

It's Not a Utopian Dream — It's Possible

Creating and Supporting Diverse Classrooms that Benefit All Students

by Julie Lowen

As CEO of Children's Paradise, my goal is to give every child what he or she needs because I know firsthand what it's like to be a child whose needs are unanswered.

I was the third of seven children born in the span of nine years. When my father was laid off from his job, our family was thrown into poverty. My early experiences taught me that school is about much more than language, math, science, and history. I don't remember learning the ABCs, but I do remember how it felt to be a child in need at school. I needed shoes and hand-me-down clothes; I needed a warm meal; I needed kindness, a compliment, a teacher to tell me I was a good reader; I needed a

loving role model to remind me I was not invisible.

Eventually, a successful family living in Escondido, California, welcomed my entire family into their home. They were determined to use their success to help others, and their kindness saved my life. My siblings and I learned about art and culture and music. Suddenly, instead of aching for acceptance, we found ourselves connected to a society that was bigger than us. The life-changing guidance that was provided to my family ultimately fueled my passion for early childhood education. They taught me that changing the life of one child — for better or for worse — sets in place a cascade of positive and negative changes in the lives of many others. I will always consider myself lucky. Too many children in need are never connected to people willing to care.

I did not necessarily plan to work within the early childhood education profession; however, in 1989 I found myself thrust back into early learning when I experienced the loss of my second son at birth. Aching once again and feeling invisible, I retreated from a career in business management and escaped home to grieve with my three-year-old son, Andrew. A power beyond my control began to work as moms in my neighborhood asked for my help. Reconnecting with the abused, homeless, and hurting little girl still living inside me and desperate for distraction, I

opened my home to children in need. The children I cared for fed my soul. I felt happiness as I watched them joyfully engage in activities and sleep peacefully in my loving home. Without making a conscious decision, I began a journey that resulted in Children's Paradise: the most beautiful *and inclusive* Preschool & Infant Centers in my world.

The Children's Paradise model is not a Utopian dream; it's a financially feasible model that improves children's lives and futures and benefits society as a whole. We are determined to deliver high-quality early learning services to *all* children in diverse settings, regardless of the incomes of their parents. For a financially stressed family, our efforts may mean extra food, diapers, and an occasional infusion of clothing to meet the needs of their growing children. For a family facing terminal illness, it might be a scholarship that allows their children to continue attending school with their friends as they face grief and loss. For a family with wealth, it may be extra pictures and mementos because both Mommy and Daddy are traveling incessantly for work and miss those priceless moments we all cherish. In each case, children must have their significant needs met and these needs exist without regard to income.

In our diverse classrooms, the children of wealthy families hailing from breath-



After losing her second child at birth, Julie Lowen, CEO and president of Children's Paradise Preschool & Infant Centers, turned her passion and entrepreneurial vision to caring for other people's children in a home daycare setting. She quickly recognized that

parents greatly appreciated high-quality care in an inspirational setting, motivating Lowen to design some of the best child care facilities in the U.S. Currently, there are four centers, all founded and overseen by Lowen. In addition to leading the expansion of Children Paradise, Lowen is the Chairman of the Smarty Patch Foundation, a non-profit organization that provides financial and other supportive 'patches' to promote the continuous early learning of children in troublesome situations. Lowen also serves on the board PACE, a national early learning provider representation organization. Advocating for early childhood learning, she regularly participates in County and State early education meetings, and keeps abreast of the latest in funding, tools and programs to remain on the cutting edge of quality education and care.

taking homes attend school with the children of families who have survived homelessness. They play together and they learn from one another.

Common sense tells us that exposure to a variety of people helps foster a genuine understanding and appreciation for differences, but many people don't realize that early childhood offers a brief window of opportunity when this exposure is most impactful. Once children have grown up in homogenous environments, acceptance becomes more challenging. We have all met adults who are intolerant of diversity, but traits like hatred and bias are not inborn. They are developed over time due to a child's lack of exposure to diversity or in response to the pain generated as a child watches other children access opportunities that are seemingly out of reach.

Our strategically located Children's Paradise centers reflect the diversity of their surrounding communities. We know that the home lives of our students vary greatly. Studies estimate that toddlers from low-income families hear 620 words per hour at home, while toddlers from high-income families hear 2,150 words per hour at home. By age 3, children from low-income homes have heard 20 million fewer words than children from high-income families. But when these children attend school together, their verbal achievement gaps narrow. Importantly, it is not only the children from low-income families who benefit; even the children from high-income families pick up more words.

Studies find that children from all socioeconomic backgrounds perform better academically and socially in high-quality, diverse environments. Research released in 2013 found that children also become better listeners when their peers are different from them. The study gathered data from 11 states and found that classroom income diversity had a positive impact on listening and

comprehension skills, with significant benefits for children of *both* low and high socioeconomic status. Children, it turns out, learn from differences.

It is no surprise to me that 'a school's socioeconomic composition is almost twice as important as a student's own socioeconomic status in predicting their academic achievement.' Study after study confirms that racial and socioeconomic segregation of children inhibits upward mobility. Limiting classroom diversity limits learning for all students, including those from high-income families. Some high-income families may not even realize that their children are missing out on the many benefits of learning in a diverse classroom — until they hear about programs like Children's Paradise and the impressive outcomes of our students.

A Comprehensive Approach Educates Children — and Their Families

Our comprehensive approach at Children's Paradise is multifaceted. Students are fueled by homemade organic food prepared from scratch by an on-site chef. They receive plenty of fresh air and exercise on playgrounds landscaped with lush, flowering vines and trees. They play games with warm, loving teachers in safe, clean, inspiring environments. Every morning, students run through our front door excited about the fact that they have education coming to them, delivered imaginatively in spaces that are beautiful and truly worthy of children.

Education begins with the health of the child, and we know that we cannot adequately address the health of our children without also addressing the needs of their families. When a student enrolls at Children's Paradise, we pair the child and his or her family with an enrollment family specialist. Our enroll-

ment family specialists offer comprehensive support to families. Our aim is to teach families how to access resources and, ultimately, how to one day help themselves.

Many of the families who attend our program navigate welfare offices, WIC applications, and more. They are filling out more state-mandated paperwork on a weekly and monthly basis than high-income families fill out to close escrow on a new home. As parents know, it's impossible to hide stress from children, especially the stress that parents carry when they are unable to put food on the table. Stress in the home during early childhood "can permanently set the body's stress response system on high alert" and impact children well into their adult lives, according to Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child. By simply lowering the stress levels in their homes, we know that we are positively impacting our students for decades to come.

Preschools and Early Childhood Education Centers Can Flourish through Sound Business Practices

Because we offer so much to students whose families are unable to pay us, you might assume that our programs are exceptionally expensive to maintain. In fact, our model is financially feasible. Sound business practices allow us to thrive and help more children as we stitch together funding from multiple programs to ensure that all of our children receive what they need, regardless of whether their families can afford tuition. When early childhood learning centers turn away families paying with government vouchers, classroom diversity suffers. Many take this action based upon the false belief that funding will not be adequate when, in fact, amazing partnerships and resources quietly exist,

which can make the difference for children across our nation.

Among these opportunities is The Early Head Start Childcare Partnership, which opened our program to a whole new group of families; these types of partnerships allow socioeconomic diversity to happen in greater measure within a center. We have successfully diversified our classrooms by integrating funding from all available programs, including Early Head Start, Head Start, State Preschool, Cal WORKs, Alternative Payment, Respite Care, and others. In addition, we have a strong Parent Tuition program. Our centers integrate children from all families in the same classrooms. We don't rely exclusively on government funding, and this in turn offers the children, families, our centers, and our government a big bang for their buck.

Another important source of funding comes from the business community. If every business contributed to local early childhood learning centers, children and businesses everywhere would benefit. Local developers know that our centers will attract families to their shopping centers on a daily basis. Recently, two prominent commercial property developers rented to us at a lower rate and spent \$2.4 million each to turn-key two state-of-the-art centers for us. These win-win solutions were beneficial for children, the surrounding community, and the businesses within the shopping centers, many of which quickly stepped up to further support our joint mission. Investments in children pay a lifetime of dividends. Our model works here in San Diego County and I believe that providers across the entire country can help more children by adopting our business friendly practices.

Prioritizing Programs that Reflect and Support Our Communities

As an early learning community, we can choose to lift up *all* children, no matter the

circumstances they are born into. We can choose to create a world in which schools do not deepen already-existing rifts. It is our obligation as educators and human beings to give every child an even start. We must decide to prioritize programs that reflect our shared values and help our communities.

Across the country, children are living in dire need. Many are hungry and hurting. For their whole lives, these children will be asked to compete with privileged children whose families have extra money for private tutors, braces, and prom dresses. Children who have endured separation from their parents because of terminal illness or the cycle of business will compete with children who have never faced remotely similar challenges. Who are we to decide whom we will help using the arbitrary factor of income to dole out access to high-quality early care and education? Society must see to it that *all* children access high-quality early learning from birth.

Stated simply, my argument is that children should not be held accountable for the income — or the unfortunate circumstances, in many cases — of their parents. The graduates of high-quality preschools are significantly less likely to interface with the criminal justice system as adults and are more likely to attend college and earn higher incomes. If we don't care for children in need now — when they are most open to our love and eager for high-quality education — how can we expect them to grow up and abide by the rules of a society that has ignored them? If we don't give all children a fair opportunity to learn when they are young, how can we expect them to have the skills necessary to complete job applications or manage their finances or provide for their future families? Whether our goal is to benefit one child or our society as a whole, socioeconomic diversity in early education happens when there is universal access to high-quality early learning, regardless

of income. This is the missing link that offers benefits for everyone.

Endnotes

- 1 Hart & Risley. (1995). "Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experiences of Young Children."
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- 3 Chang, C. "Why Integrated Preschools Help Every Student." The Century Foundation. Available: <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/why-integrated-preschools-help-every-student/>
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- 6 Chetty, R., Hendren, N., Kline, P., & Saez, E. (2014). "Where is the Land of Opportunity?: The Geography of Intergenerational Mobility in the United States." *Quarterly Journal of Economics*. Available: <http://scholar.harvard.edu/hendren/publications/economic-impacts-tax-expenditures-evidence-spatial-variation-across-us>
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