

We Find These Joys to be Self-Evident

“That all children are created whole, endowed with innate intelligence, with dignity and wonder, worthy of respect. . . . Every girl and boy is entitled to love, to dream, and belong to a loving ‘village.’ And to pursue a life of purpose.”

— Raffi, *A Covenant for Honouring Children* (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 1)

Anti-bias Education: Reflections

by Louise Derman-Sparks

It is 30 years since NAEYC published *Anti-Bias Curriculum Tools for Empowering Young Children* (Derman-Sparks & ABC Task Force, 1989). Since then, anti-bias education concepts have become part of the early childhood education narrative in the United States and many other countries. It has brought a fresh way of thinking about diversity and equity among young children. In 2010, an updated edition — *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves* — incorporated the insights and experiences of anti-bias educators throughout the country.

In this article, I reflect on where we are at this point in the development of anti-bias education for young children. All references are from *Anti-Bias Education for Ourselves and Others*, unless noted.

GOALS

Four core goals still form the overall framework for anti-bias education. While the underlying concepts remain the same, some new language makes them consistent with current outcome terminology (p. xiv).

Each child will:

- **ABE Goal 1:** Demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social (group) identities.
- **ABE Goal 2:** Express comfort and joy with human diversity; accurate language for human differences; and deep, caring human connections.

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- **ABE Goal 3:** Increasingly recognize unfairness, have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.
- **ABE Goal 4:** Demonstrate empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discrimination.

The teacher's journey

The teacher is fundamental to effective anti-bias education. He must also grow in the four core goals (p. 21). Reframed for adults, these include:

- Increasing our awareness and understanding of our cultural contexts and social identity in its many facets (gender, race, ethnicity, economic class, family structure, sexual orientation, abilities/disabilities).
- Examining what we have learned about differences, connection, fears, and benefits of human diversity.
- Identifying how we are advantaged or disadvantaged by the 'isms,' stereotypes and individual prejudices (racism, sexism, classism, ableism, heterosexism) in our society.
- Exploring our ideas, feelings, and experiences of social justice activism.
- Opening up dialogue with colleagues and families about anti-bias education.

Learning to do anti-bias education is a journey, which begins with commitment and requires ongoing self-reflection.

Each of us has our own rhythm and speed, as we build our skills for putting into practice the four core goals with the children and families we serve. As one educator explains,

"To do the personal work that is necessary to be the best teacher I can be at that moment, I have to ask myself, 'Why is this so big for me? Why am I being so reactive to what the parent or child said?' I do get discouraged sometimes that there is still so much work to do with myself, that I have all sorts of stumbling blocks, that the onion has too many layers. However, I end up growing from the experiences — and they keep my work fresh. There is still so much to learn, and the meaning of the work makes it worth all the struggle and risks" — Lupe Cortes (p. 20).

Doing anti-bias education is liberating for teachers, as I have repeatedly heard over the years. Here are a few examples (p. 2):

". . . Many adults put me down when I was a child, like saying, 'Oh, she is just a little Mexican.' These comments really affected how I felt about myself. . . . As a teacher, I wanted to break the cycle." — Lupe Marks

"The anti-bias education approach put into words everything in my life that I always thought was right about equality and justice. It gave me the tools to put into practice what I always knew was the right way for me to do early childhood education." — Mary Pat Martin

"Anti-bias curriculum changed the way I looked at child development and the world. I probably wouldn't be such an activist today without it. We are creating a better world." — Brian Silveira

"This work helps you to be a whole human being. It is a kind of redemption. It opens your eyes and makes you whole." — Jim Clay

Anti-bias education and children's development

The 'canon' of ECE now recognizes that children's construction of their social

(group) identities and attitudes toward diversity are integral to their overall development. The newest version of NAEYC's *Developmentally Appropriate Practices* states,

"[It is necessary to view] each child within the sociocultural context of that child's family, educational setting, and community, as well as within the broader society. These various contexts are interrelated, and all powerfully influence the developing child. For example, even a child in a loving, supportive family within a strong, healthy community is affected by the biases of the larger society, such as racism or sexism, and may show some effects of its negative stereotyping and discrimination" (Coppole & Bredekamp, 2009, p. 13).

Anti-bias education strengthens our capacity to foster the education and development of the whole child. It promotes children's truer understanding of themselves and the world, and strengthens their sense of themselves as capable, empowered people. In turn, these social-emotional and cognitive abilities increase the likelihood that children will be able to navigate the larger worlds of school and their communities constructively and effectively, regardless of the experiences they find there.

Early childhood educators are also becoming more aware of the interrelationship of anti-bias education with other elements of social-emotional learning. In "The Vital Connection between Anti-Bias Education and Peace Education" (p. 10) Diane Levin declares:

"As children try to relate what is different to what they already know, they learn new lessons about the world. These lessons can contribute to their reacting to differences with trust and tolerance or with fear and violence. They set the tone for how children will



deal with differences among people throughout life — differences in how they look, act, and think. The lessons also influence how children deal with differing points of view during conflicts. . . . Our efforts will help children develop the strategies they need to break the cycle of violence in their own lives and in the wider society.”

Meg Thomas advocates integrating anti-bias education concepts and strategies with anti-bullying educational work. She explains that,

“When the teasing, bullying, or exclusion is based on a societal bias such as race, religion, or sexual preference, negative results are even more likely. . . . We need to start early to make sure our children don’t suffer these negative consequences. We can’t just ignore them and hope they’ll go away.” (Personal communication, April 2011)

Anti-bias relationships with children and families

We know that the visual and material learning environments are a crucial part of quality anti-bias learning. But this is not enough. Teacher interactions with children and families are also critical. Almost everything adults say or do around children carries messages about gender, class, racial identity, ability, family culture — and fairness. This is why it is necessary for teachers (and families) to do their own work on the anti-bias education goals.

What children ask, say, or do about any aspect of their own or others’ identities and differences are the wonderful ‘teachable moments’ of anti-bias education. We need to respond directly, to help children figure out how people are both different and the same, and to address discomforts and misinformation. Silencing, or offer-

ing simplistic generalizations that avoid the issues, lead children to conclude that there is something ‘wrong’ with diversity. When children show signs of beginning discomfort or prejudice, we can use the techniques we already know for handling other forms of teasing, rejection, or aggression between children.

Partnerships between teachers and families are also key. These call on teachers to develop comfort and skills for holding conversation on anti-bias issues, facilitating different perspectives among themselves, colleagues, and families, and negotiating solutions that work within their settings. As Lisa Lee testifies,

“When I think of my anti-bias work, I go beyond the activities to the relationships. Where once I benevolently helped families, who were appreciative in turn, I came to realize that I needed those families as much as they needed me. Where once I advocated on behalf of families, anti-bias work became about advocating together on things we both cared about on behalf of the children we cared so much about” (p. 37).

Incorporating children’s home cultures and languages into the daily learning environment and curriculum is also essential.

Those of us who work with other people’s children are continually juggling our own culture, the culture of our early childhood education program, and the cultures of the families in our program. As we become sensitive to the similarities and differences in our own, the program’s, and the families’ cultures — and if we are flexible and open to the many ways children can thrive — the work we do with them can be powerful and meaningful (p. 55).

Where we go from here

Since the 1989 publication of *ABC*, the world has lived through turbulent times

where issues of human rights have been at stake in every country, including our own. The United States experienced the historic reality of the first African American president — and the countering reality of a disturbing rise in overt racial hatred. The human rights of immigrants, Arab and Muslim Americans, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people (GLBT), blue and white collar workers’ rights are contested issues throughout our country. The very diverse world comes into our homes every day — its tragedies, conflicts, and its joys.

Children absorb messages about these topics every day. Consequently, they continue to grapple with identity, diversity, and fairness issues. Children still need anti-bias education. To do this work — and to expand and improve on it — here are some suggestions:

- ECE professional organizations continue to promote anti-bias education work through conference workshops, publications, and support for further development.
- Teacher and director preparation programs offer required full-semester coursework on identity, diversity, and equity work, as well as threading the issues through all classes.
- Early childhood programs provide regular:
 - staff meetings for self-growth, assessment of work with children and families, and planning
 - time to meet with families in multiple and flexible ways
 - support from program directors
 - in-service professional development (conferences, in-house workshops)

Implementing these recommendations will take will, persistence, and resources. It will also require finding ways to reverse the current attack on children reflected in the massive state and federal budget cuts to early childhood programs

and other services for families, with the concurrent shift of wealth to the wealthiest one percent of the population. As the ABE goal 4 states, "We must demonstrate empowerment and the skills to act."

Ultimately, we must do all we can to keep alive and make real the vision of a time when all children have equal opportunity to become all they are.

References

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