

Why an Anti-Bias Curriculum?

BY LOUISE DERMAN-SPARKS

“Why can't we just let children be? Children don't know anything about prejudice or stereotypes. They don't notice what color a person is. If we just leave them alone and let them play with each other, then everything will be fine,” argue many parents and early childhood teachers. Many adults assume that children are unaffected by the biases in U.S. society. Nevertheless, what we know about children's identity and attitude development challenges this comfortable assumption. Research data reveal that:

- Children begin to notice differences and construct classificatory and evaluative categories very early

- There are overlapping but distinguishable developmental tasks and steps in the construction of identity and attitudes
- Societal stereotyping and bias influence children's self-concept and attitudes toward others

Data about how young children first develop awareness about different physical abilities are still sparse, but do suggest that the same three points apply. Awareness of other types of disabilities seems to appear later than the pre-school years.¹

Children construct their identity and attitudes through the interaction of three factors:

- Experience with their bodies
- Experience with their social environments
- Their cognitive developmental stage

Thus, their growing ideas and feelings are not simply direct reflections either of cultural patterns or of innate, biological structures.

Phyllis Katz, writing about racial awareness, suggests that from 2 through 5 or 6, children (1) make early observations of racial clues; (2) form rudimentary concepts; (3) engage in conceptual differentiation; (4) recognize the irrevocability of cues (cues remain constant—skin color will not change); (5) consolidate group concepts; and (6) elaborate group concepts. Evaluative judgments begin to influence this process at step 2.² Kohlberg's stages of gender identity development suggest a similar developmental sequence to Katz.³ Marguerite Alejandro-Wright also finds that racial awareness begins in the preschool years, but cautions that full understanding occurs much later (age 10 or 11). She states that "knowledge of racial classification evolves from a vague, undifferentiated awareness of skin color differences to knowledge of the cluster of physical-biological attributes associated with racial membership and eventually to a social understanding of racial categorization."⁴

Even Toddlers Are Aware

Let's look briefly at what these developmental patterns mean. During their second year of life, children begin to notice gender and racial differences. They may also begin noticing physical disabilities, although so far indications are that this may begin a year or two later. By 2½ years of age, children are learning the appropriate use of gender labels (girl, boy) and learning color names, which they begin to apply to skin color.

By 3 years of age (and sometimes even earlier), children show signs of being influenced by societal norms and biases and may exhibit "pre-prejudice" toward others on the basis of gender or race or being differently abled.

Between 3 and 5 years of age, children try to figure out what are the essential attributes of their selfhood, what aspects of self remain constant.

They wonder:

Will I always be a girl or a boy?

If I like to climb trees do I become a boy?

If I like to play with dolls, do I become a girl?

What gives me my skin color?

Can I change it?

If I interact with a child who has a physical disability, will I get it?

Will I always need a prosthesis in place of my arm?

During this time, children need a lot of help sorting through the many experiences and variables of identity as they journey the path to self-awareness.

By 4 or 5 years of age, children not only engage in gender-appropriate behavior defined by socially prevailing norms; they also reinforce it among themselves without adult intervention.⁵ They use racial reasons for refusing to interact with children different from themselves and exhibit discomfort, and rejection of differently abled people. The degree to which 4-year-olds have already internalized stereotypic gender roles, racial bias, and fear of the differently abled forcefully points out the need for anti-bias education with young children.

What Is Our Responsibility?

Early childhood educators have a serious responsibility to find ways to prevent and counter the damage before it becomes too deep. Selma Greenberg forcefully argues for active intervention to remedy the cognitive, social-emotional, and physical deficits brought about by constraining gender stereotypes that limit growing children's access to specific areas of experience:

When they enter an early childhood environment, children are more open to friendships with members of the other sex, and more open to non-stereotypic play experiences than they are when they leave. Clearly, while the early childhood environment cannot be held solely responsible for this biased development, it cannot be held totally guiltless either.⁶

Greenberg suggests that early childhood teachers re-evaluate existing early childhood curricula and develop ways to prevent and remediate the developmental deficiencies created by gender stereotyping.

Other researchers also conclude that active intervention by teachers is necessary if children are to develop positive attitudes about people of different races and physical abilities. Contact with children of various backgrounds is *not* enough. For example, Shirley Cohen states that “in the absence of a variety of supports, direct contact can exacerbate mildly negative reactions.”⁷ Moreover, Mara Sapon-Shevin finds that “interventions not handling the direct confrontation of difference seem doomed, or do little more than bring temporary changes in the patterns of social interaction and acceptance within integrated groups.” Consequently, “mainstreaming should not be viewed as an effort to teach children to minimize or ignore difference, but as an effort to teach them *positive, appropriate* response to these differences (p. 24).”⁸

Mary Goodman’s research about young children’s racial attitudes adds further substantiation to the position that direct contact is not enough. She documented numerous examples of biased behavior and feelings as she watched children play “freely” with each other in interracial, “nonbiased” preschool programs.⁹ Catherine Emihovich, looking at children’s social relationships in two integrated kindergartens, found that structure and teaching methodology significantly affected the amount and quality of children’s interracial peer interaction.¹⁰ Even though both teachers espoused pro-integration attitudes, interracial interaction was high and positive in one classroom but low and negative in the other.

In sum, if children are to grow up with the attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary for effective living in a complex, diverse world, early childhood programs must actively challenge the impact of bias on children’s development.

Common Questions and Answers About an Anti-Bias Curriculum

Won’t an anti-bias curriculum make things worse?

“If you point out differences, won’t children start seeing differences they haven’t been noticing?” “If you talk about stereotypes, won’t you be teaching them things they would otherwise not learn?” “Isn’t it better to emphasize the positive than the negative (how we are different)?”

Concern about addressing differences arises from a mistaken notion of the sources of bias. *It*

is not differences in themselves that cause the problems, but how people respond to differences. It is the response to difference that an anti-bias curriculum addresses. If teachers and parents don’t talk about differences, as well as similarities, then they can’t talk about cultural heritages, or about the struggles of groups and individuals to

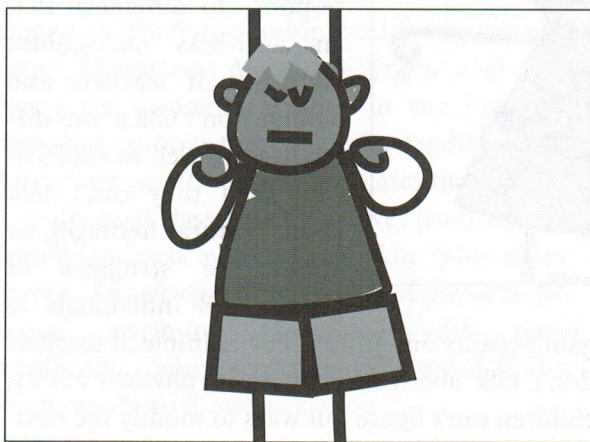
gain equality and justice. For example, if teachers don’t talk about differences in physical ability, children can’t figure out ways to modify the environment so that the differently abled child can be as independent as possible. Similarly, celebrating Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday means little unless teachers talk about his role in organizing millions of people to challenge racism.

The question “Won’t an anti-bias curriculum make things worse?” comes out of a “colorblind” or “color-denial” philosophy of how to deal with racial differences. This attitude assumes that differences are insignificant and is exemplified in statements such as “We are all the same” and “A child is a child. I don’t notice if they are brown, purple, or green.” Child development research is frequently based on a colorblind position and therefore makes the serious error of assuming that the issues of development are the same for all children and that they all share similar contexts for growth.

Colorblindness arose as a progressive argument against racial bigotry, which ranks racial



differences, putting “white” on top. However well-intentioned, this is not an adequate response to children’s developmental realities. It has been a soothing view for whites, while blatantly ignoring the daily experience of people of color. It establishes the white experience as the norm, and the differences in others’ experience become unimportant. It promotes tokenism and a denial of the identity of persons outside the mainstream. Within it, curricula need not address the fact of diversity nor the specifics of a child’s identity. Paradoxically, however, people espousing a colorblind position do often recognize the need to bring children of diverse backgrounds together so that, by playing with each other, they can discover that “we are all the same.”



“I don’t like Indians. They shoot bows and arrows at people and burn their houses,” a 4-year-old informs his class after a visit to Disneyland. “Oh, those aren’t real Indians,” explains his white teacher. “Real Indians are nice people. They live in houses and wear clothes just like us.”

The teacher obviously means well. But, does the “colorblind” teacher’s explanation mean that Native Americans who don’t live “just like us” (i.e., “just like whites”) are not nice people?

Ultimately, the colorblind position results in denial of young children’s awareness of differences and to nonconfrontation of children’s misconceptions, stereotypes, and discriminatory behavior, be they about race, culture, gender, or different physical abilities. Many caring parents

and early childhood teachers make mistakes of this kind. In contrast, an anti-bias approach teaches children to understand and comfortably interact with differences, to appreciate all people’s similarities through the different ways they are human, and to recognize and confront ideas and behaviors that are biased.

In an environment in which children feel free to ask questions and make comments about disabilities, gender, and race, there will be an increase in adults’ and children’s interactions over issues of bias. Sometimes children will test limits set by teachers or parents on unacceptable biased behavior. This does not mean that directly addressing bias is a mistake; it means that children understand that bias is an important issue and are testing to find out how clear and how firm the rules/limits are, as they do when adults set other types of behavioral boundaries.

How does an anti-bias curriculum differ from a multicultural curriculum? The approach of choice among early childhood professionals today is multiculturalism. Its intent is positive: Let’s teach children about each other’s cultures, so they will learn to respect each other and not develop prejudice. However, deterioration into a *tourist curriculum* often keeps this approach from accomplishing its intent.

A tourist curriculum is likely to teach about cultures through celebrations and through such “artifacts” of the culture as food, traditional clothing, and household implements. Multicultural activities are special events in the children’s week, separate from the ongoing daily curriculum. Thus, Chinese New Year is the activity that teaches about Chinese Americans; a dragon is constructed, and parents are asked to come to school wearing “Chinese” clothing to cook a “Chinese” dish with the children, who have the opportunity on this one day to try eating with chopsticks. Mexican American life is introduced through Cinco de Mayo, another celebration. Indeed, some multicultural curricula are written in the form of calendars, suggesting foods, crafts, and perhaps a dance to do on specific days. Paradoxically, the dominant, Anglo-European culture is not studied as such. Christmas is not perceived as an “ethnic” holiday coming from

specific cultural perspectives, but is treated as a universal holiday.

The tourist curriculum is both patronizing, emphasizing the “exotic” differences between cultures, and trivializing, dealing not with the real-life daily problems and experiences of different peoples, but with surface aspects of their celebrations and modes of entertainment. Children “visit” non-white cultures and then “go home” to the daily classroom, which reflects only the dominant culture. The focus on holidays, although it provides drama and delight for both children and adults, gives the impression that that is all “other” people—usually people of color—do. What it fails to communicate is real understanding.

Patricia Ramsey highlights other problems that may characterize the multicultural curriculum:

- It frequently focuses on information about other countries—learning about Japan or Mexico—rather than learning about Japanese Americans or exploring the diversity of culture among Mexican Americans.
- It may be standardized, with the assumption that there should or can be one set of goals and activities for all settings, ignoring the importance of taking into account the backgrounds of the children, their experience or lack of experience with people from other groups, and their attitudes toward their own and other groups.
- Teachers may assume that children only need a multicultural curriculum if there is diversity in the classroom. This seems to be an issue particularly for teachers in all-white classrooms, when, in fact, white children may be the most in need of learning about the differences that exist in American society.¹¹

An anti-bias curriculum incorporates the positive intent of the multicultural curriculum and uses some similar activities, while seeking to avoid the dangers of a tourist approach. At the same time, an anti-bias curriculum provides a more inclusive education: (a) it addresses more than cultural diversity by including gender and differences in physical abilities; (b) it is based on children’s developmental tasks as they construct identity and attitudes; and

(c) it directly addresses the impact of stereotyping bias and discriminatory behavior in young children’s development and interactions.

Is it developmentally appropriate to openly raise these anti-bias issues of injustice with young children?

Certainly, they have lots of experience with the day-to-day problems and conflicts generated by their own differences. They have lots of experience with problem solving “fair” or “not fair.” They have the capacity for expressing hurt and enjoying empathy and fairness. Adults often want to defer children’s exposure to the unpleasant realities of bias, to create a protected world of childhood. By so doing, however, they leave children to solve troublesome problems by themselves.

The anti-bias curriculum should be grounded in a developmental approach. In order to develop activities that respond effectively to children’s specific interests and concerns, it is first necessary to understand what a child is asking, wants to know, or means by a question or comment. Moreover, unless the curriculum consistently takes into account children’s perspectives, it may become oppressive to them. They must be free to ask questions about any subject, to use their own ideas in problem solving, to engage in real dialogue with adults, to make choices, and to have some say in their daily school life. If we are to facilitate children’s sense of self-esteem, critical thinking, and ability to stand up for themselves and others, then our methodology must allow them to experience their intelligence and power as having a constructive effect on their world.

I already have so much to do, how am I going to find time to learn the necessary skills and add anti-bias activities to my curriculum?

A teacher has no choice if she or he wants to enable children to develop fully. The point to remember is that an anti-bias approach is *integrated into* rather than *added onto* an existing curriculum. Looking at a curriculum through an anti-bias lens affects everything a teacher does. Much classroom work will continue, some activities will be modified, some eliminated, some new ones created. Beginning is hard, not because of new activities, but because teachers have to re-evaluate what they have been

doing. This means being self-conscious and learning by trial and error. After a while—six months, a year—it becomes impossible to teach without an anti-bias perspective. ■

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