

Lessons from an 86-year-old Anti-Bias Educator

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“We need all the different kinds of people we can find to make Freedom’s dream come true. So, as I learn to like all the differences in me, I learn to like the differences in you. I like you, no doubt about it. You like me., can’t live without it. We are free. Let’s shout about it. Hooray for Freedom’s Child!”
(Bill Martin)

These words, from one of my favorite children’s picture books, illuminate why I have been an anti-bias/social justice educator all my professional life. Here are ten lessons that have helped me sustain my work.

Background/Context

NAEYC first published *Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children* in 1989. (Derman-Sparks & the ABC Task Force) and then published two further revisions in 2010 and 2020-- *Anti-Bias Education for Young children and Ourselves* (Derman-Sparks & Edwards). Numerous ECE professionals in the USA and internationally (teachers of children, families, and college students, directors/managers of ECE programs and agencies) have embraced anti-bias education’s principles and goals. These are implemented in ways that reflect each country’s history, cultures, and societal dynamics.

Some educators do anti-bias education work with governmental policy and financial support; some experience indifference, and some face overt opposition. Sometimes the political winds in our country encourage us, sometimes they do not. As numerous anti-bias educators from the US and other countries have related to me, the anti-bias journey is exciting and frustrating, challenging yet doable. Wonderful celebratory moments happen from time to time because of persistent, step-by-step efforts. Creativity and flexibility are necessary. Feeling part of a larger movement throughout the world helps a lot.

The vision, mission and goals of an anti-bias education approach have been with us in the USA since slavery, as when courageous enslaved African people found ways to covertly teach enslaved children how to read and write. The on-going effort to eliminate the inequities and

injustices of the systemic racism in the USA that followed slavery has persisted in difficult, unsafe times, and in periods when many people supported change. Right now, in 2026 USA, anti-bias educators in the USA (and in other countries) face complex contexts with governmental and individual opposition on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a significant number of people in our country around the world who support the ideal of “Freedom’s Child” and the values underlying anti-bias education and other social justice education approaches.

Lessons for Keeping On

Being strategic is essential. This means engaging in a cycle of planning, doing and assessing and then beginning the cycle again, based on the lessons from your reflections. Being strategic enables us to meaningfully work with the specific people and communities we are serving.

One: Be clear about why you do anti-bias work. Your vision and mission are the fuel for acting. Be prepared to carry out your beliefs in both supportive and difficult societal times.

Two: Accept that fostering Freedom’s Children demands eternal vigilance, as does democracy. The anti-bias education journey includes experiencing both difficult and supportive times.

Three: Build mutual, respectful relationships with your colleagues and the children and adults whom you serve. These relationships are essential to good early childhood education in general and lay the groundwork for doing anti-bias work. Through these relationships you gather the information you need to make the anti-bias mission and goals, and activities meaningful in your work setting.

Four: Connect with colleagues, and families in our work setting, and with individuals and organizations in your community who share a commitment to anti-bias/social justice values. These relationships provide insights, ideas, critical feedback, and encouragement. Always very helpful, they are especially critical in times where prevailing political power does not support the vision of anti-bias education.

Many anti-bias educators form/join a support group that meets regularly in person or by zoom. Join, participate, and use the resources offered by NAEYC, and your local and state affiliates. My own anti-bias education work would have not been possible without the support I have received over the years from NAEYC.

Five: Assess and analyze the context in which you work. While this is an initial important step, don't prolong it. Engage in critical reflection and assessments periodically during the school year to strengthen your planning. Seek input from allies among colleagues, families, and management in your work setting.

Six: As you plan and implement curriculum, keep in mind that it is the mission and goals of anti-bias education that matter. Plan your learning environment and curriculum to scaffold learning with your groups of children and adults. Activities and teaching styles will vary from program to program. Learn from what doesn't work as well as from what does work.

Seven: Keep updated on the research and lessons from practice to improve your anti-bias education work. New issues arise and old issues continue in changed ways. Many books, articles, in-person conferences and online zoom webinars are available.

Eight: Applaud small changes--- from developing a more diverse children's books library, to creating a total environment that makes all families and children visible to integrating anti-bias education goals into your program/agency's mission, policies, and daily curriculum. I often sing to myself a folk song phrase that goes "inch by inch, row by row, gonna' make my garden grow" to boost my spirits.

Nine: Inform yourself about the people and movements that are part of a long history of justice activism throughout our country's history. Their stories offer us insights, lessons, and inspiration about how to make our country a fair, equitable, and humane society.

Ten: Do not neglect self-care. Doing anti-bias education asks us to pay our best attention to each child, and to constantly use our knowledge and creativity to learn from and include your children's and families' needs. Constructively managing differences of opinions, and even occasional hostile resistance are also essential. Moments of being discouraged, anxious or exhausted do happen. Therefore, we need to regularly engage in relaxing and fulfilling self-care.

My anti-bias educator journey has been a gift. As my long-time colleague Carol Brunson Day wrote

What if someone told you that you could contribute in a small but significant way to making the world a better place?... A chance to make the world fairer and more humane for everybody....

from a place where you have already chosen to be—in your daily work with children and families.... Your reward will be a renewed sense of hope that by your own hand, things really can change” (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, NAEYC, vi)

References

- Derman-Sparks, L & J Edwards. 2010. Anti-Bias Education for Young Children & Ourselves. Washington, DC: NAEYC
- Martin, Bill. 1970. I Am Freedom’s Child. Allen, Texas: DLM Teaching Resources.