

ANTI-BIAS CURRICULUM: TOOLS FOR EMPOWERING YOUNG CHILDREN

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INTRODUCTION

Children are aware very young that color, language, gender, and physical ability differences are connected with privilege and power. They learn by observing the differences and similarities among people and by absorbing the spoken and unspoken messages about those differences. Racism, sexism, and handicappism have a profound influence on their developing sense of self and others.

A 4-year-old boy, wanting to take over the wheel of a pretend bus, tells the child already there, "Girls can't be bus drivers."

"Ann can't play with us. She's a baby," a 3-year-old tells her teacher. Ann, 4 years old, uses a wheelchair.

A 2½-year-old Asian child refuses to hold the hand of a Black classmate. "It's dirty," he insists. At home, after bathing, he tells his mother, "Now my hair is white because it is clean."

Two 5-year-old White boys are playing in the sandbox. A Vietnamese boy asks to join them. "Nah, nah, you can't play with us, you Chinese," they chorus, pulling their eyes into a slant.

All children are harmed. On the one hand, struggling against bias that declares a person inferior because of gender, race, ethnicity, or disability

sucks energy from and undercuts a child's full development. On the other hand, learning to believe they are superior because they are White, or male, or able-bodied, dehumanizes and distorts reality for growing children, even while they may be receiving the benefits of institutional privilege.

Although there is a great deal more to know about how children "go about forming the intricate maze of knowledge and values" (Phillips, 1987, P. 5) that result in self-identity and attitudes, we know enough not to underestimate the power of children to perceive the negative messages in their world or the power of those messages to harm them. It is too dangerous for early childhood educators to take an "ostrich-in-the-sand" stance. As Carol Brunson Phillips (1987) points out,

It has been said that actions more often than not speak louder than words. And if this is so in the case of child-rearing, then we must be especially vigilant in our actions to shape the values children will attach as they learn about the people in their world. If we don't, they will learn by default the messages that are already prevalent out there and both we and they will contribute to perpetuating past ideas which we do not want to replicate in our children's future. (pp. 5-6)

Young children **can** begin the journey toward anti-bias identity and attitudes. Listen to the voices of four children who are participating in anti-bias curriculum:

A kindergarten teacher shows the children a magazine picture entitled "Brides of America." All of the women pictured are White. She asks, "What do you think of this picture?" Sophia responds, "That's a silly picture. My mom was a bride, and she's Mexican."

One morning 4½-year-old April arrives at the child care center hiding a stereotypic "Indian Warrior" figure. Kiyoshi, another 4½-year-old, says to her, "Don't let Suzanne see that. It will hurt her feelings." Suzanne, a staff member, is Cherokee-Cree.

Donald, 4½, playing at home with his Lego set, says to his mother, "You know, all of the Lego people in this set are White people. Why?"

After hearing the story of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott and role playing the bus sequence, 5-year-old Karen turns to her friend Tiffany and exclaims, her voice expressing both indignation and wonderment, "Tiffany, you wouldn't be able to sit next to me. I don't like that at all!"

Tiffany, whose skin is light brown, ponders whether she would have had to sit in the back of the bus. Is her skin dark enough? Finally, Tiffany firmly asserts, "I'm Black, and anyway all this is stupid. Everyone should sit wherever they want to. I would just get off the bus and tell them to keep their old bus."

Sophia, Kiyoshi, Donald, Karen, and Tiffany are learning to think critically and to speak up when they believe something is unfair. They are becoming empowered. They are participating in "the practice of freedom; the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" (Freire, 1970, p. 15).

The "practice of freedom" is fundamental to antibias education. Curriculum goals are to enable every child: to construct a knowledgeable, confident self-identity; to develop comfortable, empathetic, and just interaction with

diversity; and to develop critical thinking and the skills for standing up for oneself and others in the face of injustice.

The specific tasks for achieving these goals vary according to how each child is affected by the prevailing bias in U.S. society. Empowerment for children of color requires that they develop both a strong self-identity and a proud and knowledgeable group identity to withstand the attacks of racism. In contrast, White children's task is to develop a positive identity without White ethnocentrism and superiority. Girls need to learn that they can be competent in all areas and can make choices about their lives. Boys need to learn competence without also learning to feel and act superior to girls. The developmental tasks of children with disabilities include learning to use alternative abilities and to gain skills for countering societal practices that sabotage their opportunities for growth. Able-bodied children's tasks include learning ease with differently able people and how to resist stereotyping.

Anti-bias curriculum embraces an educational philosophy as well as specific techniques and content. It is value based: Differences are good; oppressive ideas and behaviors are not. It sets up a creative tension between respecting differences and not accepting unfair beliefs and acts. It asks teachers and children to confront troublesome issues rather than covering them up. An anti-bias perspective is integral to all aspects of daily classroom life.

Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools For Empowering Young Children is not a recipe book. Using its principles and methodology, teachers (and parents who choose to use the book) must recreate anti-bias curriculum in their setting in relation to specific groups of children and families. Therefore, developmental information about children, illustrated by their comments, questions, and

behavior, supplements suggested activities so that the teacher can understand the "why" as well as the "what" and "how" of the activities.

It is not always easy to implement anti-bias curriculum on a regular basis, whenever the appropriate moment pops up. Few early childhood educators have been prepared to talk with children about race, ethnicity, and disabilities. The situation is similar to the discomfort adults felt in the past when responding to the question "Where do babies come from?" Now many more early childhood teachers know how to address that question.

Like children, grown-ups must learn by doing: by making mistakes, and thinking about it, and trying again. Anti-bias teaching requires critical thinking and problem solving by both children and adults. And, because at heart anti-bias curriculum is about social change, it may meet with resistance -from other teachers, from parents, from administrators-and from one's own ambivalences and discomforts. Nevertheless, it is worth the hard work. Through anti-bias curriculum, teachers enable every child to achieve the ultimate goal of early childhood education: the development of each child to her or his fullest potential.

References

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: The Seabury Press.

Phillips, C. B. (1987). Foreword. In B. Neugebauer (Ed.), *Alike and different: Exploring our humanity with young children* (pp. 5-6). Redmond, WA: Exchange Press.

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