

# Why We Practice Anti-bias Education

by Louise Derman-Sparks

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*"You know how you always wanted to change the world, make it a little better? This is your opportunity. Throw yourself in: make yourself proud."*

— Regina

Two great social-justice educators, Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, told us that it is by walking the road to educational and social change that we make it happen (1990). In this article, several experienced anti-bias educators share thoughts about the roads they walk. Each responded to several questions in writing or in a



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presentations, conducts workshops, and consults throughout the United States and internationally. She served on the Governing Board of NAEYC, has been a justice activist for 50 years, and has two grown children, who are human service professionals.

phone interview. For the sake of brevity, I have excerpted and tightened their comments. Here is what they say about why they chose to implement anti-bias education, the impact of doing this work on them personally and professionally, and their words of advice and encouragement.

The ECCE practitioners whose voices appear here have been putting anti-bias education into practice for anywhere from 10 to 48 years. They are teachers of children, program directors, adult educators, college faculty, consultants, an assistant state superintendent for ECE, and the leader of a community anti-racism organization. They are women and men of several racial/ethnic backgrounds. Most are United States Americans; one is Turkish-German and one is Irish.

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*"Anti-bias Education is needed in the same way that Developmentally Appropriate Practices are needed — it is foundational to educating the whole child."*

— Catherine

We hope that their voices motivate those of you who are at the beginning of the anti-bias education journey, and support

and affirm those of you already practicing ABE in your work with children and/or adults. As you read, perhaps you can keep track of the thoughts and feelings that arise in you and add your voice to those in this article.

## What Drew You to Anti-bias Education?

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*"ABE brought my personal and professional life together."*

— Debbie LK

Three intertwining themes thread through the replies to this question. Together, they create a whole way of thinking about oneself and one's work.

One theme is that learning about anti-bias education profoundly affirmed and strengthened people's understanding and belief in themselves. As Mary Pat succinctly put it, "Doing anti-bias education helped me be able to connect to my own humanity." Regina movingly explains what this meant to her:

"My college anti-bias class was the first time that I felt validated as a person who had experienced oppression. I was given language to articulate structural oppression and to realize my struggle with my

own internalized oppression. I felt safe in my identity. The class also taught me that I could DO something. And I knew in my heart that it was worth fighting for social justice.”

Jo Ann describes the powerful draw of discovering an educational perspective that illuminates one’s own childhood and young adult experiences and that became a central motivator for working with children in new ways. She writes that:

“Learning a systemic analysis of racism, and learning about an anti-racism/ anti-bias approach to education, felt like I had been given the very specific and necessary information I had been missing all my life. I KNEW in my soul that had it been offered to me as a child, my early childhood and youth would have been much different. I also know it has made me a better Aunt Jo Ann, Pastor, and student.”

For some, the path to becoming an anti-bias educator begins with a search for ways to ensure that all children receive the best early childhood education that we know how to do. For example, Brian relates that:

“I wanted every child to have access to high-quality exploration, play, beautiful materials, and innovative, caring teachers who know how to create school communities that reflect the diversity of our country and are equitable and relevant. I spent the beginning of my career discovering what that would look like. This commitment to equity has been key to keeping me in the field.”

Colette explains that, “Working on early childhood education with the Traveler Community in Ireland, my learning about the ABE-Goals and approach situated what I was doing in a much clearer and coherent way.”

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In contrast, Catherine came to anti-bias education because, as she admits, “It was part of a training required by my employer — so I had to do it.” She then explains why she made anti-bias education her own:

“My initial contact was more like an arranged marriage where I ended up falling in love after the arrangement began. What has kept me involved for almost 25 years is that I see the differences an ABE approach make — large and small differences — every day. It is a catalyst for empowerment for children, authentic engagement for families, and hope for staff that they can truly make a meaningful difference in early childhood programs.”

Several people highlighted their discovery of the connections between their social justice values and activism with the mission and goals of anti-bias education. For example, Bryn explains that:

“The values of anti-bias education resonated so strongly with my own values and passions, giving me a vision of who I wanted to be and how I would make my life meaningful in my work. ABE helped me face the powerful misinformation and bias that creates and supports the unfairness and injustice in the world, and know what I could do about it. The potential of anti-bias work called me to be a preschool teacher.”

Others, already social activists, share that, like Bill, they “made the fascinating discovery of anti-bias education’s connection to my adult social justice work and of young children’s ability to build social justice behavior in their young lives.” Mary Pat adds that, “When ABE came along, it felt like I could breathe. Other people believed what I do, wanted what I wanted for children and their families and for themselves. It was so exciting to find I could be part of a movement I had not known existed.”

## What Have You Learned?

The understanding that “Knowing myself is a key to practicing ABE” (Miyuki), and the necessity of uncovering our own biases appears in almost everyone’s thinking about this question. As Bill puts it: “I am always unearthing biases I am not conscious of having. It’s painful and it’s refreshing.” Elmida underscores the need to accept our imperfections, sharing that, “I am not perfect and I am not bias-free. I do not know everything, but I am always open to learning. This in itself is freeing and connects me to all people.” Fawzia states, “Anti-bias education promotes introspective reflection to determine if we are providing an environment where each person is valued and respected.” And, Regina sums it up when she writes, “ABE invites us all to think, reflect, and change.”

Learning to engage productively with and to be patient with people grappling with anti-bias ideas is another lesson. As Debbie explains, “I have become more comfortable with conflict and the disequilibrium that is inevitably part of anti-bias work. I try to figure out where people with whom I disagree are coming from. I do not expect quick solutions, and can sit with the tensions while working towards finding the common ground and third space.” Others write about gaining patience as they work with people who are first hearing about anti-bias issues and may be reluctant to explore them.

Colette describes how the four ABE goals help her manage the ‘ongoing learning curve’ of anti-bias education. “There are so many things to learn all the time — especially when new communities come into your space. But, I found I could always hop back to the four ABE goals. They are always relevant because they fit into a social justice framework. They take you back into thinking about who is in front of

you and about their right to recognition and respect. That is the beauty of them.” Others also highlight the importance of the connection between the larger dynamics of systemic racism (and other -isms) and anti-bias education. Seyran related that, “I learned that the ‘-isms’ are part of social reality, which helped me not to take prejudices so personally.” Being cognizant of this connection is very important. The four goals of anti-bias education arose from the harmful impact on children’s development in the larger social-political context.

Lastly, becoming a new or better activist threaded through responses to what people had learned from engaging in anti-bias education. This theme comes through in comments such as: “I gained the audacity to stand up and speak up when I need to” (Brian); “I learned to be a white ally” (Julie); and, “The four goals instilled a stronger advocacy and activism role in my life and made me very determined to just keep at it.”

## What Would You Say to a Teacher Just Beginning to Do ABE?

While the request for a one-sentence-only reply to this question was a challenge, people’s responses well describe the essential ingredients for being an anti-bias educator. Listed is a distillation of their counsel:

- It is an amazing journey. You will have to be open to rethinking everything you think you know. But the results are worth it!
- Be brave, make mistakes, ask questions, read, read.
- Be curious all the time — you rarely know more than your students know about their circumstance and identity.
- Be willing to take constructive criticism.

- Strive to be current, relevant, and open to multiple perspectives in your work.
- Learn from every member of your community and be aware of the histories of the communities around you.
- Learn about systemic/institutional racism and about past and current anti-racism movements. (Ditto for other forms of prejudice and discrimination.)
- Be thorough and tenacious — you are NEVER done — promise... it is a journey!
- Remember that for all of us, doing ABE is a fulfilling, yet sometimes overwhelming undertaking.
- Go step by step, day by day. Enjoy seeing the benefits/results of your work, like seeing children delighted with themselves, and proud of who they are because they are recognized. That is the power in it.
- Gather people around you who can support you and who you can support, and build with them a group of like-minded educators in your program and city. You cannot do this work well by yourself.
- Believe in what you are doing and don’t give up. Anti-bias education work is life giving.

## Final Words

All of this counsel is sound and doable. However, putting it into practice does not happen overnight. As people emphasized, becoming and being an anti-bias educator is an on-going journey. We each find our specific starting points, paths, and pace. While everyone experiences demanding times in their journey, remembering that, as Mary Pat declares, “We are creating

What would you reply to the three questions we explore in this article?

■ What drew you to anti-bias education?

■ What have you learned?

■ What would you say to a teacher just beginning to do ABE?

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a world where our children can be who they are meant to be — who they were created to be” energizes them. And as Julie asserts, “Anti-bias work feeds us, and holds us accountable. I/ we wouldn’t trade it for anything.” So, dear reader, we say with Catherine: “Welcome to our community; you are starting a challenging and rewarding journey that will empower you to be a force for positive change in the world.”

## Reference

Horton, M., & Freire, P. (1990). *We make the road by walking: Conversations on education and social change*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

