



Teaching for Equity and Agency: Intentional Strategies That Support Anti-Bias Education

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Anti-bias education (ABE) is an approach to equitable learning experiences for young children that aims to strengthen children’s sense of self and family, support their joy in human diversity, and help them build fairer, more inclusive communities (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, with Goins 2020). However, without an underlying pedagogy that guides planning and practice, it can be challenging to make ABE more than a series of disconnected activities. To truly implement ABE in the early childhood setting, educators must bridge theory and practice with instructional approaches that draw on children’s strengths, interests, identities, and agency. This requires systematic reflection on practice, which directly impacts decisions about teaching and learning (Kuh et al. 2016).

One such pedagogy is the Complementary Curriculum Approach, which provides teachers with guidance and strategies to design, present, and scaffold curriculum and to align their teaching with children’s interests (Kuh & Ponte 2022). When applied to ABE practices, the Complementary Curriculum Approach has the potential to strengthen and deepen learning experiences.

The Complementary Curriculum Approach was developed by early childhood educators Lisa Kuh (the first author) and Iris Ponte as a response to teacher requests for more strategies for application. Each had noticed that educators were navigating a range of challenges related to effectively engaging and supporting children. These challenges were reported by teachers using both tightly controlled, teacher-led experiences and very open-ended, unstructured encounters. Grounded in theories of child development and learning, Lisa and Iris developed a both/and approach, in which adult guidance is intentional and does not stifle creativity. In addition, their approach views intentional teaching as teaching for equity and is, therefore, rooted in ABE’s four core goals (see “The Four Core Goals of Anti-Bias Education” below). These goals support the right of each

and every child to learn in a strengths-based environment—one that is responsive to and differentiated according to children’s gifts, assets, preferences, and needs (NAEYC 2020; Kuh & Ponte 2022).

Debbie LeeKeenan (the second author) was the director of the Eliot-Pearson Children’s School at Tufts University when both Lisa and Iris were teachers there. An ABE lens was infused into all aspects of the school, including policies and procedures, curriculum, and pedagogy, as well as professional development and partnerships with families. As producer of the film *Reflecting on Anti-Bias Education in Action: The Early Years* (2021), Debbie connected with Nadia Jaboneta (the third author) at Pacific Primary School, where Nadia is a teacher and pedagogista.

All of the authors came together to collectively share their expertise and experiences in this article. We begin by outlining both ABE and the Complementary Curriculum Approach. Throughout, the article follows Nadia as she leads her class of 4- and 5-year-olds in an exploration of families. While ABE does not advocate any one family structure (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, with Goins 2020), it does adhere to NAEYC’s “Code of Ethical Conduct”; specifically, that a family includes all of the adults who are responsible for educating, nurturing, and advocating for a child (NAEYC 2011). By examining Nadia’s activities and discussions, we surface ways that intentional teaching brings even more depth to anti-bias work and scaffolding children’s learning.

The Four Core Goals of Anti-Bias Education

Goal 1, Identity	Teachers will nurture each child’s construction of knowledgeable and confident personal and social identities. Children will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities.
Goal 2, Diversity	Teachers will promote each child’s comfortable, empathic interaction with people from diverse backgrounds. Children will express comfort and joy with human diversity, use accurate language for human differences, and form deep, caring connections across all dimensions of human diversity.
Goal 3, Justice	Teachers will foster each child’s capacity to critically identify bias and will nurture each child’s empathy for the hurt bias causes. Children will increasingly recognize unfairness (injustice), have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.
Goal 4, Activism	Teachers will cultivate each child’s ability and confidence to stand up for oneself and for others in the face of bias. Children will demonstrate a sense of empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions.

Source: *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves*, 2nd ed., by Louise Derman-Sparks & Julie Olsen Edwards, with Catherine M. Goins (2020).

Our Frameworks: Anti-Bias Education Goals and the Complementary Curriculum Approach

ABE places diversity and equity at the heart of early childhood education and builds on children's strengths, interests, identities, and agency. It includes educators recognizing children's power as agents of their own development and the need to put research into practice and practice into research (Fenton et al. 2014). In addition, educators understand that children can and do grapple with complex topics and that children want to talk about their own competencies and learning opportunities. They help children identify their strengths and apply them in real time in real-world situations, which foster children's engagement, well-being, and learning (Galloway, Reynolds, & Williamson 2020).

Young children are continuously observing, experiencing, and actively making sense of social identities and biases. They have a deep and empathic sense of fairness (Lee et al. 2022). The four core goals of ABE provide a framework in which to build upon these tendencies (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, with Goins 2020). The goals are interconnected, with each connecting to and strengthening the others. They offer guidance for adults as well as children, with any one of the goals serving as an entry point for learning experiences that link to the other goals. When children's identities are centered, when their awareness of diversity is honored, when educators tap into their strong sense of justice and scaffold them to take action, then children's strengths are at the forefront of learning encounters (Galloway, Reynolds, & Williamson 2020).

An effective early childhood program actively and daily addresses all four ABE goals. While many early childhood educators and administrators want to enact the goals, bringing them to life can be elusive. Often children are exposed to a single activity, such as skin color mixing or a few books related to identity. Teachers may not think about how an experience needs to be designed and implemented over time. They may not intentionally plan for and reflect on their responses to children's questions in the moment (short-term) and long-term. An understanding of high-leverage, high-impact strategies, activities, and materials is crucial to effective curriculum implementation in any content

area or domain, and ABE is no exception (Kuh & Ponte 2022). Without a framework for examining learning intentions and how they meet children's needs, ABE goals for children may remain a wish and not a specific, intentional, and implemented plan.

The Complementary Curriculum Approach is a pedagogical framework rooted in four intentions that are responsive to each child's strengths, interests, needs, and contexts. These intentions can guide teachers as they develop and carry out purposeful ABE curriculum and work daily with children. They are

- **compelling materials:** Educators design and offer materials to inspire curiosity, experimentation, and thoughtful decision making.
- **explicit presentation:** Educators model social interactions, self-care routines, and the use of classroom materials to guide purposeful action, develop routines, and sustain independence.
- **responsive scaffolding:** Educators support interactions that build upon and expand children's explorations, moving in and out of children's experiences to scaffold new learning.
- **following children's interests:** Educators plan experiences rooted in children's interests to spark deep, relevant learning rooted in "big idea" investigations that connect to children's lives and communities.

These intentions are not hierarchical and, like the ABE goals, are interrelated and provide multiple entry points for educators. Because the focus is on high-leverage practices that facilitate teaching and learning, they are meant to be applied regardless of the particular curriculum an early childhood educator may be using. An advantage of strategies such as the four intentions is that they are within the control of educators and can be applied with study, practice, and reflection on one's own or with colleagues. We have found that this process begins with a new mindset about how educators design, offer, scaffold, and prioritize experiences and that this shift leads to positive changes in children's learning (Kuh & Ponte 2022).

The Complementary Curriculum Approach in Action: One Program's Experience

Exploring topics with children is an adventure in flexibility and maintaining clear connections to concepts. As teachers offer provocations and proposals, they follow children's interests, being ready to go in a range of directions while remaining attuned to the big ideas of an investigation (Chard, Kogan, & Castillo 2017). Teachers can incorporate children's interests no matter what type of setting they work in, whether a public school with a set scope and sequence, a Head Start program using a prescribed curriculum, or a child care center using an emergent approach. Pairing ABE and the Complementary Curriculum Approach helps teachers to expand their thinking and strengthen their practices across content areas and across ABE goals.

Often, ABE instruction sticks to the core goals related to identity and diversity (Goals 1 and 2), such as with activities focused on skin color or completing self-portraits. The core goals focused on justice and activism (Goals 3 and 4) remain a bit more elusive and abstract. Yet what happens if children make comments or ask questions about "sensitive" subjects, such as "Is Devlin a boy or girl?" or "Why is that person sleeping on the street?" These require teachers to reflect on their observations of children and develop short-term and long-term responses to support children's questions, comments, and behaviors (LeeKeenan & Allen 2017):

- **Short-term responses** refer to how we respond in the moment. This includes listening carefully to the children's questions and comments and providing accurate information in developmentally appropriate language. Ignoring their questions conveys to children this topic is unsafe or not okay to talk about or that it is not good to ask questions.
- **Long-term responses** refer to how we continue these conversations in the classroom and in our work with families.

"Intentional Short- and Long-Term Planning to Address ABE Goals," below, illustrates how short- and long-term responses align with intentional teaching via the four intentions of the Complementary Curriculum Approach.

Intentional Short- and Long-Term Planning to Address ABE Goals

The Four Intentions	Responding in the Moment (Short-Term Planning)	Responding Over Time (Long-Term Planning)
Compelling materials	Create a provocation, offering materials in the moment to uncover and spark children's thinking.	Design and offer materials based on observations of and interactions with children.
Explicit presentation	Model the use of materials and social interactions in the moment.	Intentionally plan the presentation of materials and concepts over a period of time, introducing children to new materials and experiences that align with ABE goals.
Responsive scaffolding	Use questions and responses to reflect back to the child in the moment.	Intentionally identify possible language during presentations, discussions, children's play, and provocations with materials that is consistent with ABE goals and that supports and reflects children's thinking.
Following children's interests	Engage in close listening to understand what children are thinking about and saying.	Engage in a cycle of activity, learning, engagement, and alignment to "big ideas."
Questions for Educator Reflection		
When implementing the four intentions through an anti-bias lens, educators can ask <ul style="list-style-type: none">› What feelings come up for you, and how do they hinder or support your work?› How do your identities impact your work?› How will you plan for experiences with children?› Who supports your planning?› How do you partner with families in this ABE work?› When, what, and how do you share what is going on with different stakeholders (families, colleagues, the field, children)?		

In the following sections, we describe the experiences of Nadia, a teacher at Pacific Primary School, and her class as they incorporated the four intentions into an exploration of families. Pacific Primary School is a preschool in San Francisco that provides full-time, year-round education and care for families in the city. It has a strong commitment to creating a preschool with diversity, equity, and inclusion at the heart of its mission. As is common in many early childhood programs, educators at Pacific Primary School begin the school year with an exploration of children, family, and community.

While observing her class, Nadia noticed that children shared stories about their families and family structures:

Oh, you have two mommies. Where is your daddy?

I live with my mom, my dog, and my Paw Paw and Grandpa. Who do you live with?

Building on these conversations, Nadia and her team read books about families to the children, making sure that the stories represented a range of family structures. Their approach to the exploration of families was rooted in the following beliefs: “A family is a circle of people who love you”; “There are many ways to make a family”; and “Love makes a family.” She sent home family questionnaires and hosted family gatherings. (See “Making Family Structures Visible” at the end of this article for more about family structures.) She planned to introduce a self-portrait activity but changed her mind after a read aloud of *Who’s in a Family?*, by Roger Skutch. This book reminded children of the family trees they had seen at their school in the past.

Driven by the children’s interests, Nadia and her teaching team decided to launch a family tree project. Following, we highlight how Nadia used the four intentions to link the ABE goals related to identity and diversity to the goals focused on justice and activism. Throughout, we note how the four intentions helped Nadia plan for and impact children’s understandings of ABE ideas. Indeed, these intentions helped Nadia to address all four ABE goals as they relate to family structure (see “Applying Anti-Bias Education Goals to Diversity in Family Structure” below).

Applying Anti-Bias Education Goals to Diversity in Family Structure

- Children will talk comfortably about their own families from their personal experience. **(Goal 1)**
- Children will show awareness and acceptance of different kinds of families beyond their own and appreciate that different kinds of families love and care for their children. **(Goal 2)**
- Children will develop skills to recognize and question unfair depictions or invisibility of different kinds of families. **(Goal 3)**
- Children will learn and practice language and actions to resist teasing or rejection of themselves or classmates based on their own and others’ family structures. **(Goal 4)**

Source: *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves*, 2nd ed., by Louise Derman-Sparks & Julie Olsen Edwards, with Catherine M. Goins (2020).

Using Compelling Materials to Help Children Investigate Identity and Diversity

Once the idea of family trees was identified as a class exploration, Nadia began reflecting about the materials she would curate to bring depth to the foundational ABE goals related to identity and diversity. These goals help children feel confident in who they are and proud of their families, without needing to feel superior to anyone else (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, with Goins 2020). Nadia looked for



books, materials, and curriculum that aligned with the concept of mirrors and windows: mirrors to reflect the children and families in the community and windows to see those who may be different from them (Bishop 1990). To surface their own identities and understand the lives of others, Nadia decided to work with small groups of children and ask them to make a leaf for the classroom family tree. She purposefully offered family photos as a visual for children to notice differences and similarities. “It’s your family leaf, so you can decorate it however you would like,” she said. “Everyone’s leaf will look different.” To ensure that everyone felt included and represented, Nadia explained that everyone in the classroom, including the teachers, would make a family leaf.

The intention of **compelling materials** came into play here. While the idea of family was central, Nadia also led discussions about trees, how they look, and their leaves. She gathered pastels and markers, then placed leaves, branches, books, and the drawing materials on the table. As she did so, Nadia began thinking, “How am I designing a compelling activity? How can I slow down the process for everyone so I can better build upon children’s competencies, learning needs, and have more sustained and focused interactions?”

How materials are offered makes a difference in how children engage with a topic or experience. Always offering materials without any guided exploration or explanation of materials and their properties may actually limit children’s agency and engagement. A well-designed yet flexible structure can spur deeper engagement. Initially, Nadia placed materials in the middle of the table. She had a book ready to read, and she shared with children the steps they would follow and the materials they would use. However, instead of focusing on the book and Nadia’s conversation prompts, the children went right for the materials on the table and were distracted by the other shelves around them.

Educators often want to give children access to many things. Yet offering too many materials without organization can interfere with children’s abilities to participate in important conversations (like discussions about families). It can also prevent teachers from gathering information about children’s assets and interests to use for long-term planning. Having a small set of materials on trays, for example, can help children to choose materials with care and intention. When teachers ask themselves “Is this a distraction or an exploration?”, it helps them to curate and redirect the activity. This is particularly important when there is something specific they want children to engage in.

With a “less is more” focus, Nadia decided to rein in the materials she offered while still offering children choices and agency. For the next small group, Nadia and her team did not display all of the leaf-making materials. Instead, they started by reading the book. They also moved the tables away from surrounding shelves. Having a small set of materials on trays, contained without being overwhelming, helped the children to choose materials with care and intention.

The next day, Nadia and her team began thinking about another design aspect related to their environment—time. Small-group work is ideal for exploring anti-bias topics, but in order to slow down and be more intentional, the team realized that the schedule needed to shift. After morning circle, they extended children’s play period to an hour. This provided an uninterrupted period of time during which they could offer children a range of activity choices, including small-group time with Nadia to explore the idea of families. This is an important aspect of compelling materials: teachers can design beautiful

experiences and materials, but if children do not have enough time to really engage with them, then the learning risks being surface level. With the ABE goals related to identity and diversity, Nadia wanted to go deep.

Using Explicit Presentation to Advance Diversity and Justice

Teaching with an anti-bias lens means thinking about children's equitable access to and use of materials: Do children get to use everything, whenever they want, however they want? Can they work alone, or do they have to share? Where do adult modeling and other instructional supports come into play? These questions are part of the second intention—**explicit presentations**, which entails modeling both the use of materials and social interactions.



Nadia showed children how to use scissors, how to access and pick up drawing materials, and how to use glue. This guidance offered all children entry points to the activity. It also focused their attention, so they could engage with the overall concept of families and how to represent their own unique family structures. As the children worked on their family tree leaves, they had natural conversations about their immediate family members, extended family not in their photos, and the pets and other important people they considered part of their families. Children made connections to each other's leaves and pointed out differences in their families:

My family doesn't have sisters. I have a brother.

I have a mom and a mama and a dog.

My sister is a teenager; your sister is a baby!

Nadia, do you have a sister or a brother?

Modeling via explicit presentation enabled the children to engage more fully with the leaf-making activity and the concepts behind it, thereby engaging deeply in the ABE goal focused on diversity.

When children are not shown how to use materials successfully, then “misuse” them in the eyes of an adult, they risk being labeled as destructive. When children are forced to stay at a learning or activity center for a long time when they are not interested—or forced to leave when they want more time—they may exhibit intense negative emotions or behaviors (Kuh & Ponte 2022). Both of these scenarios relate to equity because children are denied the instruction they need to be successful with materials and are expected to interact with materials at the adult’s discretion. Child agency is a key part of a strengths-based approach, must be accompanied by scaffolding and responsive teaching, and is crucial to meaningful learning (Galloway, Reynolds, & Williamson 2020). When educators consider how they will model, what they will make explicit, and how they will facilitate agency, they offer children the opportunity to experience empathy and fairness—mindsets that build a bridge to the ABE goal related to justice.

Responsive Scaffolding to Facilitate Action

Scaffolding learning is not simply providing materials related to children’s experiences. It is responding to children’s questions, wonderings, or even concerns, mistakes, or misunderstandings, which will become more frequent and complex as they explore the ABE goals focused on identity and diversity. The more educators address children’s questions, the closer they move toward teaching that is grounded in the ABE goals related to justice and activism.

The ABE goal related to justice is often interpreted as talking about “fairness.” Yet this entry point needs consistent and further messaging if children and families are to embrace the complex aspects of empathy that justice requires. ABE Goal 4 is often framed as “activism,” but it also includes speaking—for ourselves and others—and feeling empowered to act (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, with Goins 2020).



During the family tree project, Nadia had several opportunities to scaffold the ideas and messages children were learning about the strengths, interests, and assets of families and to build bridges among the ABE goals related to diversity, justice, and action. When she overheard a child ask their friend with two moms, “Where is your dad? Do you have a dad?”, she modeled justice (expressing truth and empathy) and activism (speaking up) by responding, “Not every family has a dad. There are many ways to be a family.” Later, when a child new to the classroom said their family was “normal” because they had a mom and a dad, Nadia was encouraged to hear other children respond:

All families are normal families.

Lots of families can have one parent or two moms
or two dads.

These children had developed empathy for their peers and were empowered to speak up in a way that emphasized the strengths each family possesses.

Sometimes, the identities of teachers themselves can link ABE goals, sparking interest and adding new information in a child-centered discussion. Nadia asked Brian, a coteacher, to share his family leaf, which included his husband. She used this as a provocation to open up the conversation.

Nadia: How long have you and Jay been married?

Brian: We have been married since 2015. Can I share a story about me and Jay getting married?

Children: Yes! Yes!

Child: (*whispering to a teacher on the side*) He is married to a boy.

Teacher: (*whispering back*) He is married to Jay. That is his husband.



Brian went on to share that there once were laws that meant gay and lesbian people could not get married and that these laws were not fair. The children agreed, “Oh no, that is not fair!” Brian continued: “When we were singing the song about love makes a family today, it made me really happy. We had a big wedding, ate yummy food, and we walked down the aisle. Do you have any more questions about my family?”

For some children, the idea that a man can be married to another man is new information. It might spur questions, wonderings, or potential misunderstandings about what it means to be a family and the assets of different kinds of families. By presenting this information factually and rooting it in the idea that there are many ways to make a family, educators responsively scaffold children’s understanding of a new concept as well as reinforce goals about diversity and justice.

Following Children's Interests to Bridge Justice and Activism

While educators want to **follow the interests** of children, they must balance complete adherence to children's desires with their own knowledge of how to guide an investigation in a certain direction. They also must balance their aspirations for a project if children decline to participate. Teachers can offer explanations and questions to guide children toward new social and emotional learning, such as about empathy and collaborative participation. They also may need to respect a child's wishes while keeping the door open for a child's re-entry.

For example, not all of the children in Nadia's class wanted to make a leaf for the family tree. Nadia and her team reflected on this and decided to problem solve with these children about what it might feel like not to be represented. In a conversation with one child, Nadia explained that the family tree represented their classroom community, of which he was an important part. She asked, "Would it be fair if everyone was there except for you and your family?" The child agreed to work on his leaf, and that evening at pick-up time, he excitedly showed his mother the tree. This nuanced awareness of fairness is part of the ABE goal focused on justice. It also helped Nadia continue to think about and respond to the interests of each child in her class.

Sometimes teachers cannot simply follow children's interests because the children don't know what they don't know! In those cases, educators must structure activities and conversations to give children the information they need to ask more questions. For example, Nadia had to brainstorm and teach children about the larger school community (the cook, the office manager, the custodian) when children said they wanted to include other people in the school on the family tree. She also could have taken the children into the neighborhood and involved them in interviewing, researching, and learning about people and families outside of school. This kind of community engagement is an important part of the ABE goal focused on activism. Connecting experiences to the world beyond a child's immediate family communicates that the broader community is a place of wonder, strengths, and relationships. It is also a way to expose children to diversity they might not otherwise encounter; frequenting playgrounds, community events, farmers markets, and neighborhood restaurants on a regular basis can help create meaningful positive connections.

Conclusion

ABE is a critical part of early childhood practice. Teaching with intention is key to children's interactions and learning experiences. Integrating the Complementary Curriculum Approach with ABE goals supports this intentionality, along with teacher reflection, decision making, and strengths-based practices.

Identity, diversity, justice, and activism are complex topics. When inevitable moments of conflict or discomfort occur, it is important to stop, pause, and analyze what is happening. Find out more, and listen to what others—including teachers and families—are feeling. What are their concerns? Their fears? Programs can bring clarity to their ABE goals by communicating their visions and missions through community meetings, an active website or blog, social media, and family handbooks. Sharing a program's stance early on helps families to understand curricular approaches. The goal is to work to find common ground, gain new insights, and expand perspectives about each other (Derman-Sparks, LeeKeenan, & Nimmo 2023).

Making Family Structures Visible

Early childhood settings are filled with a variety of family structures and social and cultural contexts. Debbie LeeKeenan (the second author) recalls a parent whose spouse had recently died asking the director of an early learning program how her child's father would be made visible. Talking about death and dying can be uncomfortable for many, bringing up fears about how children will process it. Will they think their family members might die? Will it be too sad to talk about? Inviting families to the program to talk about loved ones who have passed can help normalize talking about death.

Likewise, families with incarcerated members pose the need for thoughtful responses. One program we know of had a children's book that included text about incarcerated family members.

If we do not scaffold conversations about these family structures and contexts and highlight the assets every family possesses, we commit an injustice for the children in these families. They remain hidden, and they internalize the shame and hidden nature of their own identities (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, with Goins 2020). In addition, other children are deprived of learning widely about families and how to take action with and on behalf of those who might be marginalized. One cannot assume why a family might be uncomfortable with certain topics and must respect the right of a family to share what feels right (LeeKeenan 2024).

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Audience: Administrator (director or principal), Faculty, Student (higher education), Teacher

Age: Kindergarten, Preschool

Topics: Other Topics, Equity, Anti Bias, Diversity, YC

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