

Tattoos, Piercings, Pink Hair and Professionalism!
Pssst... your bias is showing

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When I first wrote this piece in 2006 I was not aware of an epidemic of preschool teachers running en masse to their local tattoo parlors, but I was aware of an emerging war on teachers who had them. I'd like to think that in the time which has passed since I first wrote this piece this topic would've been finally put to rest. But alas. It has not.

So what happened? Well first I started hearing about preschool people who found themselves **out of a job** because of the Tigger / Flower / Heart / Star / Moon / Rainbow that had been on their ankle since forever. "Why?" I asked. "Because now it is visible," they say. I started hearing about preschool teachers in California and Indiana who were no longer allowed to wear jeans, T-shirts or sneakers. I got emails from early childhood people in Texas who were now required to wear heels and skirts, jackets and ties. I heard from child care providers who were asked to change their hair color before starting their new position. I got concerned and started asking, "What's happening here?"

My sense was that in a misguided effort to avoid talking about individual biases against tattoos, piercings and purple hair, folks started making ridiculous dress code policies and just outright banning certain practices altogether.

TALES FROM THE FRONT LINE: Jeans at my school used to be allowed. When I had on my (clean, not skin tight, not ripped) jeans you couldn't see my tattooed legs, but now that we have to wear skirts, you can. But we aren't allowed to have visible tattoos! Overnight I have been deemed "less professional" and am out of a job. What to do?

A DILEMMA: Piercings are being banned *inconsistently*. What do you mean? I mean that Daniella's "regular" holes in her ears are okay, but Jacquie's eyebrow, Ronald's nose and Anton's tongue rings are getting negative press. What's up?

QUESTION: Does having a tattoo or piercing or rainbow hair make you "less professional"??

COUNTER QUESTION: Does the hair color, the tattoo or the piercing come with an attitude? A chip on the shoulder? A poor work ethic? Do these things inhibit the ability to get down on the floor, play tag, lift kids to the changing table, arrange the room? Does they come hand-in-hand with sloppiness, laziness and inattention to ones' job performance?

If the answer to any of the above is YES then please forgive me for stating what I thought was obvious; being less "professional" has nothing to do with the fact one is tattooed or pierced or has blue hair and everything to do with the fact that these characteristics and traits do not a good employee make, regardless of the job they do.

As I said above, I think this topic brings people face to face with their prejudices and fears. It's easier to make a new rule than to face a personal bias. We think we are "just being fair" when we institute a new dress code policy, when really it's a diversion; an attempt for us to avoid talking about a judgement we might or might not have realized we had. We ban things for no reason other than them being different or new or not familiar. It might feel like the easy way out. But in the long run, it's damaging. For a profession that preaches "be nice" "be kind" "inclusion" "acceptance" and "use your words" day-in and day-out, we can be embarrassingly inconsistent.

REALITY CHECK: People make judgments based on things like hair color, clothing, tattoos and piercings. I'm not saying that's good or bad, I'm saying that they do. But good gracious, how can we expect children to see beyond the surface if we ourselves can't (or don't)? Remember what is at the core of our work people! Relationships! Caring! Connections! How can we possibly be expected to model and teach the skills we have deemed important for young people to have, if we ourselves lack them?

So yes, I am well aware that the new toddler teacher's green hair, 1-inch rainbow ear plugs and bleeding dragon flame throwing heart tattoo might be a bit distracting at first, but for cryin' out loud! You hired her for her skills, passion and experience, right? Get over it!!

Question: Why do we assume it's even going to be an issue in the first place???

Short Answer: Because whether folks realize it or not, they are often projecting their own personal fears onto the situation and assume that everyone shares their discomfort.

Also, why would we think we need to introduce a new teacher with colorful hair or tattoos and/or piercings any differently than one without? Pssst. Your bias is showing.

"Good Morning! This is Ms. Katelyn and she is your new teacher."

Done.

And then see where it goes. Maybe someone says something, maybe no one does. Stop leading the witness! Don't assume this is going to be a situation!

YOU'RE RIGHT! She *does* have lots of pictures on her arms! Come see!

Then you know what you do? You look. And you talk. Mind your assumptions and your over-reactions. Maybe it's time for some self-reflection and a candid conversation with a mentor or supervisor as to the reaction you might be having. Your reaction isn't really the problem - how you handle it and what you do with it might be.

Unless you make her hide her arms under long sleeves or tuck her hair up into a hat or cover her ears with band-aids for the duration of her employment, I guarantee the intrigue won't last much longer than a few days. And then guess what happens? Just like anything else in the early childhood world, the novelty of the *new* will wear off and everyone re-calibrates to the *new* now being normal. Our *reaction* is going to 100% decide if a situation escalates or de-escalates, if you want something of no real consequence (in this case, hair color, tattoos or piercings) to either become a BIG DEAL or remain a BIG DEAL, then by all means, keep poking at it.

Once I had a family in my program where both both mom and dad were exotic dancers. That's neither here nor there, but it influenced their son's drop off/pick up schedule. Because Daniel always arrived right after nap his parents always stuck around and joined us for snack and conversation. Anyway, point of the story is that one afternoon as they came in we noticed that this typically chipper chatty set of parents were not talking. Daniel was talking with friends but mom and dad were silent. Hmmm... I thought, something's up. After a few minutes one of the kids asked them what was wrong, one of the kids! Dad said, "Ree got ourr tongs bierced" and he proceeded to stick out his newly pierced, and quite swollen, tongue. So did mom. Daniel added, "Yeah, they can't eat a lot. They gotta keep it clean so it doesn't get infected." The children proceeded to look (but not touch, obviously!) and asked questions, "Did it hurt?" "Yes" "Like a shot?" "Yep." "Did it have blood?" "Not really"..... The inquisition went on for about 10 minutes, and then, guess what?? It was OVER. Done.

More recently a co-worker had beautiful Celtic art on his arms. Over our years of working together we saw children incorporate the symbols into their drawings and easel paintings, it was pretty cool actually and of course, all child initiated. We didn't announce it was Celtic Symbols week, lol! And since I have tattoos

and he had tattoos it didn't really surprise anyone when the dress-up center morphed into a tattoo parlor. Did our level of professionalism decrease because we now had a tattoo parlor in the classroom?!?! Of course not! It was actually quite an amazing event. The children all made signs, had to take turns, had to negotiate how much we (the adult clients) had to pay, we had to wait, we had to make an appointment, there was evidence of math, art, conversations, spatial skills (how to fit the drawing onto the arm?) social skills, language, fine motor (they tattooed us using washable markers), patience, creativity (they had to think of the designs) all unfolding in our tattoo parlor. It was fantastic.

Moral of the story: One is not automatically more "professional" because they are **not** tattooed or pierced or if their hair is their natural color. (Or just because they have a masters degree for that matter, but that's a different workshop). We might know this in theory, but we need to make sure we are acting on it on practice. Professionalism, passion, dedication and commitment come from the inside out, not the other way around. And from a true professional you will see evidence of these characteristics on a daily basis regardless of their hair color, the designs on their arms or the ring in their nose.

We need to shed these warped superficial definitions of what it means to be a professional and stop using personal preferences as a measurement tool.

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