

Leading Anti-Bias Early Childhood Programs

— A GUIDE FOR CHANGE —

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Pursuing the Anti-Bias Vision

The Conceptual Framework

Early childhood centers can . . . become places that respond to the longings for community, meaningful relationships, a sense of belonging, and an exuberant experience of learning about the world. . . . [They] can give the children and adults involved an experience of empowerment, of democracy in action, so that they will have the will and know-how to make this a priority in our country.

—Carter & Curtis (2010, p. 13)

Hundreds of thousands of children from many diverse backgrounds live a significant part of their childhoods in early childhood programs (Carter & Curtis, 2010). The diversity among children attending early childhood programs continues to increase, as a reflection of the nation's changing demographic realities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The children's diverse ethnicities, cultures, religions, languages, and family structures bring both vibrancy and complexities to our communities. Ensuring that all early childhood care and education programs are places where all children and families are visible and thrive requires educators to pursue a "relentless commitment to equity, voice, and social justice" (Kugelmass, 2004, p. 14). Anti-bias education, or ABE (see our definition in Figure I.1 in the Introduction), can play a significant role in this pursuit. Program leaders are central to building the anti-bias education programs that can make this commitment to social justice a reality for all young children and their families.

In this first chapter we discuss the central ideas underlying the philosophy of anti-bias education. This includes: (1) a review of anti-bias education, (2) what it takes organizationally to become an anti-bias program, (3) what adults need to know in order to pursue an ABE approach, (4) the phases of antiracism identity development, and (5) an exploration of "contested-ground" issues in ECCE.

REVIEWING ANTI-BIAS EDUCATION

The heart of anti-bias education is a vision of a world in which all children and families can become successful, contributing members of their society. To achieve this goal, they need to experience affirmation of their identities and

cultural ways of being, and learn how to live and work together in diverse and inclusive environments (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). The anti-bias vision incorporates the basic human rights described in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1990), which embrace the right to an identity, to be free from discrimination, to express opinions, and to participate actively in the community.

Anti-bias education supports children in developing a fuller, truer understanding of themselves and the world, and strengthens their sense of themselves as capable, empowered people. They have a better chance to develop curiosity, openness to multiple perspectives, and critical-thinking skills. They can also develop their ability to resist the harm that prejudice, misinformation, and discrimination do to their sense of competence and efficacy. These social-emotional and cognitive abilities increase the likelihood that children of all backgrounds will be able to navigate the larger worlds of school and community more constructively and effectively. As Jack P. Shonkoff, M.D., Chair of the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, makes clear:

There is a very strong science of emotional development and social development. . . . We have a great deal of brain research that tells us how emotions are very much embedded in the architecture of the brain and the function of the brain. . . . Our conclusion from the science is that absolutely early literacy experiences are very important for young children, but they're no more important than paying attention to children's social health and their emotional well-being. (Boulton, n.d.)

Four core goals of anti-bias education form a framework for guiding practice in a program's learning environment, curriculum, and child-teacher interactions. These goals take into account the body of research about how children construct their identity and attitudes and about the impact of racism and other "isms" on these developmental processes. Such research about children has been accumulating for more than 50 years (e.g., Beanson & Merryman, 2009; Clark, 1963; Clark & Clark, 1947; Goodman, 1952; Hirschfeld, 2008; P. A. Katz, 1976; Lane, 2008; Mac Naughton & Davis, 2009; Ramsey, 2004; Tatum, 1997; Trager & Radke Yarrow, 1952; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). As late as 2010, a CNN commissioned study about children's racial attitudes, under the direction of Dr. Margaret Beale Spencer, supported previous research findings that White and Black children held a preference toward lighter skin color ("Study: White and Black Children Biased Toward Lighter Skin," 2010).

The anti-bias education goals are for children of all family backgrounds and communities, and each goal interacts with and builds on the others. The four goals are the following:

Goal 1: Each child will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities.

Goal 2: Each child will express comfort and joy with human diversity; accurate language for human differences; and deep, caring human connections.

Goal 3: Each child will increasingly recognize unfairness, have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.

Goal 4: Each child will demonstrate empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions. (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. xiv)

BECOMING AN ANTI-BIAS PROGRAM

An anti-bias program puts diversity and equity goals at the center of all aspects of its organization and daily life. It involves much more than adding new materials and activities into the already existing learning environment. Rather, broad systemic changes are necessary. The learning environment and curriculum, as well as program policies, structures, procedures, and processes, all come into play. Change also includes the perspectives and attitudes of the individuals who serve the children and families. In sum, it is “a process, not an event” (Kugelmass, 2004, p. 6).

Significant organizational change requires shared commitments, a collaborative process, and facilitation (Kugelmass, 2004). It also calls for developmental growth in the program leader and staff. While the urgency to implement anti-bias education is great from the perspective of the children’s needs, the process of change happens over time; an anti-bias education leader must plan for the long haul. Successful anti-bias education change needs an intentional and thoughtful strategic approach.

Two central dynamics of organizational change come into play. One is shifting the cultural core of the program; the second is recognizing the impact of the process of change on the stakeholders. As the program leader, you have a primary role in facilitating both dynamics.

Shifting the Culture of the ECCE Program

While the importance of culturally relevant ECCE programs is a major theme in the field, too many early childhood programs continue to ground their environment, curriculum, teaching styles, and language in the dominant culture (as defined in Figure I.1 in the Introduction). Staff may act out societal power relationships of advantage and disadvantage and socially prevalent biases, even if they are not aware of what is happening.

The dynamics of dominant-culture-centered early childhood programs push other viewpoints to the margins—even when the majority of families at the program come from other cultural backgrounds. This means that a large number of young children experience two differing cultural contexts every day.

Worse, children may experience their home culture as invisible or inferior. When teachers use child development norms and criteria based on dominant group culture to judge the ability of children from other cultural groups, the teachers are hindered in seeing the actual developmental abilities and growth of many children. This dynamic automatically advantages children from the dominant culture group and disadvantages children from nondominant groups.

The more discontinuity young children face, the more likely they are to find that what they are learning in their family about how to be in the world, including their home language, does not work for them outside their family. The lack of familiarity with a program's practices makes it harder for them to adjust, to build strong relationships, to act and feel competent, and to feel secure. Conversely, the more continuity between home and school a child experiences, the better able they are to be active, competent participants, and to feel respected for who they are.

Minimizing cultural discontinuity between home and school programs and eliminating indicators of discounting or prejudice against a child's home culture foster an equal playing field for all the children. Young children thrive when their early childhood program integrates their home languages and cultures into all of its operations. Developmentally appropriate programs pay attention to the social and cultural contexts in which each child lives, and not just to a child's individual characteristics (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 1995).

Building an anti-bias ECCE program requires shifting the dominant-culture core of a program's thinking, organizational structures, and practice. It means intentionally moving to a many-cultures, anti-bias approach. Shifting the culture of a program brings groups at the margin of ECCE theory and practice into the center of all that happens. Shifting the culture also requires adjustment to the dominant and traditional approaches to ECCE to incorporate other ways of thinking and doing (Anderson & Collins, 1997).

Shifting the culture of a program calls for a broad vision of equity and inclusion and an intentional effort to create change. It demands attention to the seemingly small and everyday details of a program's life, as well as to the broader structures, relationships, and teaching practices. An anti-bias program continually evolves as the composition and structure of the program changes. Doing all of this requires strong leadership and engagement from the various stakeholders in the program or organization.

Recognizing the Response to Change

Change inevitably brings disequilibrium, dissonance, and conflicts—until specific changes become part of everyday life. There will likely be differences about what to change and how to carry out agreed-upon changes, or even whether to change at all.

Some program stakeholders (e.g., staff, families, administration) may fear that creating a program where the dominant culture shares space with other perspectives is a threat to their own rights, even though the goal is for *everyone* to have a voice and place. Similarly, some may fear that a shift away from the dominant culture approach requires abandoning all they have previously learned about creating quality early childhood programs. Staff or family members who fear loss of their own way of life or of program quality may try to resist change. The discomforts of disequilibrium push people to search for solutions that will bring equilibrium again—either retreating to the safety of familiar ways or, hopefully, searching for fresh perspectives. Finding ways to move the organization and its individual members closer to anti-bias education goals is a crucial part of the anti-bias education leadership role.

Even when everyone wants change, people will still experience disequilibrium. Inevitably, disagreements will arise about which aspects of the policy, structures, and curriculum to work on and with what strategies. The organization's stakeholders may want different timetables. Some may want to shift the culture of the program faster than the rest of the staff are willing to take on. Some may want it to take longer or have a different sequence.

Even in the midst of change, the pull to keep things as they are (the status quo) will arise. We like to compare this dynamic to the function of the “default” mode on a computer. If the font of a computer is changed from its default mode to another font, the computer reverts to the default the next time it is used. Making change rarely follows a clean, linear course of action. A program may make progress in one arena, but hit resistance to change in another arena. From time to time, everyone needs a brief respite before taking up the challenge once again. External events may open up and support changes on a specific aspect of diversity, or they may create bumps in the road.

CHANGING ADULT CONSCIOUSNESS AND BEHAVIOR

Realistically, ECCE practitioners who have been absorbing their families' and societal assumptions, stereotypes, and prejudices about human identity since childhood cannot be expected to suddenly teach children not to absorb these same beliefs and attitudes. And yet that is exactly what a program leader may expect.

The learning goals for adults reflect current thinking about identity as a combination of social group membership and individual life experiences. Exploring and deepening an individual's understanding of one's own and others' social identities and their influence on perspectives and behaviors are important components of becoming effective anti-bias educators.