Introduction

Embracing Social Justice in Early Childhood Education

BY ANN PELO

There's a small town in Italy with an international reputation for its early childhood programs. The teaching and learning that happens in their schools is certainly compelling—but more compelling is the story of how the community came together to create an early childhood education system. The town of Reggio Emilia, like much of Italy, was devastated by World War II; as the war ended, the townspeople were fiercely determined to create a new culture, a culture in which the fascism that had taken hold of Italy in the decades leading up to the war would find no foothold. The citizens of Reggio Emilia were clear about how to begin this work of culture-building: they would create schools for young children.

Parents occupied an abandoned building near the town square, demanding that the city government make that building available to them for their first school, while the teachers and children set up school each day on the courthouse steps where the city officials would be sure to encounter them. Parents and teachers didn't set out to create private schools available to a few; they wanted publicly funded schools, open to all families in the community, organized around the values of critical thinking and joyful collaboration. One of the founders of the schools, Loris Malaguzzi, explained the vision of the community this way: "We are part of an ongoing story of men and women, ideals intact, who realize that history can be changed, and that it is changed starting with the future of children."[1]

This story has resonance for us today. It reminds us that early childhood education is a political act, and that it necessarily involves values and vision. Early childhood is the time in our lives when we develop our core dispositions—the habits of thinking that shape how we live; our work as early childhood educators is to nurture dispositions in young children towards empathy, ecological consciousness, engaged inquiry, and collaboration. These dispositions undergird just and equitable communities; they are at the heart of activism and in the hearts of activists. Early childhood educators must believe, with the founders of the schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, that history can be changed, and that our work is to contribute to that change. That is the premise of this book: quality early childhood education is inseparable from social justice teaching and ecological education. It is essential to rethink early childhood education, and it is essential to ensure that quality early education—programs for children from their first months through the primary grades—is offered to all children.

Fostering Social and Ecological Dispositions in Young Children

Early childhood programs that put social justice and ecological teaching front and center share particular characteristics.

They prioritize anti-bias, culturally sensitive teaching and learning. Teachers call attention to the ways in which people are different and the ways in which people are the same, honoring individual and group identity. They intentionally introduce issues of fairness and unfairness, and coach children to think critically and to take action. Teachers learn about children's family and cultural identities and integrate those identities into the daily life of the classroom, at the same time as they acknowledge the

ways in which their own cultural identities shape their teaching.

They are organized around play and ample time for exploration. Teachers create time and provide open-ended materials for children's imaginative, self-directed play. They talk with families, with other teachers, and with community members about the value of play for children's healthy development and for their learning.

They use curriculum approaches that are responsive to children's developmental and intellectual pursuits. Teachers pay attention to children's play and conversations, watching for the developmental themes, compelling questions, understandings, and misunderstandings expressed in their play. They use what they observe to develop curricula that challenge children to think deeply and to explore collaboratively.

They cultivate a sense of place—of belonging to a particular patch of earth and sky—and a connection to the earth and its creatures. Teachers take the children outdoors and bring the natural world into the classroom, inviting the children to engage their senses and their minds as they come to know and care about—and to care for—the place where they are spending their days.

They emphasize children's social-emotional and dispositional learning. Teachers seek to cultivate in children the disposition to pay attention to their own and others' emotions and needs. They emphasize the importance of collaboration and offer children coaching and practice about understanding multiple perspectives. Teachers create opportunities for children to think critically and engage intellectually with ideas and with each other—and to take action based on their critical thinking.

They learn from and stand with children's families. Teachers recognize that they have much to learn about children from their families, about children's particular ways of being in the world, about their family rituals and rhythms, and about their cultural identities. As they learn from families about their strengths and challenges, they can then offer themselves as allies to families, in ways specific to individual families and in the arena of broader community activism and justice efforts.

They advocate for children, families, and early childhood workers. Teachers acknowledge the broader social conditions that impact the lives of children, families, and teachers. They take action—speaking out in their community, writing letters to news media and to legislators, participating in demonstrations. They know that their activism is an extension of their teaching, contributing to social justice efforts and modeling for children what it is to live in the world as a change-maker.

This is early childhood education at its best: teachers, children, and families opening themselves to each other and to the earth in ways that invite joyful play, collaborative inquiry, thoughtful observation, and deep caring that gives rise to action. These ways of being are a foundation for children's lives in community. They foster the social and emotional well-being that is at the heart of just communities, and they strengthen the intellectual development that is at the heart of academic learning.

Challenges to Early Childhood Education

This vision for top-notch early childhood programs is a stark contrast to the cultural belief system that now threatens early childhood education. Early childhood, we're told, is a time to get children ready for school and for work. Play is nice, but school is about learning and skill development, and that means memorization and drill and testing.

Pressure from federal policy has pushed assessment-driven, academic instruction into programs for the youngest children: most federal- and state-funded programs use standardized, scripted curriculum packages that emphasize literacy and numeracy at the cost of open time for play, and administer a barrage of tests to the 4- and 5-year-old children enrolled in their programs. This emphasis on a "teacher-proof" drill-and-skill curriculum communicates to families that early childhood ought to be about "school and test readiness," defined in the narrowest and most hollow academic terms. Families, in turn, are confused: should they accede to this vision for their children's earliest years, hoping to insure

their children's school success, or press for a more generous and spacious experience for their young children, anchored in their intuition that childhood ought to be about more than literacy drills and tests?

Families carry their confusion to teachers, looking for reassurance that their children will be ready for school—and for the tests they're sure to encounter there. Teachers are squeezed between this push towards early academics and their commitment to children's right to play and to meaningful curricula anchored in their lives and questions. And teachers are weighed down by the emphasis on narrowly technical teaching centered on discrete skills, which stands in stark contrast to the intellectually engaging work of reflective study and inquiry that is teaching at its best and most sustaining. Teachers face wrenching pressure to abandon their desire to be reflective, responsive educators who think critically about their teaching and the children's learning, and, instead, to organize their teaching around assessments and scripted curricula.

In addition to this daily intellectual and emotional challenge, childcare teachers and caregivers work with the constant strain of low wages and no health care or retirement. Their work is dismissed as unskilled, jobs that anyone can fill—an attitude born of the view that early childhood work is women's work. Caring for and educating very young children comes naturally to women, the thinking goes: women do that work by instinct, and have been doing it forever—it certainly doesn't require any particular education or professional development. That attitude has been institutionalized in the field of early childhood education: there are only minimal requirements for childcare workers in most states—typically, passing a criminal background check and having a high school diploma. No specialized training, no internships, no particular experience needed.

The attitude that "anyone can do this work" is one reason for the current emphasis on "teacher-proof" curricula. Early childhood agencies provide scripted curricula in place of professional development for early childhood educators. This communicates a startling disrespect for teachers' ability to generate engaging, thoughtful, instructive experiences for children without a script to follow, and drives people from the field who are eager to engage intellectually with children, families, and colleagues.

Given these stresses, it's no wonder that the annual national turnover rate in child care stands at around 40 percent.[2] And that turnover compounds the challenges that early childhood education faces. Children and families are shaken each time a cherished caregiver leaves; the effort of developing trust in new caregivers becomes a too-familiar detour away from learning. And teachers, too, are shaken as their colleagues come and go; they face a daunting uphill struggle to create a community of thinkers anchored by a shared understanding of the work. The disruption created by teacher turnover is felt especially in impoverished communities, where teachers typically earn rock-bottom wages and struggle with an appalling lack of resources and a corresponding high degree of stress.

Early childhood education is in a precarious situation.

We believe that social justice and ecological teaching offers a much-needed vision for early childhood education in the face of the challenges weighing on the field and confronting the planet.

Social Justice and Ecological Teaching Is Responsive Teaching

Social justice teaching grows from children's urgent concerns. If we listen to the themes embedded in children's play and conversations, we hear questions about identity and belonging, about community and relationships and fairness: *Can boys be part of the game about the kitty family, or just girls? The bad guy is the one with brown skin and a funny way of talking, right? Can we have two moms in this family?* And, in their everyday negotiations, children are working to make sense of the ways in which people are the same and different: *Your lunch has food in it that I've never seen before. Why don't you have a dad in your family? You have Easter at your house, but I don't. Why is your skin a different color than your mom's skin?* Children are fundamentally concerned with making sense of their social and cultural world; teachers and caregivers can join them in this

pursuit, guiding them towards understandings rooted in accurate and empathetic understandings—or we can leave them to figure out their questions on their own, coming to conclusions based on misinformation and cultural bias. When we engage with children in questions about identity and equity, we participate in the work of reshaping our society.

Ecological teaching grows from an understanding that current ways of living on this planet are unsustainable and destructive and must be replaced. Young children are forming the fundamental understandings that will shape how they engage with the earth. Will they learn that the earth is a resource to be used and abused by humans with little attention to the price of that use, or will they grow a more intimate relationship with the earth that ranks the environment high on the list of "things to consider" in every decision? Our planet cannot afford another generation of children to grow up disregarding the earth, the sky, the water, and all who live in them. And children cannot afford to grow up ignorant of the earth and its ways, displaced from their ecological home terrain by lack of intimate knowledge.

Changing the Discussion about the Purpose of Early Education

Social justice and ecological teaching relocates the meaning of early childhood education from school readiness to social and emotional learning and intellectual development. It offers another way to understand childhood, reminding us that this is a time when children ought to be developing core social and ecological dispositions rather than cramming for the tests ahead. Social justice and ecological teaching reframes our work as educators from a too-heavy focus on academic skills that actually diminishes the capacity for deep learning, and offers, instead, an emphasis on thoughtful observation, reflection, and planning on behalf of children's dispositional and developmental learning. This is teaching at its best: responsive to children's developmental questions and pursuits and attentive to building a sturdy

intellectual foundation for the academic work that children will encounter in later schooling.

In these ways, social justice and ecological teaching becomes a form of resistance to the view that early childhood education is unskilled work, important only inasmuch as it prepares children to recite the alphabet, identify colors, and count to 10. Social justice and ecological teaching is intellectually and emotionally engaging work; it sustains, rather than drains, teachers and caregivers. It asks that teachers listen closely to the social and cultural questions embedded in children's play, and that they think carefully about how best to engage the children around those questions. It demands that teachers stay present to the children's developing understandings about the world and themselves in order to best support their learning. This is a far remove from scripted curricula and preplanned lessons; it is authentic teaching—and it is the kind of teaching our society urgently needs. We need teachers who are engaged and curious, who create in their classrooms cultures of deep listening, compassionate perspective-taking, and critical thinking. We need teachers who, in the words of Terry Tempest Williams, cultivate "democracy as a way of life: the right to be educated, to think, discuss, dissent, create, and act, acting in imaginative and revolutionary ways."[3]

Our Work Extends Beyond the Classroom

When we embrace social justice and ecological teaching, we participate in changing history, "starting with the future of children." But the challenges we face and the vision we hold of just communities carry us beyond our teaching practices into the arena of broader activism.

We can resist and subvert assessment-driven, standards-based curricula in our daily teaching, but our individual efforts won't safeguard children's right to education that is anchored by their questions, passions, and pursuits. There is a growing movement to remake the government mandates that locate drills and tests at the heart of education; until recently, that movement hasn't much involved early childhood educators. Now, though, Head Start directors, community childcare

leaders, administrators in state-funded preschools, and other early childhood educators are coming together with colleagues in elementary and secondary education to strengthen the movement against packaged curricula and assessments.

The push to create universal prekindergarten (UPK) programs offers another entry point for activism on behalf of children, families, and teachers. Universal prekindergarten is a movement to provide preschool programs to all 4-year-old children as preparation for the academic work that they'll encounter in kindergarten; it's a state-funded drive—each state legislates its own mandates for prekindergarten programs. Universal prekindergarten offers increased access to early education for low-income families, something to celebrate given the large numbers of children who currently aren't served by affordable, quality early childhood programs in their communities. Yet UPK classrooms typically adopt (often by the mandate of funding agencies) standardized curricula characterized by rote learning and skill-and-drill teaching. This compromises the assertion that these are top-quality programs. And it is especially problematic for low-income communities most deserving of education that fosters critical thinking and social awareness: as children's opportunities seem to be expanding because of the increased access that UPK offers, the type of education that they're offered is narrow and intellectually numbing. In addition to these contradictions, UPK threatens to disrupt community-based childcare programs, as families and teachers exit these programs to move into UPK classrooms. UPK is in its infancy; this is the time for concerned educators, parents, and community members to get involved in shaping how it unfolds.

Another challenge that carries us into action beyond our daily teaching arises from the ongoing discrimination that early childhood educators face. In the late 1970s, teachers and caregivers of young children began to organize in protest of the unlivable wages and lack of benefits that characterize early childhood education. They created the Child Care Employees Project, a national effort to draw attention to poor working conditions in early care and education and to jumpstart initiatives that would make early childhood education a sustain-able career. The Child Care Employees Project gave rise to the Worthy Wage Campaign, as early childhood educators across the country took part in creative, bold acts of protest and challenge, and began to form and join unions in an effort to improve working conditions. That effort has been folded into the current Center for the Child Care Workforce, a project of the American Federation of Teachers. In the three decades since this movement began, important ground has been won—and new struggles have emerged. There is work for us to do beyond our classrooms, stepping into the terrain of broad social action aimed at transforming the working conditions for early childhood educators.

There is an even broader arena of social concerns to acknowledge. Inadequate health care, immobilizing poverty, unstable housing, lack of access to decent nutrition—the best early childhood programs that we can imagine won't fix these broader social conditions. There is much work to be done, and all of it is interconnected. Caring about young children means caring about—and taking action to improve—the social conditions that shape their lives and determine their opportunities.

When we embrace a vision of social justice and ecological teaching in early childhood education, we join a lineage of educators who are intent on changing history, participating in the "ongoing story of men and women, ideals intact," who understand that how we engage with the youngest children in our communities speaks volumes about the kind of society in which we hope to live. ■

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Language Matters

BY ANN PELO

The words we use to describe early childhood programs come layered with meanings. "Child care," "preschool," "prekindergarten"—each of these conveys social and political ideas and images, and each is problematic.

"Child care" is an umbrella that overarches licensed and unlicensed family childcare homes, childcare centers, and a plethora of informal arrangements among family members. Some folks say "day care," though that's becoming less common, as caregivers remind us, tersely, "We take care of children; it's child care, not day care." Both phrases—child care and day care—are commonly used dismissively, shorthand for bare-bones, minimal quality caregiving: "It's just child care; they don't do much for kids' learning."

To counter the sting of that disrespect for their work, childcare providers increasingly refer to themselves as "teachers"; it's painful to have one's work patronizingly dismissed as unskilled babysitting. And "early childhood education" is becoming increasingly common—we use it throughout this book—as people who work with the youngest children seek to raise up the social and political image of their field by calling attention to the significant teaching and learning that happens in programs for young children. ("Early childhood education" is in itself problematic, though, as it highlights "education" but leaves out "caregiving"; this distancing from the caregiving aspect of work with young children implies that education happens separately from caregiving, and is more important than caregiving, and, so, contributes to the second-class status accorded to that traditional women's work.)

There are other layers of meaning to "child care." In its origins and, still, at its core, child care represents a political commitment to provide structural support for women to pursue work for pay, in addition to their parenting. Child care was fought for and hard won by feminist activists. Now, that meaning has been distorted by welfare laws that require women to leave their children in inexpensive (and, too often, poor quality) childcare programs in order to work for pay, as part of their "welfare-to-work" benefits.

"Preschool" typically refers to part-time programs that emphasize children's social learning through group interactions. Increasingly, these programs also explicitly focus on school preparation—becoming, literally, pre-school programs. Because they have limited hours (often three or four hours a day), preschools often offer "extended care," child care for children whose parents aren't able to pick them up at the end of the preschool session. Usually, the extended care staff is paid less than the preschool staff, because they're seen as "just doing child care" rather than "teaching."

The word "preschool" carries an explicit, and troubling, meaning: it frames childhood as a time before, a time of preparation for some later context. But childhood is worthy in its own right, and the lives of young children hold a richness of play, emotion, relationships, questions, and exploration that deserves to be honored and celebrated.

"Prekindergarten" is a near-cousin to "preschool." It makes explicit an orientation to future schooling and to the values of academic learning. There are prekindergarten programs for affluent families,

aimed at preparing children for academic success in private schools. And there are publicly funded prekindergarten programs for low-income families, aimed at preparing children to navigate the terrain of public schools and, minimally, not to fail (often confounded with the idea of "success" for these children). These publicly funded prekindergarten programs have been the testing ground for standards-based curricula and assessments in early childhood education.

"Head Start" was the prototype for publicly funded prekindergarten programs. It grew out of the War on Poverty and was created with an overt political acknowledgment that families living in poverty had fewer resources to offer their children to prepare them for school success than families who were economically privileged—and that the hierarchy that grew from that was wrong. But it's an easy slide from a strong political critique of the social and economic class system in our country to a patronizing, racist, classist attitude that "those children" need extra help, need a head start, if they are to keep up with "the rest of us." In everyday parlance, "Head Start" connotes a deficit understanding of poor children and of children of color.

Each of these ways of describing early childhood programs is problematic, but each can be reclaimed and used to honor children and their caregivers and teachers. Jonathan Kozol, in his book *Ordinary Resurrections*, reminds us to keep childhood at the heart of our programs, however we describe those programs:

> Childhood ought to have at least a few entitlements that aren't entangled with utilitarian considerations. One of them should be the right to a degree of unencumbered satisfaction in the sheer delight and goodness of existence itself. Another ought to be the confidence of knowing that one's presence on this earth is taken as an unconditioned blessing that is not contaminated by the economic uses that a nation does or does not have for you. ■

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Part I

What Color Is Beautiful?

BY ALEJANDRO SEGURA-MORA

Most of my kindergarten students have already been picked up by their parents. Two children still sit on the mat in the cafeteria lobby, waiting. Occasionally, one of them stands to look through the door's opaque windows to see if they can make out a parent coming. Ernesto*, the darkest child in my class, unexpectedly shares in Spanish, "Maestro, my mom is giving me pills to turn me white."

"Is that right?" I respond, also in Spanish. "And why do you want to be white?"

"Because I don't like my color," he says.

"I think your color is very beautiful and you are beautiful as well," I say. I try to conceal how his comment saddens and alarms me, because I want to encourage his sharing.

"I don't like to be dark," he explains.

His mother, who is slightly darker than he, walks in the door. Ernesto rushes to take her hand and leaves for home.

Childhood Memories

Ernesto's comment takes me back to an incident in my childhood. My mom is holding me by the hand, my baby brother in her other arm, my other three brothers and my sister following along. We are going to church and I am happy. I skip all the way, certain that I have found a solution to end my brothers' insults.

"You're a monkey," they tell me whenever they are mad at me. I am the only one in my family with

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curly hair. In addition to "monkey," my brothers baptize me with other derogatory names—such as Simio (Ape), Chineca (a twisted and distorted personification of being curly, and even more negative by the feminization with an "a" at the end), and Urco, the captain of all apes in the television program *The Planet of the Apes.*

As we enter the church, my mom walks us to the front of the altar to pray before the white saints, the crucified white Jesus, and his mother. Before that day, I hadn't bought into the God story. After all, why would God give a child curly hair? But that day there is hope. I close my eyes and pray with a conviction that would have brought rain to a desert.

"God, if you really exist, please make my hair straight," I pray. "I hate it curly and you know it's hard. So at the count of three, please take these curls and make them straight. One, two, three."

With great suspense I open my eyes. I reach for my hair. Anticipating the feel of straight hair, I stroke my head, only to feel my curls. Tears sting my eyes. As I head for one of the benches, I whisper, "I knew God didn't exist."

For Ernesto, the pill was his God; for me, God was my pill. I wonder how Ernesto will deal with the failure of his pill.

A Teachable Moment

I can't help but wonder how other teachers might have dealt with Ernesto's comments. Would they have ignored him? Would they have dismissed him with a, "Stop talking like that!" Would they have felt sorry for him because they agree with him?

As teachers, we are cultural workers, whether we are aware of it or not. If teachers don't question the culture and values being promoted in the classroom, they socialize their students to accept the uneven power relations of our society along lines of race, class, gender, and ability. Yet teachers can—and should—challenge the values of white privilege and instead promote values of self-love.

Young students, because of their honesty and willingness to talk about issues, provide many opportunities for teachers to take seemingly minor incidents and turn them into powerful teaching moments. I am grateful for Ernesto's sincerity and

trust in sharing with me. Without knowing it, Ernesto opened the door to a lively dialogue in our classroom about white privilege.

To resurface the dialogue on beauty and skin color, I chose a children's book which deals with resistance to white privilege (a genre defined, in part, by its scarcity). The book is *Niña Bonita,* written by Ana María Machado and illustrated by Rosana Fara (1996, available in English from Kane/Miller Book Publishers). The book tells the story of an albino bunny who loves the beauty of a girl's dark skin and wants to find out how he can get black fur. I knew the title of the book would give away the author's bias, so I covered the title. I wanted to find out, before reading the book, how children perceived the cover illustration of the dark-skinned girl.

"If you think this little girl is pretty, raise your hand," I said. Fourteen hands went up.

"If you think she is ugly, raise your hand," I then asked. Fifteen voted for ugly, among them Ernesto.

I was not surprised that half my students thought the little girl was ugly. Actually, I was expecting a higher number, given the tidal wave of white dolls which make their way into our classroom on Fridays, our Sharing Day, and previous comments by children in which they indicated that dark is ugly.

After asking my students why they thought the girl on the book cover was ugly, one student responded, "Because she has black color and her hair is really curly." Ernesto added, "Because she is black-skinned."

"But you are dark like her," Stephanie quickly rebutted to Ernesto, while several students nodded in agreement. "How come you don't like her?"

"Because I don't like black girls," Ernesto quickly responded. Several students affirmed Ernesto's statement with "yes" and "that's right."

"All children are pretty," Stephanie replied in defense.

Carlos then added, "If you behave good, then your skin color can change."

"Are you saying that if you are good, you can turn darker?" I asked, trying to make sure the other students had understood what he meant.

"White!" responded Carlos.

"No, you can't change your color," several students responded. "That can't be done!"

"How do you know that your color can change?" I asked, hoping Carlos would expand on his answer.

"My mom told me," he said.

"And would you like to change your skin color?" I asked.

"No," he said. He smiled shyly as he replied and I wondered if he may have wished he was not dark-skinned but didn't want to say so.

Carlos's mother's statements about changing skin color reminded me of instances in my family and community when a new baby is born. "Oh, look at him, how pretty and blond-looking he is," they say if the baby has European features and coloring. And if the babies came out dark, like Ernesto? Then the comments are, "¡Ay! Pobrecito, salió tan prietito"—which translated means, "Poor baby, he came out so dark."

I hear similar comments from co-workers in our school's staff lounge. A typical statement: "Did you see Raul in my class? He has the most beautiful green eyes."

It is no surprise that so many students must fight an uphill battle against the values of white privilege; still other students choose not to battle at all.

Challenging the Students

In an attempt to have students explain why they think the black girl in *Niña Bonita* is ugly, I ask them, "If you think she is ugly for having dark skin, why do you think her dark skin makes her ugly?"

"I don't like the color black," volunteers Yvette, "because it looks dark and you can't see in the dark."

"Because when I turn off the light," explains Marco, "everything is dark and I am afraid."

Although most of my kindergarten students could not articulate the social worthlessness of being dark-skinned in this society, I was amazed by their willingness to struggle with an issue that so many adults, teachers included, ignore, avoid, and pretend does not exist. At the same time, it was clear that many of my students had already internalized the values of white privilege.

At the end of our discussion, I took another vote to see how students were reacting to *Niña Bonita*; I also wanted to ask individual students why they had voted the way they had. This second time, 18 students said the black girl was pretty and only 11 said she was ugly. Ernesto still voted for "ugly."

"Why do you think she is ugly?" I asked, but this time the students didn't volunteer responses. Perhaps they were sensing that I did not value negative answers as much as I did comments by students who fell in love with *Niña Bonita*. In their defense of dark skin, some students offered explanations such as, "Her color is dark and pretty," "All girls are pretty," and "I like the color black."
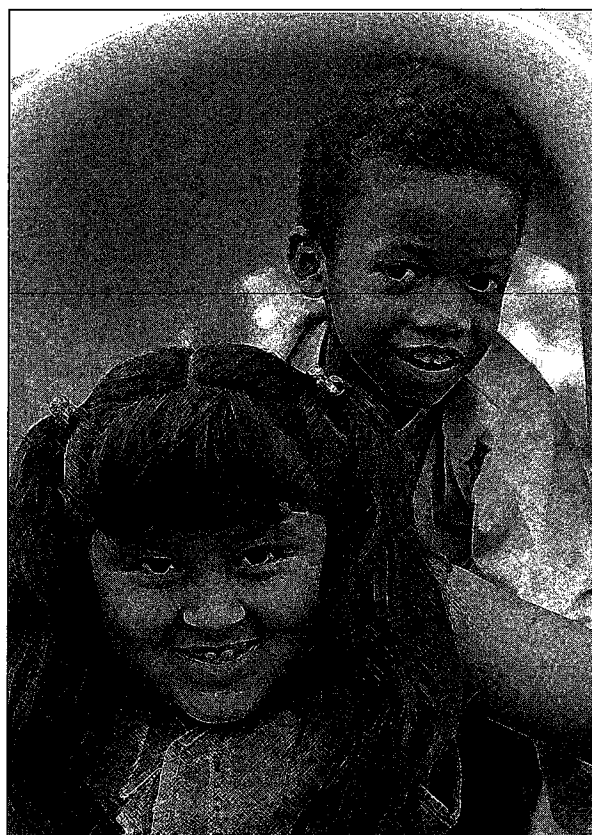
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Our discussion of *Niña Bonita* may have led four students to modify their values of beauty and ugliness in relation to skin color. Maybe these four students just wanted to please their teacher. What is certain, however, is that the book and our discussion caused some students to look at the issue in a new way.

Equally important, *Niña Bonita* became a powerful tool to initiate discussion on an issue which

will affect my students, and myself, for a lifetime. Throughout the school year, the class continued our dialogue on the notions of beauty and ugliness. (One other book that I have found useful to spark discussion is *The Ugly Duckling*. This fairy tale, which is one of the most popular among early elementary teachers and children, is often used uncritically. It tells the story of a little duckling who is "ugly" because his plumage is dark. Happiness comes only when the duckling turns into a beautiful, spotless white swan. I chose to use this book in particular because the plot is a representation of the author's value of beauty as being essentially white. I want my students to understand that they can disagree with and challenge authors of books, and not receive their messages as god-given.)

When I have such discussions with my students, I often feel like instantly including my opinion. But I try to allow my students to debate the issue first. After they have spoken, I ask them about their views and push them to clarify their statements. One reason I like working with children is that teaching is always a type of experiment, because the students constantly surprise me with their candid responses. These responses then modify how I will continue the discussion.

I struggle, however, with knowing that as a teacher I am in a position of power in relation to my young students. It is easy to make students stop using the dominant ideology and adopt the ideology of another teacher, in this case my ideology. In this society, in which we have been accustomed to deal with issues in either-or terms, children (like many adults) tend to adopt one ideology in place of another, but not necessarily in a way in which they actually think through the issues involved. I struggle with how to get my students to begin to look critically at the many unequal power relations in our society, relations which, even at the age of 5, have already shaped

even whether they love or hate their skin color and consequently themselves.

At the end of our reading and discussion of the book, I shared my feelings with my students.

"I agree with the author calling this girl 'Niña Bonita' because she is absolutely beautiful," I say. "Her skin color is beautiful."

While I caressed my face and kissed my cinnamon-colored hands several times happily and passionately, so that they could see my love for my skin color, I told them, "My skin color is beautiful, too."

I pointed to one of my light-complexioned students and said, "Gerardo also has beautiful skin color and so does Ernesto. But Gerardo cannot be out in the sun for a long time because his skin will begin to burn. I can stay out in the sun longer because my darker skin color gives me more protection against sunburn. But Ernesto can stay out in the sun longer than both of us because his beautiful dark skin gives him even more protection."

Despite our several class discussions on beauty, ugliness, and skin color Ernesto did not appear to change his mind. But, hopefully, his mind will not forget our discussions.

Ernesto probably still takes his magic pills, which, his mother later explained, are Flintstones Vitamin C. But I hope that every time he pops one into his mouth, he remembers how his classmates challenged the view that to be beautiful one has to be white. I want Ernesto to always remember, as will I, Lorena's comment: "Dark-skinned children are beautiful and I have dark skin, too." ◼

* Names have been changed.

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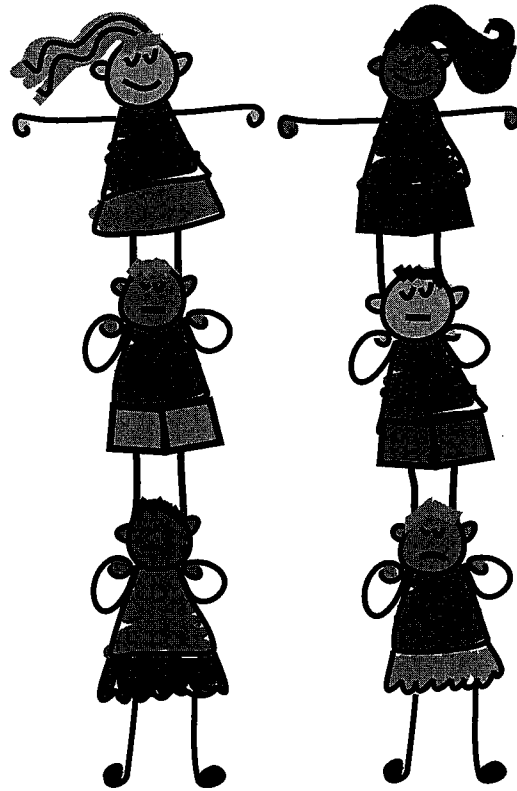
Why an Anti-Bias Curriculum?

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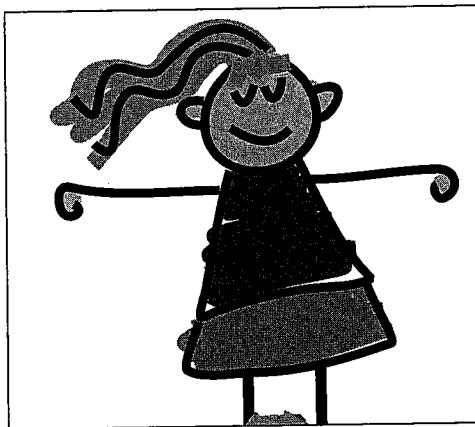
In sum, if children are to grow up with the attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary for effective living in a complex, diverse world, early childhood programs must actively challenge the impact of bias on children's development.

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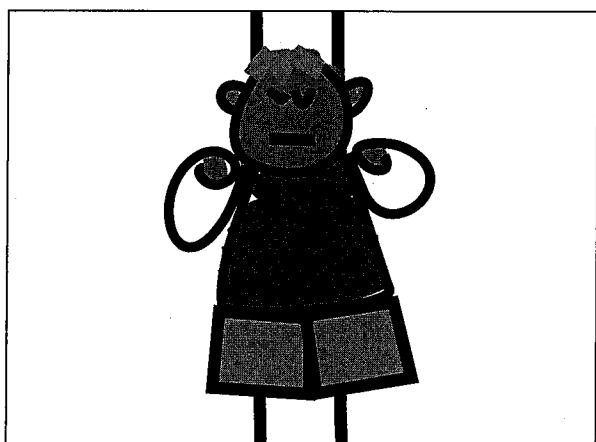
"I don't like Indians. They shoot bows and arrows at people and burn their houses," a 4-year-old informs his class after a visit to Disneyland. "Oh, those aren't real Indians," explains his white teacher. "Real Indians are nice people. They live in houses and wear clothes just like us."

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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Developmental Themes, Tasks, and Goals in Anti-Bias Work

BY MARGIE CARTER AND DEB CURTIS

This chart is republished from *Training Teachers: A Harvest of Theory and Practice* (Redleaf Press, 1994). It is adapted from *Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children,* by Louise Derman-Sparks and the A.B.C. Task Force (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1989). The chart offers an overview of children's understanding of gender identity, physical disability, racial differences and silimarities, and cultural identity as well as anti-bias goals for children's learning in these areas.

—Editor

GENDER IDENTITY

Twos	Threes and Fours	Fives
Curious about anatomy; notices differences in gender.	Know whether they are a boy or girl.	Have established gender identity constancy; know that they are and will remain a boy or girl.
Nonverbally explores differences (looking, pointing, touching).	Strongly influenced by dominant culture attitudes toward gender behavior; have definite ideas about how boys and girls are supposed to do things differently.	Have learned to be embarrassed about gender anatomy and show this through teasing, giggling, and secret genital play.
Learning names of body parts.		
Confused about anatomical differences; may think they have both types of genitals or that they can change their body parts.	Confused about gender constancy. Have questions about whether they will remain the same gender as they grow.	Curious about how babies are born.
Learning attitudes of dominant culture toward gender; learning from different behaviors and messages towards boys and girls.	*Developmental Goal:*	Defining own gender identity; acting out prevailing gender stereotypes.
Developmental Goal:	To develop a clear, healthy gender identity through understanding that being a boy or a girl depends on anatomy, not on what they like to do; to expand understanding.	*Developmental Goal:*
To gain simple matter-of-fact information about anatomy. Acceptance regarding curiosity. Construct a healthy non-sexist identity based on anatomy as what determines gender, rather than looks, e.g., hair length or clothing.		To expand ideas regarding gender roles to counter prevailing biases; to acquire accurate information and terms about gender anatomy and differences; to be aware of a variety of role models who cross gender lines.

LEARNING ABOUT PHYSICAL DIFFERENCES AND DISABILITIES

Twos	Threes, Fours and Fives	
Notices the more obvious differences in physical abilities, such as a person using a wheelchair, a brace, or crutches to move around.	Able to see shared abilities and similarities.	*Developmental Goals:*
	Notices and asks questions about disabilities.	Children with disability—to see themselves reflected in the world around them; to receive acceptance for who they are; to develop autonomy and independence.
Uses nonverbal behavior to explore differences such as staring, imitating, pointing.	Curious about equipment and devices people use to help with disability.	
Shows signs of "pre-prejudice," discomfort, or fear with physical differences.	Confusion about what a person with a disability can or can't do.	Children without disability—to ask questions and express feelings about disabilities; to gain information about and comfort with those who are disabled.
Developmental Goal:	Has anxiety and fear about being hurt or "catching" the disability through contact with the person or equipment.	
To gain words for observations; to receive acceptance for curiosity; to develop comfort and familiarity with physical differences.	May reject or show fear or impatience with someone differently abled; lack skills for interacting with differently abled.	

RACIAL DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES

Twos	Threes and Fours	Fives
Notices differences in skin color; learning color names.	Continued curiosity about racial differences; wonder where they fit in.	Can begin to understand scientific explanations for differences in skin color, hair texture, and eye shape.
Curious about differences in hair texture.	Aware of and sensitive to attitudes toward skin color and other racial characteristics; becoming aware of societal bias against darker skin and other physical differences.	Can understand more fully the range of racial differences and similarities.
Uses nonverbal cues to signal noticing differences; may react with curiosity or fear.		
Overgeneralizes common characteristic such as skin color, e.g., "those are some of the Cosby people."	Wants to know how they got their color, hair, and eye characteristics.	*Developmental Goal:*
Developmental Goal:	Aware that getting older brings changes; wonders if skin color, hair, and eyes remain constant.	To understand and value the range of differences among racial groups.
To develop a positive awareness of own racial identity; to learn words for observations of differences; to develop a comfortable awareness of others.	Confusion about racial group names and actual color of their skin.	
	Developmental Goal:	
	To understand that racial identity does not change; to learn accurate information about racial identity to counter bias; to understand that one is part of a large group with similar characteristics (not "different") and to feel comfortable with exactly who one is.	

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES

Twos

Aware of cultural aspects of gender and ethnic identity.

Can understand different words from different languages.

Developmental Goal: To see self as a part of a family group.

Threes and Fours

Understands cultural identity as it relates to their family; knows one has individuality and a group connection.

Confused about criteria for ethnic/cultural group membership.

Acquiring information and bias from the dominant culture's prevailing attitudes and images.

Cultural understanding is based on concrete, daily living with family members through language, family stories, values, celebrations, spiritual life.

Beginning to understand that everyone has a culture or group identity and that there are similarities and differences among children and adults.

Developmental Goal:

For white children—to counter the developing belief that the dominant white culture is superior to other ways of life.

For children of color—to build a positive sense of person and group identity; to see themselves as of equal value to others.

Fives

Begin to make connections between their individual and family cultural identity and the larger cultural/ethnic group.

Begin to understand people's struggles for justice and a better quality of life.

Developmental Goal:

To understand the broader context of how individuals and families relate to the larger community; to begin to identify bias and find ways to take action to challenge and change injustice.

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SUSAN LINA RUGGLES

Raising Issues of Race with Young Children

BY RITA TENORIO

Before I became principal of La Escuela Frat-ney, an ethnically diverse school in a racially mixed working-class Milwaukee neighbor-hood, I taught kindergarten and 1st grade for many years. I still remember sitting down one day with children in my 1st-grade class, early in the year when we were getting to know each other. We talked about how we were alike, how we were different. "Our skin is different," one of the children said. I asked everyone to put their hands together on the table, so we could see all the different colors.

One of my African American students, LaRhonda,* simply would not. Scowling, she slid her hands beneath the table top, unwilling to have her color compared to the others.

It was a reaction I had seen before. Even for students with only six or seven years of life experi-ence, the centuries-old legacies of bias and racism in our country have made an impact on their lives. I have seen fair-skinned children deliberately change places in a circle if African American chil-dren sit down next to them. An English speaker won't play with a Latino child because, he says, "He talks funny." On the playground, a group of white girls won't let their darker-skinned peers join in their games, explaining matter-of-factly: "Brown kids can't be in our club."

Early in my teaching career, I might have told LaRhonda we were all equal and we were all the same, and left it at that. But much has changed, and

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I've learned that it is part of my job to help students to learn how to discuss issues of race.

I now know that while early childhood students are too young to intellectually understand the complexities of issues such as racism or prejudice, their behaviors show the influence of societal stereotypes and biases. Throughout my career I have had children who vehemently believed that Indians all live in "teepees" or, even worse, that there were no more Indians "'cause the cowboys killed them all."

I had wanted to believe that children arrived in kindergarten with an open mind on all subjects. But the reality is different. Children mirror the attitudes of society and of their families. Researchers have found that between the ages of 2 and 5, children not only become aware of racial differences but begin to make judgments based on that awareness. Having watched on average over 5,000 hours of TV by age 5, it is no wonder that some children believe all Indians are dead. Television's influence is further compounded by the segregated lives many children lead prior to coming to school.

A New Anti-Racist Curriculum

In the 1970s and 1980s, multicultural education meant moving from holiday to holiday, learning about cultures all over the world. As a teacher in those years, I changed bulletin boards and literacy activities to correspond to the holidays, and proudly integrated the activities into my daily lessons. We learned about our "differences" and celebrated our "similarities." I insisted that "we can all live together" and forbade words or actions that would "hurt" anyone.

My message was that everyone would be treated fairly and equally in our classroom, and I thought it worked. My classroom was filled with active, playful, well-disciplined children. I held high expectations for all the children and by all obvious measures they were growing and learning in ways that pleased both me and their parents. Yet over the years I became uncomfortable with my approach.

Even in my fair and "equal" classroom environment, there were frustrating conflicts. Some-

times they centered around a verbal put-down, other times they involved body language—such as when white or lighter-skinned children would get up and move if a brown Latino or African American child sat next to them. Life on the playground could be even rougher and certain students would be isolated or ridiculed if they were different. Even the children's "make-believe" stories were at times defined by race. Comments like, "You can't be the queen; there are no black queens," caught me off-guard. Equally disturbing, more often than not the children accepted these hierarchies without complaint.

As part of the group of educators who founded La Escuela Fratney, a two-way, English/ Spanish bilingual school, I had my chance to forge an entirely new kindergarten curriculum that was multicultural and anti-racist. Fratney envisioned students not only learning about the history and culture of the major ethnic groups, but also understanding racism's influence on all of us.

At Fratney, which serves 400 students from kindergarten through 5th grade, we discuss issues of social justice with all of our students. Teachers strive to build classroom community by helping children learn about each other's lives and families. They ask students to collect and share information about their families and ancestry. For example, they might talk about how they got their names, how their families came to live in Milwaukee, which holidays they celebrate and how. And at every step teachers help the children to explore the nature of racial and cultural differences and to overcome simplistic notions of "who's better" or who is "like us" and who isn't. Some years ago, as part of a 1st-grade team, I helped to develop a series of activities and projects that help children to discuss issues of race and social justice in a meaningful, age-appropriate way.

These activities include:

Me Pockets

This was always a class favorite. Each child took home a letter-sized clear plastic sleeve, the kind used to display baseball cards. We asked students to fill the pockets with photos, pictures, drawings,

or anything else that will help us know more about them and the things that are important in their lives. They returned the pockets within a week and put them into a three-ring binder that became the favorite classroom book to read and re-read.

The individual pockets reflected the cultural and socioeconomic diversity of the families. Some students put lots of photos or computer images in their pockets. Others cut pictures out of magazines or made drawings. Every family was anxious to share in some way, and family members took time to help their children develop the project.

If someone didn't bring their Me Pocket sheet back, the teachers stepped in to help them find pictures or make the drawings they needed to add their page to the binder.

I was always amazed at how quickly the children learned the details about each other's lives from this project: who had a pet, who took dance classes, who liked to eat macaroni and cheese. The children knew there were differences among them, but they also love to share the things that are alike.

"Look, Rachel has two brothers, just like me."

"I didn't know that Jamal's family likes to camp. We do, too!"

Each of the teachers also completed a Me Pocket. The students loved looking at the picture of me as a 1st-grader, seeing my husband and children, and learning that chocolate cake is my favorite food.

Partner Questions

Each day we took time to teach the social skills of communicating ideas with others and listening to another person's perspective. We used this time to "practice" those skills with role-playing activities and problem-solving situations they or we brought to the group. For example, we asked such questions as: What is the meanest thing anyone has ever said to you? Why do you think some people like to use put-downs? The children took a few minutes to talk about this with a partner. Afterwards some were willing to share with the whole group. We sometimes then role-played the situation as a group and looked for ways to respond, such as speaking back to insults.

"Someone Special"

By the end of October, during the time of Halloween, Día de los Muertos, and All Souls' Day, we learned about how people remember their ancestors and others who have died or who are far away. We set up a table and students were encouraged to bring in pictures or artifacts to display. They brought a remarkable variety of things: jewelry, a trophy won by a departed relative, a postcard that person sent them, or perhaps the program from a funeral. And they brought many, many stories. Again, the teachers also participated and shared stories of those who have gone before us. We got great responses from our students, and from their families.

MARILYN NOLT

Let's Talk About Skin

Another important conversation I had with my students focused on the varieties of skin color we had in our group. Usually when we began this discussion, some children were uncomfortable about saying "what they are" or describing the color of their skin. In particular, children with very dark skin—like LaRhonda, who would not even put her hands on the table—were often reluctant to join in. Meanwhile, the white kids often boasted about being "pink." Though we'd never talked about this in class before, there was definitely a strong implication that it was better to be lighter.

Many children were amazed that this topic was put out on the table for discussion. The looks

in their eyes, their frequent reluctance to begin the discussion, told me that this was a very personal topic.

As part of the lesson, we asked the students if they had ever heard anyone say something bad or mean about another person's skin color. The hands shot up.

"My mom says that you can't trust black people."

"My sister won't talk to the Puerto Rican kids on the bus."

"Mara said that I couldn't play, that I was too black to be her friend."

They continued to raise their hands and this conversation went on for a while. We talked about ways we'd heard others use people's skin color to make fun of them or put them down. We talked about what to do in those situations.

Rita Tenorio with one of her students.

As we continued to discuss issues of race, we teachers often introduced our personal experiences. I told them about the first time I realized that black and white people were treated differently. I shared my experience being one of the few Latinas in my school. And we tried to ask questions that really intrigued the students, that invited them to try to look at things with a different perspective, to learn something new about the human experience and be open-minded to that idea: Do people choose their colors? Where do you get your skin color? Is it better to be one color than another? Lots of our conversations revolved around a story or a piece of literature.

With a little work, we were able to expand this discussion of skin color in ways that incorporated math lessons, map lessons, and other curricular areas. We did surveys to see how many of our ancestors came from warm places or cold places. We asked children to interview their relatives to find out where the family came from. We created a bulletin board display and a graph that we used to compare and learn about the huge variety of places our students' relatives were from.

Skin Color and Science

Our class discussions of skin color set the stage for lots of "scientific" observations.

For example, I brought in a large variety of paint chips from a local hardware store. The students loved examining and sorting the many shades of beige and brown. It took a while for them to find the one that was most like their own skin color.

In the story *The Colors of Us*, by Karen Katz, Lena learns from her mother that "brown" is a whole range of colors. Like the characters in the story, we took red, yellow, black, and white paint and mixed them in various combinations until we'd each found the color of our own skin. Then we displayed our research as part of our science fair project.

In another exercise, inspired by Sheila Hamanaka's *All the Colors of the Earth*, students were asked to find words to describe the color of their skin, and to find something at home that matched their skin color. Then we displayed the pieces of wood and fabric, the little bags of cinnamon and coffee, the dolls and ceramic pieces that "matched" us.

As we continued these explorations, dealing concretely with a topic that so many have never heard discussed in such a manner, students began to see past society's labels. It was always amazing to children that friends who call themselves "black," for example, could actually have very light skin. Or that children who perceived themselves as "Puerto Rican" could be darker than some of the African American children.

Writing About Our Colors

As children began to understand the idea of internalizing another's point of view, they could apply that understanding by examining different ideas and alternatives to their own experiences. As they learned to express themselves through reading and writing, they learned to challenge stereotypes and speak back to unfair behavior and comments.

Once students had a chance to reflect on skin color, they wrote about it. Annie wrote: "I like my skin color. It is like peachy cream." James wrote: "My color is the same as my dad's. I think the new baby will have this color too." And Keila wrote: "When I was born, my color was brown skin and white skin mixed together."

When LaRhonda wrote about mixing the colors to match her skin, she said: "We put black, white, red, and yellow [together]. I like the color of my skin." How far she had come since the day she would not show us her hands.

Tackling Issues

These activities had an impact. Parents spoke to us about the positive impression that these activities made on the children. Many children had taken their first steps toward awareness of race. They were not afraid to discuss it. They had developed more ways in which to think about and describe themselves.

Yet these activities are no guarantee that children will internalize anti-racist ideas. So much depends on the other forces in their lives. Teachers are still working on making these activities better: doing them sooner in the year, integrating them into other subjects, deepening the conversations, finding other stories or activities to support them. Each year's student group is different, and we need to incorporate their experiences and understandings. We learn something new every time. The students challenge my consciousness too.

Are They Too Young for This?

Many people would say that children at this age are too young to deal with these serious issues. I too had real questions at first about what was actually possible with young children. Can you have "real" conversations with 6-year-olds about power, privilege, and racism in our society? Can you make them aware of the effects that racism and injustice have in our lives? Can they really understand their role in the classroom community?

The answer to all of these questions is "yes." Even very young children can explore and understand the attitudes they and their classmates bring to school each day. They have real issues and opinions to share, and many, many questions of their own to ask. In this way they can begin to challenge some of the assumptions that influence their behavior toward classmates who don't look or talk the same way they do.

Children at this age can explore rules and learn about collecting data, making inferences, and forming conclusions. They can compare the experiences of people and think about what these experiences mean. They can, that is, if they are given the opportunity.

We rely on our schools to be the place for a multicultural, multiracial experience for our children. We want to believe that learning together will help our students to become more understanding and respectful of differences. Yet so often we do not address these issues head-on. Teachers have a responsibility to recognize the influence of racism on themselves and their students. And we can help children learn the skills and strategies they will need to counteract it in their lives. It is unlikely that sensitivity and tolerance will develop, that children will bridge the gaps they bring to school from their earliest days, without specific instruction.

I want to see more than tolerance developed. I want children to see themselves as the future citizens of this country. I want them to gain the knowledge to be successful in this society. Beyond that, though, I want them to understand that they have the power to transform society, and to live in a world where children won't hesitate to share the color of their skin. ■

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