

Redefining the Norm: Early Childhood Anti-Bias Strategies

by Ellen Wolpert

It is often assumed that young children are unaware of racial differences and that they do not discriminate on the basis of gender, relative wealth, ethnicity and other characteristics. In fact, young children do notice differences. They quickly learn from their environment to attach values to those differences and to mimic the dominant society's discriminatory behavior unless those biases and behaviors are challenged. Children need help in recognizing and challenging bias rather than internalizing it.

A multicultural/anti-bias approach can help students learn to place a positive value on those differences and to treat all people with respect. It can nurture the development of positive self identity and group identity in not only the students but also the staff and families. Education by itself cannot eliminate prejudice or injustice. But the application of an anti-bias approach in the early years can help children to develop:

- pride in who they are;
- respect for others and the ability to interact with many different perspectives and to solve problems cooperatively and creatively;
- critical thinking skills and the ability to recognize bias and injustice;
- the commitment and ability to act against bias and injustice individually and in cooperation with others.

In this article I will describe some of the strategies that can be used to create an anti-racist/anti-bias environment. Many of the ideas have been implemented at the Washington-Beech Community Preschool, where I have worked as Director since 1985. Some of the basic ways to help students address biases are listed below.

- Continually reevaluate ways to integrate an anti-bias approach into all aspects of the program.
- Watch for bias in the environment that children encounter and listen to their comments. Gather materials that contradict the stereotypes and makes the invisible visible. Make comments that contradict statements of bias.
- Ask questions to develop critical thinking.
- Create opportunities to make comparisons between stereotypical images and a variety of real images.
- Create opportunities for problem-solving: what would you do if?
- Take action to protest bias.

We begin by focusing on the children, families, and staff represented in our programs. With them at the center, we expand outward. We start with activities that encourage children to share who they are - drawing and talking about their lives, supporting positive feelings about one's self, family, race, culture, and community. Children make comparisons among themselves, looking at the ways they are both similar and different. They learn that different is OK. This creates the foundation for respecting and valuing differences beyond their own families and communities.

One technique we use is to create interactive materials using pictures mounted on mat board, blocks and wooden tubes. Central to the picture collection are lots of photographs of the students themselves. Used in games, children interact with the pictures and discuss the anti-bias information while they simultaneously develop a wide variety of cognitive skills such as reading, printing, developing descriptive language and vocabulary skills, counting, comparing, classifying, developing visual memory, etc.

The pictures also reflect the true diversity of our society. The images are selected to challenge prevailing stereotypes to which students are exposed. There are many primary areas of bias that permeate our environment that we can directly acknowledge, discuss and challenge on a daily basis including race, age, physical abilities, physical characteristics, gender, family composition and sexual orientation, economic class, ethnicity.

Classroom Strategies

The following are some anecdotes from our work and lessons we have learned about addressing specific areas of bias.

Race

Many teachers believe that preschool-aged children do not notice race. One teacher was surprised when she showed a White 4-year-old boy a picture of a young Black man. The boy said, "He's a robber cuz he has a brown face like a robber..." Clearly the boy had been affected by TV news and stories repeatedly linking Black men to crime. She knew then she would have to develop anti-racist strategies. The teacher collected positive images and used them for learning games and discussions (see Photo Picture Cards following this article.) The teacher asks students, "Can you describe the people in these pictures? What skin color do they have? What are they doing?" Using a picture of an African American man teaching his son to ride a bicycle, the teacher refers specifically to skin color and the positive activities. The teacher asks: "What color skin does this man have? What is he doing in the picture? Is it like anything that happens in your family?"

In Disney's *The Lion King*, the destructive hyenas have black or dark skin. Scarface, the mean lion, has a black mane. After the movie a young child says, "Black people are bad, they are bad in the movie," even though there are only animals in the movie with human voices. Racial and other forms of bias require

more than an immediate response when hurtful incidents happen. We need to be proactive. Examining books and other media one can see how often the villain in children's stories is Black or dressed in black. One can assist children in recognizing this use of color and to challenge rather than internalize it. Also, purchase and create stories in which people of color are important positive characters.

Heroes should be redefined as people of all races who do daily heroic things like helping a friend or helping to bring neighbors together to build a community center. It is important for children to recognize that heroes reside in their families and in the community.

Children need to learn about White people who have taken a stand against racism. This teaches them the concept of solidarity. White children learn that instead of feeling guilty about racism, they can choose to work against it.

Children at Washington-Beech listened to and discussed the following text from a story about two miners: "In the morning they were clean as snow... but by night time they were black as soot, dirty as pitch."

The students and their teacher wrote a letter to the author to protest the negative use of black in the story and the assumption that cleanliness is white.

A White child, new in class, looked at a Black child and said, "She's still dirty. She didn't wash good." In response one can do lots of skin color activities. Bring black and white dolls to the water table and ask, "Does the color wash off? Is the doll dirty? Are all things that are dirty black or brown? When you make playdough and get the white flour and water all over your hands, are your hands dirty?" Make lists of beautiful things that are black and brown. Mix paints to match the students' and teachers' skin colors. In one class a child complained,

"She won't let me play cuz I'm brown." The teacher intervened: "Saying Shade can't play because her skin is brown hurt Shade's feelings. It wouldn't be fair to say you can't play because your skin is beige. I can see you both want to play with this game. Let's think together of a different way to solve the problem."

Age

Observing children at play quickly reveals many of their stereotypes. For example, their assumption that the elderly are all physically weak is reflected when a child bends over, uses a stick and walks slowing, saying, "I'm old." To broaden their understanding, share a variety of visual resources which demonstrate that people with canes are not all elderly, inactive or unable to contribute. Share pictures of a young man with a cane playing basketball, an elderly farm couple harvesting a crop, or an older woman playing sports. Invite older friends and relatives to share some of their experiences.

Physical Abilities

- Instead of simply contradicting the misinformation, ask questions to develop critical thinking. For example, if a child says, "People in wheelchairs can't be mommies and daddies," ask "Do you think that could be a stereotype?" Suggest simple research, "Let's look through our stories and picture collection and see if we find mommies or daddies in wheelchairs." You could find pictures such as a single mother in a wheelchair washing her infant son or a mother and father, both in wheelchairs, pushing their daughter in a baby carriage. Ask questions like: what is this woman doing to take care of the baby? Do you think she could be the baby's mommy?

- Provide crutches for the dramatic play area and borrow (or rent) a wheelchair to test getting around the room. Make group decisions on how to rearrange the room to make it more accessible to people with diverse physical abilities.

- Create persona dolls - dolls with a story that stays with that doll. One of the dolls could use a cane or wheelchair. This allows children to "interact" with people with specific issues.

- Integrate anti-bias issues into every theme. For example, during a theme on communication, have children learn sign language and develop respect for the many ways people communicate.

Physical Characteristics

- Challenge bias about physical characteristics by providing diverse body type images and supporting comments: "People come in all different shapes and sizes."

- Share the story *Fat Fat Rose Marie*. Rose Marie is teased about her size. Claire, Rose Marie's friend, stands up to the teaser. She mashes her ice cream in the teaser's face. Ask children: "What do you think of Claire's solution?" "Are there other ways Claire might have responded?" "Have you ever been teased like that?" "How did it feel?" "What can you do if someone teases you or your friend?" (*Fat Fat Rose Marie* is out of print. If you can't find the book, create your own stories using puppets.)

Gender

- Respond to play time comments such as: "You can't be the doctor. You're a girl!" by asking critical thinking questions such as "Do any of you know doctors who are women?" In the next few days, introduce visual images and books that feature women as doctors and men as nurses. In a class meeting, raise the issue: "I remember that someone said girls couldn't be doctors. What do you think about that? Do you think girls can be doctors when they grow up?" The class could visit a local clinic so children can meet a woman doctor.

- To learn about students' biases, try telling a story without showing the pictures. Use character names that can be male or female. Have children draw or describe specific characters. Compare and discuss why they thought certain characters were male and others female.

- Create a matching game of people doing similar things using lots of non-stereotypical pictures. Include photographs of children from the class. For example, use photos of girls climbing or doing carpentry and of boys playing with dolls or helping with cleaning chores.

- Create simple dolls for the block area by wrapping non-stereotypical photographs of male and female workers around cardboard tubes that will encourage both boys and girls to play and explore diverse roles.

- Read stories which help children explore a range of roles for women. For example, *Dulci Dando Soccer Star* is about a young girl who challenges the doubts of the boys on the school soccer team and proves her skills as a soccer player.

- Play "stereotype or fact" by posing questions such as, "only boys play soccer - stereotype or fact?" In one class a child responded saying, "That's a stereotype! We got the book!"

- As adults, we must pay attention to our own comments: Do we complement girls when they wear dresses but not when they wear overalls? Do we comment on girls' appearances while focusing on boys' accomplishments? Do we encourage boys to be involved and treat the girls as if they are involved as long as they are watching?

Family Composition and Sexual Orientation

- To support the diversity of families, create a picture collection of many kinds of families beginning with pictures of the families in your class. These can be used in a classifying and sorting game, where each child takes turns describing sets of similar families: single-parent families, group and children's homes, two-parent families, including families with two adults of the same gender. Adding the number of people in pairs of family cards, a child finds a two-parent African-American family and an extended family totaling ten people and compares that pair to a diverse age couple with their baby and a biracial family with their adopted children also totaling ten people.

- After hearing the story *Snow White*, a child announced, "Stepmothers are wicked." To encourage critical thinking the teacher asked, "Does anyone have a new mommy? What is she like? Do you know anyone who is or has a stepmommy? Have you heard other stories about stepmothers that are not wicked?"

- A child says, "You can't have two mommies." A child with gay parents is visibly upset. The teacher intervenes, saying, "There are lots of different kinds of families. In some families there are two mommies. People make many different choices about who they love and who they live with." She follows up with children's books which feature families with two moms like *Asha's Mums* -and another with two fathers -*Daddy's Roommate*.

- In one staff group at Washington-Beech there were strong disagreements about sexual orientation and implications for the classroom. In order to develop an approach that would validate children's lives and our own diversity of perspectives, we reached a compromise after several discussions. One teacher simply could not read stories she felt would advocate for a lifestyle which her religion strongly opposes. But, because of her deep care for the children, she was able to reassure the child of gay parents in her class when a negative remark

was made. It was agreed that another teacher would read stories to the students which made reference to gay parents. This can be a difficult discussion. One of the basic principals and challenges of anti-bias curriculum is negotiating among diverse views to create environments respectful of difference that can be very controversial.

Economic Class

- Children learn through television programs that one's money is what makes a person important. Although money certainly gives a person privilege and power in this society, we want to challenge the notion that having money makes one a better person. In a theme on clothing, we can use the story *Old Hat, New Hat* to provide an alternative message. After trying on all the new and exciting hats, the best one is still the worn and familiar one.

- During planning for math activities: evaluate the materials. I had made number charts from a Benetton ad book with bright colors and diverse children. But I later realized how they reflect financial resources which are not the current norm for my students. So I created new number cards with more diverse clothing images. A child collecting the number two chose pictures of two construction workers in overalls and two sisters dressed alike in red pedal pushers and plaid blouses.

- During a theme on housing I made 4-piece puzzles of various living situations that are inclusive of a diverse range of economic conditions including both poor and affluent scenes from urban and rural communities.

- During a theme on special events and celebrations, use stories like *The River That Gave Gifts* in which the best presents are made with love rather than money. Place less emphasis on individual gifts and more on things that can be

shared, like new skills children can teach each other or cooperative efforts like baking bread for the whole group.

- Children in our classrooms learn from the media and other sources that people are poor because they are lazy, not because the system is inequitable or unfair. They also learn that certain occupations are better than others. In the classroom, we can validate the contributions that *all* workers make to society. We can incorporate visual images in our picture collection from calendars produced by a labor union and pictures of people working in the neighborhood. We can invite community workers to visit school and take field trips to see the different jobs they do. Themes can include the contributions and concerns of relevant workers. A theme on clothing can include textile factory workers. The teacher asks questions that assist children to contradict stereotypes: "Do you think the work these people are doing is important?" Children can learn about the work of all the school staff, such as the people who work in the kitchen, maintenance, administration, transportation, health room and library.

- Evaluate the birthday policy. Do families buy party food and favors, creating pressure to "keep up with" the more elaborate parties? Instead children can collectively prepare a celebration with handmade cards and decorations.

- When issues come up, respond in ways that create empathy rather than blame for one's poverty. Children on a field trip see a homeless mother and daughter. Back at school they talk about fairness and decide it's unfair that everyone doesn't have a home to live in. They play counting and sorting games that include pictures of people who are homeless and those organizing against poor housing. They find stories about people coming together to challenge unfairness and learn about a local organizing campaign to help people who are homeless move into abandoned buildings. Children at Washington-Beech decided to help, too, by making a support banner. At a monthly meeting, families and staff talked

about the same issues and played the picture games. A parent said, "This has really changed my own attitudes. I'll never see a homeless person as just a bum anymore."

- Most children learn young that if you work hard you'll do well and will not be poor. The absence of diverse images of people who are poor from school materials means that many children will not understand the real lives and concerns of those who want jobs but are excluded because of factors such as gender, skin color, physical ability and runaway shops.

- Students seldom see images of people who work hard but receive wages too low to sustain basic needs. The common stereotype of people with low incomes is that they simply are not working hard enough. Many children will not learn to value the contributions that a majority of workers make to our society if they remain absent from school materials. We can value all workers by their inclusion in materials we create.

- In a theme on food, include pictures of farmers and farmworkers. Share stories and pictures about the work of farmworkers to protect their jobs, such as the protests against non-union fruit.

Ethnicity

- Begin by developing awareness of and respect for the language diversity in our own community. Adding to children's knowledge of "Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes" in English, student intern Sook Hyun taught children to sing it in her language, which is Korean. She added picture name cards in Korean to a name photo match game. Children made Hebrew letters for an alphabet display. *Angel Child, Dragon Child* is a good story for challenging bias about language. In the story, Ut from Vietnam is teased by Raymond because of her accent. Raymond gets to know Ut and stops his teasing. (The story has one problem which the

teacher should address. Raymond says "I can't understand her [Ut's] funny words." No one challenges his description of her language. The teacher can stop reading at this point and ask students how they would respond to this comment. Or the teacher can model a response by adding a comment from another character in the story such as, "Raymond, does Ut speak in a way you have never heard before? She speaks Vietnamese. It is not funny, just different from your language."

- A child says in a negative tone, "She's Haitian!" The teacher says positively, "Yes she is Haitian. She comes from Haiti. Did you know she can speak three languages?" Several other children proudly announce, "I'm Haitian! I can speak in Kreyol!"

- Create games that provide ongoing contact with images of people from diverse ethnic groups, beginning with ourselves. We all have ethnic origins, whether they be from Europe, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, or the Americas. The pictures go beyond our own communities to make connections to unfamiliar people doing familiar kinds of activities. Players collect pictures of people doing similar things - Working with clay, riding bicycles, or playing on swings for example. Children develop sorting and classifying skills while learning to appreciate ways we are simultaneously different and alike. Children make comparisons between their stereotypes and photographs or other information.

- A child says, "Ooh, she dresses like a Puerto Rican. Those bright colors look funny." The teacher responds, "Are all the Puerto Ricans in these pictures dressed in bright colors? Is it a stereotype or fact to say that all Puerto Ricans wear bright colors?" The teacher also uses a fabric match game to point out bright color combinations and asks, "Do we all like the same colors? Why can't someone wear clothes with bright colors?"

- A child brings in a restaurant place mat of a sleepy Mexican village, a childlike man in a great big hat, a donkey and some cactus. The child, repeating a stereotype he's heard, says, "Mexicans are lazy." A teacher asks, "Is this a stereotype? Do all Mexicans live in sleepy villages and spend their time sleeping under cactus?" To contradict the stereotype, use stories like *Amelia's Road*, or *Lights on the River* about the lives of Mexican farmworkers. Provide opportunities for additional research using photographs of Mexican cities or Mexicans hard at work in a car factory and ask, "Are Mexicans working in this factory lazy?" Children can see that the remark about Mexicans being lazy is a stereotype.

Cooperative Problem-Solving

To accept diverse perspectives and solve common problems related to bias, children need to develop cooperative skills rather than competitive ones. Following are some strategies that we have found helpful.

Using a picture collection with pairs of artwork or textile images, tape pictures to children's backs. They must each find another child with the same picture but they can't see their own. The game requires cooperation, as well as observation, descriptive language, and careful listening. By using artwork from diverse cultures, students can also develop an appreciation for different styles and color combinations.

We continually reevaluate activities and process. We tried musical chairs a new way, using an idea from *The Cooperative Sports and Games Book*. Instead of removing children from the game, the goal is to make space for everyone and share the seats as more chairs are removed. When I suggested this game the teacher was very skeptical saying, "It won't work." Well, at first she was right. The children were used to competing with each other. But after several tries the new way caught on and we had no more tears. Instead children were

enthusiastically saying, "You can share this seat with me, come sit with me, you can sit here." This spilled over into many other classroom activities as children felt the thrill of sharing rather than the tension and disappointment from competing.

We choose stories about cooperation, like *Swimmy* in which the little fish get together to protect themselves from the big fish. In *The Streets are Free* children organize to get a playground. The stories inspire discussions about the many ways people can challenge things they think are wrong and children apply the ideas to their own situations. One time, children were concerned about not getting enough food at lunch. They wrote letters to the food company and presented them at a meeting. The food service improved.

Some stories, such as *The Lorax*, make it appear that social change results from the goodwill of those in power or one individual. As described by Bill Bigelow in *Rethinking Schools* (4.3), *The Lorax* features an industrialist who stops polluting once he understands how harmful the poisons are to the land. The story can be used to question whether change really happens that way and to consider cooperative strategies by asking students: "Most company owners already know the impact of their factories on the land, air and people. What else could the Lorax have done? Were there other characters in *The Lorax* that could have worked together to solve the problem and if so, how?"

To encourage cooperative activities and problem-solving, I created a match game that illustrates and supports ways staff, families, and people in various communities cooperate in daily activities and challenge injustice. The pictures include photographs of children working together to make playdough, build a block structure, make a mural, bake a cake. The pictures also include a neighborhood mural about Latino concerns and scenes from a demonstration against budget cuts that would have taken away many families' daycare.

Developing the Curriculum: Reflection and Revision

On a daily basis, we reflect on the messages students are getting from the environment and ourselves. For example, without thinking a teacher made the same comment to a child she had heard when she was growing up, "Oh, don't mix all those beautiful colors together, it will come out all brown." A child responded, "Don't you like brown. My skin is brown." As soon as she said it the teacher realized that her comment countered her efforts to encourage students to see the beauty in all colors.

There is no list of the things we should and shouldn't say. It is a process of reflective teaching -reflecting on what students are learning about themselves and the world from our interaction with the classroom environment. Following are some examples of how we have reflected on issues of bias and modified our curriculum accordingly.

As educators, we go to see the most popular children's films to be aware of the messages children are getting. For example, the opening lyrics of the film *Aladdin* are: "I come from a land, from a faraway place, where the caravan camels roam. Where they cut off your ear if they don't like your face. It's barbaric, but hey, it's home." (Protests led to changing those lines in the video.)

In the film, Aladdin the good Arab, is associated with the color white and Caucasian features and the bad one, Jafar, with the color black and Semitic features. We ask children to make comparisons between themselves and several pictures of Arabs such as an Arab man reading to his daughter. "How are people in each of picture similar and different from people in our school or in your family?"

Even if children don't see the big films, they're bombarded with related toys, clothes, and advertisements wherever they go. Because it's almost impossible to avoid, we assist children in recognizing the bias so they can challenge it.

We make mistakes along the way. We learn from them and keep trying. In one class we made a puzzle chain that included pictures from Caribbean countries to make the classroom more welcoming to Caribbean immigrant students. When she saw the puzzle, a parent said, "These are great! But did you know that there are both rural villages and *cities* on the islands?" We realized that our limited image of the Caribbean as beaches and small towns was reflected in the puzzle. We added pictures of Caribbean cities.

I loved the story of *The Three Little Pigs* and suggested that it could be used during a theme on where we live because of the three different kinds of housing it introduces. After hearing the story of *The Three Little Pigs*, children saw a picture of a Yagua village in Peru in which the homes are made of trimmed tree limbs ("sticks") and built on stilts. One child remarked, "That's a stupid house."

I realized that *The Three Little Pigs* implies that stick homes are poorly built with laziness by a brother who just wants to dance and play, but brick homes are superior, strong, and built with intelligence and hard work.

To address the students' comments, we found pictures of a man in India working very hard in the hot sun to build a roof of sticks and the teacher asks, "Is the person building this house lazy? Do you think the house is strong? Could it be blown down by a wolf?" We also told a variation of *The Three Little Pigs* by replacing the wolf with an elephant. To protect their homes from the elephant's bursts of water from her trunk, the pigs in the homes of straw and sticks put them up on stilts. But the house of bricks floods. The pig in the brick house

must flee to his brother's house of sticks. Students see that different materials are appropriate for different settings and conditions.

We continue by making comparisons between houses in our own environment and those in different countries, all built to address similar conditions. For example, we share pictures of houses on the Massachusetts shore with pictures of a Yagua home. Both are built on stilts, one as protection from the tides and the other to make the most of river breezes. This begins to break down stereotypes about the inferiority of less industrialized societies.

We develop a lot of our lessons based on comments we hear from children. For example, a child sees a picture of a baby being carried in a basket and says, "Babies don't go in baskets." In response we try to encourage critical thinking and experimentation with the diverse ways familiar things can be done - such as carrying babies and bags. Pictures are provided showing the many ways people carry babies. Bags, poles, shawls, and baskets are available. A child tries using her head to support the strap of a bag and wrapping her doll on her back - learning there isn't one "regular" way but many different ways to accomplish a task.

A teacher hears a child say, "Everybody sit like Indians." To contradict the stereotype, the teacher uses a picture of a Navajo family in which people are sitting in many different ways including on a couch, a chair, cross legged on the floor, and open-legged, also on the floor. The teacher asks, "Do all Indians sit the same way?"

A match game can be created from carefully chosen, non-stereotypical images from magazines and books of Native people engaged in activities of daily life. Going to school, riding a bicycle, working as a doctor, and a grandmother and her granddaughter out walking are just a few examples. A variety of occupations

should also be reflected, such as a tree surgeon, a welder and a doctor. Children find cards that are the same. During play we talk about the pictures. The teacher asks, "Are you surprised that these Indians are skiing or playing football?" A child says, "They're not Indians. Real Indians wear feathers." The teacher responds, "Native people have important ceremonies called powwows when they wear special clothes including feathers. Do you have any clothes you wear for special celebrations?"

After several weeks of activities and discussion, a child who at first argued that Indians "do toooo" always wear feathers and live in tepees was playing the match game. I asked, "Who are these pictures o?" He said: "Indians." "But where are the feathers?" I asked. He replied, proud of his new knowledge, "They're for special ceremonies."

Working with Parents and Families

Parents and family members are important to the development of anti-bias curriculum. At Washington-Beech we try various strategies so that parents and families have opportunities to do the things listed below.

- Learn about the anti-bias curriculum approach.
- Experience activities children are doing in the classroom and teachers are using in staff development.
- Learn about their own biases.
- Share their values and expectations.
- Provide input and feedback.
- Share some of their strategies for dealing with bias.
- Learn ways to support their children as they begin to challenge bias.

Following are some of the ways that we have worked with parents on anti-bias education.

1. Family members explore issues of bias and anti-bias curricula at regularly scheduled family/ staff meetings. Below are two examples of activities that have been tried in our meetings.

Example: Select pictures from a storybook or the newspaper, xerox and distribute to small groups. Ask the groups to describe and discuss what they see. Comparisons are then made between their perceptions and those of the actual story.

The children's book *The Streets are Free* was used for one meeting. Parents examined a picture from the book of children playing in the street. Some said that it looked like the children were trying to make trouble and get in the way of traffic. Others felt they were in the street because they had no other place to play. In this particular group the need for considering diverse perspectives was further enforced by families' direct experience. They compared the story with what happens in regard to their own neighborhoods when "outsiders" report only the bad things they "see" so their neighborhoods get the reputation of being full of crime and drugs and not full of people helping each other, getting through school, working three jobs and raising wonderful children. This activity introduced to families how and why the school helps children recognize diverse perspectives.

Example: During a family/staff meeting in November, we viewed a filmstrip used both with staff and in the classroom called "Unlearning stereotypes about Native Americans" from The Council on Interracial Books for Children.

After the filmstrip, participants played a series of games based on familiar card games. These card games were also used with staff and in the classroom. The cards were all photographs of Native Americans in the present doing familiar activities such as reading to their children, playing football, doing the laundry,

and engaged in various occupations such as surgeon, teacher, logger, farmer. We compared these images to the stereotypes presented in the filmstrip and talked about where the stereotypes come from and the harm they do. Family members were indignant that they had never learned these things in school and that their older children were continuing to be exposed to stereotypes and "mis-education." They became enthusiastic supporters of the anti-bias approach. We talked about ways of supporting each other in the work to have all our lives and histories better represented and respected in public schools.

2. Family members critique materials, books and activities that deal with themes relevant to their own experiences.

Example: *How Long to America: A Thanksgiving Story* is written for young children about refugees fleeing their country by boat and the perilous journey they experience to get to the United States. Upon arrival they are welcomed with open arms and celebrate their good fortune with the Thanksgiving holiday.

I shared this book with a Haitian parent to get her opinion. She felt that the book was not appropriate as written because it did not portray the reality of the difficult conditions making it necessary for the family to leave their home country. Even worse, the book romanticized the families' arrival, showing them being welcomed when in fact many refugees face rejection. This is particularly true for Haitian refugees whose treatment by the United States even after a brutal coup led to international condemnation of U.S. refugee policy.

With this new knowledge, staff discussed how to edit the story by eliminating certain pictures or text, or changing some of the words so it could still be used to develop empathy for the difficulties classmates or community members have faced. They searched for other stories that would present other perspectives of the immigrant experience like *Friends from the Other Side*. In this book, a

Mexican child who has come into the United States is teased and threatened by children here. He is then befriended by a young girl.

3. Family members tell their own stories. At family/staff meetings, family stories can be shared as a way of:

- Learning about each other's experiences and values.
- Exploring similarities and differences.
- Thinking about our own school and life experiences and using them to think about what we want children to learn.
- Developing our own heroes.

Example: In one group we had been struggling to deal with December holidays in a way that would be anti-bias. We decided to do a theme on all the special things we celebrate. We didn't want to focus on December holidays but we didn't want to ignore them for many reasons. For example, we wanted children to learn that not everyone celebrates those holidays and those who do, do so in many different ways.

With families, we had a big discussion about the things we all liked and didn't like about the "December holiday syndrome." This discussion helped people see, from their own experiences, the reasons we had identified for not focusing so heavily on Christmas in particular.

We asked people to share stories of other things they celebrate in their families from homecomings to naming ceremonies to learning new things. Many of these stories were then shared with the children as part of the theme on special things we celebrate. A recommended book for this theme is *Welcoming Babies*. It celebrates the diversity of ways new babies are welcomed into families.

4. Family members can provide photographs for wall displays or big books illustrating all the different kinds of families represented in the class.

Photographs of the jobs family members do, such as women and men doing nontraditional activities can be added to photograph games.

5. Family members can provide music. Music children hear at home can be incorporated into classroom activities and nap time.

6. Families can provide translations of common phrases helpful in staff/child relationships, for favorite songs, and for various theme-related words and phrases.

7. Families can often share information about how discrimination affects them, their children and/or their community.

Example: "He said he'd help our people but he doesn't do what he said he would." Several Haitian children in one group cut out a photo-graph from the newspaper of President Clinton talking to a group of people. The children described the picture saying, "This is Bill Clinton. He's telling our people he will help us but he doesn't do what he says he would." When family members were told about this they came in and talked to staff about the coup in Haiti that ousted their beloved President Aristide and its effect on families and their children here. The discussion helped staff better understand what people were experiencing and how to strategize for the classroom.

8. Visits to the classroom. Although it is often difficult for parents and other family members who are working to come into class there are occasions when it is possible.

Example: Developing our own heroes. One group of parents wanted to redefine heroism from the qualities of a "superhero" to the qualities of heroes in our daily lives. Family members and friends were invited to share "hero" stories with the class. One grandmother came to school to share her recent success at having gone back to school and having just received her high school diploma.

Example: "But won't she die of starvation if she goes to Africa?" A Nigerian child and her family were planning a visit home. Children in the class who had seen various newscasts were afraid their classmate would die of starvation while visiting Nigeria. The child's father came to school to talk about what his home country was like and challenged some of the stereotypes the children were learning about Africa. I made a big book of African cities as a follow-up to his visit.

9. Receive assistance with issues of bias.

Example: "Won't my son be gay if he plays with dolls?" A parent came to me because her son wanted a doll after playing with dolls at school. She received a lot of resistance from friends and family who felt that dolls for boys were inappropriate. I asked her what kind of help she wanted from her husband in caring for her own kids and what kind of a father she hoped her son would become. I suggested that playing with dolls might be a way for him to practice. Feeling much more comfortable, the parent did decide to buy her son a doll. Later this parent was able to share her story with another parent who was struggling with the same situation.

Many teachers fear the resistance they will get from family members as they attempt to implement an anti-bias curriculum approach. It is true that this can be a very difficult process. Many family members have faced similar difficulties in trying to get teachers and school personnel to respect their race, culture, class, gender, physical abilities, and family composition.

Although sometimes it is difficult sharing information and experiences like those described above, really listening to peoples' concerns has proven to be extraordinarily helpful. Meeting as frequently as possible, having an open-door policy in between, and creating opportunities for small groups to talk and do activities together during the meetings generally has ensured that people speak up when opinions are expressed that they don't like. Parents and family members in the program rarely all agree with each other so when there is a disagreement there are usually adults other than staff who will argue for an anti-bias approach.

Conclusion

Education by itself cannot eliminate prejudice or injustice. But schools and families together can help develop proud and powerful children so that together we can all create a more just society.

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Unlearning Indian Stereotypes filmstrip by the Council on Interracial Books for Children (CIBC). The CIBC is no longer operating. Some school or public libraries have copies of the filmstrip which is dated but still useful.

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