happen. Instead, students in my class spend time in dialogue considering the ways in which family and community engagement is often happening outside of the school community. We also spend time thinking about ways in which teachers and schools can engage families through meaningful, culturally relevant and context specific experiences. These thoughts come together to form community based action plans that are developed in collaboration among Early Childhood Studies students, families, directors, teachers, and children.

One of the most transformative experiences I've engaged my students in is participation at the local MICOP (Mixteco Indígena Community Organizing Project) meetings. Every month I attend the meeting

Community Care and Concern: Moving Outside School to Build Connections

Larisa Callaway-Cole

with my students. We work as volunteers, helping to bag and distribute groceries to families but also as facilitators of children's activities to engage children and support their families in attending the meeting. In the past three semesters, I've become familiar with the community organizers working for MICOP and they've come to know me by the hearty number of students I bring and my "bag of tricks" filled with toys and activities to help engage children while their families are in meetings. We've evolved from hours-long Duck, Duck, Goose games when we didn't know what materials we could use, to now multiple stations set for children to work and play. There are several intentions in our attendance, from students learning about local community based organizations (CBOs), to witnessing collaborative and inspiring community organizing. But the biggest intention is for students to engage with children and families in a context that is familiar to those children and families, but possibly unfamiliar to the students. It is often unfamiliar to the students because their only experience working with families thus far is within the walls of their classrooms. But so much lives outside the walls of our classrooms, including the stories and experiences of our families.

I've asked students this semester to particularly reflect and describe the impact of attending the MICOP meeting on their developing teacher identity. Following are stories of my students, who have deepened their understandings of family and brought meaning to their work as emerging educators.

Reflecting on the use of home language, Karina describes her connection of course content to community experiences and conversations.

Something that was very interesting to me was how these families speak more than one language. I heard various families bouncing from one language to another, usually between Spanish and Mixteco. This made me realize how important it is to value all the languages families speak to create a positive environment with families and their children. This reminded me of my class facilitation and Critical Race Theory. In a school setting it is important to recognize all the languages a family speaks and their preferred language to increase family engagement. Many individuals might see these families' language as a deficit since they do not speak English. However, after taking [this course], I see their language as a strength of these families and how it brings rich culture into our community.

In an experience that demonstrated the selflessness of the children she engaged with, Brooke reflects on her experiences working with a group of children.

I met a little boy who introduced me to three of his cousins and two friends from school. While working with the beads, his cousin asked him if she could make a bead string. He acted as a translator since she didn't seem to speak much English, and he then asked me if I could get his cousin some beads. I put a handful between them and about five other kids who were playing with the beads and they proceeded to string them in silence for a few minutes. Soon he noticed his cousin start to get frustrated because she couldn't find any of the beads she wanted. She was looking for the same green and yellow beads that the boy was using. When he found this out he slid all but four beads off his string and gave them to her. After she finished stringing them she ran off to show her mom and I told the boy that he was such a sweet cousin for sharing with her. He then looked at me and said, "She wanted one like mine so I gave her more beads so she could have the better one." That statement really struck me. In my house, I

Community Care and Concern: Moving Outside School to Build Connections

Larisa Callaway-Cole

wouldn't do that for my siblings, let alone cousins—I have to pay my brother every time I need him to feed my dog—so I can't even imagine the selflessness imbedded into the Mixtec community.

Noticing how children and families were interacting with one another, Blanca builds connections around her formative experiences as a developing educator.

I saw young children carrying their younger siblings and I saw families laughing and having conversations, but most importantly I saw how secure and safe they felt. When I become a teacher, I hope to set up events, invite the families, and get to know one another and have communication. For my future classroom, I hope to inspire my students, allow them to have big dreams, support them and believe in them. My past experiences, my service work, and my college work have shaped me into the teacher I want to be and I am glad to pursue a future in teaching children.

While drawing with children, Ariana noticed the dynamics in relationships among siblings at the meeting.

The thing that really sticks out to me from our time with the children were their relationships. Older sisters acted more like second mothers to their younger siblings. It really struck something for me, an only child, to see the care the girls had for their sisters. The girls were young, but they took their role of older sister very seriously and did not engage in any of the activities we facilitated. I had to ask myself if this was cultural: were the girls their mother's helpers from an early age and are they 'supposed to' watch over their younger siblings? One girl came up to me and asked if her sister could draw. I knelt and asked the little girl what color paper she wanted; she wouldn't look at me but looked to her sister and whispered something. The older girl told me blue and I handed over the paper. The older girl shuffled her sister over to the table to sit down and stood behind her the whole time. Occasionally the older girl would lean over and look at the drawing, but she never sat down to draw herself. The whole exchange felt very protective and I saw several other girls watching their younger brothers and sisters.

Making deep connections to how we conceptualize family and their role in children's schooling, Valeria discusses her interactions with one child and his family member.

Unfortunately, one little boy hurt his head on a pole while we were playing. This young boy [spoke] Spanish so I was able to communicate with him. I asked him where his mother was so I could take him to her. The young boy looked at me in the eye and said "My mom did not come. She is working, but I came with my godmother." He then led me to his godmother and I saw that the godmother was concerned and hugged him as if he was her child. At this moment, I realized that even though the mother was not there due to her work, the young boy had the support from extended family. As a future teacher, there might be times when parents do not show up to an event, but it does not mean that they do not care. It is because of other circumstances that they are not able to make it. Moments like these show that as much as parents want to show up to important events, there are times where they just won't be able to due to other circumstances.

Community Care and Concern: Moving Outside School to Build Connections

Larisa Callaway-Cole

In noticing the children's engagement with one another, Emily reflects on considering the strengths of families and children in planning for her future classroom.

Being able to spend time with and hear the children talk about their families was special. Many of the children had multiple siblings and cousins with them, and they were proud of that. Many of them were eager to help their siblings and care for them when the parents were at the workshops. As I reflect on this and how it has impacted my developing teacher identity, it makes me think about how my background is completely different. I think that recognizing how your own background differs from your students is crucial when taking steps toward uncovering cultural norms and practices to be effective in your collaboration with families. I noticed that the children in the Mixtec community assume high levels of responsibility for their age because it is expected of them and it is a part of their culture. If I were working with these children in my classroom, I think it would be apparent that some of the strengths they may gain from this type of responsibility would include: patience, discipline, leadership, and communication skills. Identifying the strengths that are gained from children's cultural background and upbringing is something that I would like to continue to develop as I assume a teaching role. I want to develop into a teacher who goes beyond surface level cultural norms and discovers the deepest level of students' culture to be able to create more meaningful learning experiences that incorporate family values.

I share these stories to convey the deep importance for all teachers—whether they be pre-service teacher education students, teachers of adult learners, or the teachers of our children themselves—to engage deeply with their communities. This engagement lets us see the children and families in our community in a different, and I argue, more meaningful way. For me and my students it is an opportunity to build connections and relationships. These connections and relationships are built amongst our community organizations, our classroom of learners, and most importantly with the children and families. In order to better know one another, sometimes we need to move outside the classroom.

About the Authors

Larisa Callaway-Cole is a lecturer in Early Childhood Studies at CSU Channel Islands. She is completing her Ed.D. in educational leadership through CODEL, CI's joint doctoral program with Fresno State University. Larisa is interested in the importance of family in young children's lives, and her dissertation investigates families' love as transformational and resistant in our current sociopolitical climate.

Valeria Huerta is a student at CSU Channel Islands and she is completing her undergraduate degree in Early Childhood Studies. Valeria is interested in working with younger children as she has done a lot of service learning with preschool children. She eventually wants to be a preschool teacher.

Blanca Ramirez is an Early Childhood Studies major at CSU Channel Islands, graduating May 2019. She is currently working in an infants and toddlers classroom and hopes to pursue her career in elementary education. Blanca loves helping her community and has a goal of working with Spanish speaking families to provide more resources and services.

Community Care and Concern: Moving Outside School to Build Connections

Larisa Callaway-Cole

Karina Ramirez is a recent graduate of the Early Childhood Studies program at CSU Channel Islands. Karina recently welcomed her own child into the world. Karina is interested in pursuing graduate studies.

Ariana Seyssel is completing her bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Studies at CSU Channel Islands and plans on continuing her education as an Education Specialist. She believes in the importance of building relationships with families and strives to create an inclusive classroom for students of all abilities.

Brooke Shaffer is a student at CSU Channel Islands, and she is working on completing her bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Studies. Brooke is interested in working with children with special needs and wants to incorporate Learning Stories into her special education classroom.

Emily Wilcox is a graduating senior at CSU Channel Islands in the Early Childhood Studies program. She has a great passion for supporting and nurturing young children and their desire to discover and learn about the world. In the future, she desires to open an in-home childcare center to serve families within her local community.