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What Kind of Human Do You Want to Be?

Teacher Identities in Anti-Bias Education

by Debbie LeeKeenan and John Nimmo

With Claudia Garcia, Karla Gomez, Nadia Jaboneta, Joyce Jackson, Maddie Piper, Veronica Reynoso, and Brian Silveira

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As we mentor early childhood teachers seeking to live out their ethical commitments to children, we find that teachers settle in comfortably to Anti-Bias Goal #1, "to nurture each child's construction of knowledgeable and confident personal and social identities" (Derman-Sparks, Edwards & Goins, 2020, p. 15). In contrast, many teachers neglect to consider not only who *they* are in the world, but also how these social identities shape their role as teachers and their relationships with children and families. Not surprisingly, this dynamic is especially evident for White teachers, but it also happens to those with other dominant identities by gender, social class, language, and so on. When teachers do share their dominant identities in the classroom, it is often cloaked in the unconscious assumption that everyone in their community shares a similar history and background.

Social identities are "significant group categories that are created and defined by the society in which people live. These include culture, economic class, family structure, gender, language, race, religion and more." (pg. 25). These intersecting identities are both imposed on us to define differential access to power, and also embraced by us as part of how we see ourselves as members of communities. They affect how we view children, families and colleagues, our experience of bias and privilege, and the knowledge and heritage we draw on when developing curriculum" (Derman-Sparks, LeeKeenan, & Nimmo, 2015).

In this article, we (Debbie and John) turn to our experiences making the film "Reflecting on Anti-bias Education in Action: The Early Years" (LeeKeenan, Nimmo & McKinney, 2021). This documentary features anti-bias strategies in the classroom and the

REFLECTING ON
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voices of teachers committed to equity in their daily practice. Eight teachers at three sites in Seattle and San Francisco were invited into conversations with us—individually, as partner teachers, and as a team. Representing diversity across race, gender expression, ethnicity, age, sexuality, social class, and language, we use their words here as the heart of what we have to share. We created a space in which the teachers could be themselves, take risks and share their humanity in authentic ways, exemplifying the parallel anti-bias goal for teachers to "increase [their] awareness and understanding of [their] own individual and social identity in its many facets"(Derman-Sparks, Edwards & Goins, 2020, p.19).

Supporting Children to Feel at Home with Who They Are

The teachers in the film reflected on bringing their social identities into the classroom as a way of modeling authenticity and encouraging children to share who they are. Teacher Veronica Reynoso shared, "Making sure that people are feeling comfortable with themselves comes from you being comfortable being yourself around others. It is a lot of paralleling that with children, and really getting them to show who their authentic selves are, because they are getting to know who they are...to really bring that up with confidence."

Talking about the importance of the connection between home and school, teacher Nadia Jaboneta—who identifies as Latina—reflected, "When I was younger, I went to a school that was predominantly White, and I did not feel confident in sharing who I was. I did not see myself reflected, so it took me years to learn to be confident about who I am. Now, the children know all about me, whether it is my culture, the language I speak at home, or foods that I like to eat."

This process of cultural sharing calls on teachers to dig deeper and share their own stories of growing up as a way of modeling pride in one's heritage. Speaking in Spanish, teacher Karla Gomez brings her culture into the classroom because, "Being from Durango, Mexico, and not speaking the language when I came to this country, I don't want children to suffer from what happened to me. I want them to have a strong identity, culture, and language that they do not lose by trying to fit into a society that has requirements. What I want with these activities (for example, making tortillas with a tortilla press,) is to make children feel comfortable with who they are and their families' values. That is why I bring my culture to the room, so they feel comfortable bringing their family's culture to school."

Photo (courtesy of Filiz Efe McKinney, John Nimmo & Debbie Leekeenan

Filmmaker Filiz Efe McKinney captures teacher Claudia Garcia sharing portfolios with children.

Photo (courtesy of Filiz Efe McKinney, John Nimmo & Debbie Leekeenan

Teacher Veronica Reynoso engages a preschooler about their self-portrait.

Photo (courtesy of Filiz Efe McKinney, John Nimmo & Debbie LeeKeenan

Teacher Karla Gomez shares her family stories about making tortillas.

Opening Windows to Diversity

This process of sharing is not only critical for mirroring and affirming those children who share our own identities, but is also critical to opening up windows to diversity. Karla talked about her efforts to entice all families to make their cultures more visible in the classroom.

"I try to do many activities with all the families, and my classroom goal is to have all families do one thing during the school year," Karla said. "If they do not feel comfortable doing something from their culture, like cooking, they can read a book in their home language. I just keep offering many ideas and eventually they feel comfortable and they come into the classroom to share. I just want them to bring who they are and I want to share who I am."

Brian Silveira, a White teacher who identifies as a gay man, reflected on his own experience of violence in the world, and how this also drives his commitment to opening up the possibilities for children to be "whoever they are." Talking about his approach to dramatic play, Brian shared, "Children need to feel safe to be whoever they want to be and that is what is happening in the dramatic play—they are acting out different ways of being in the world. In one of my first morning meetings, I talked about wearing a skirt. I bring a skirt that I like to wear into the classroom sometimes and I tell the children, 'I want to wear the skirt, but I want to make sure that I feel safe wearing a skirt in the classroom. I am just a little bit afraid that someone might laugh or they might feel uncomfortable. I just want you to know that sometimes I wear a skirt and it is really comfortable. I like it. I like to spin around in it.'"

Brian sees his own expression of gender as one way in which he welcomes children to explore their own personal and social identities in their play.

Risking Being Vulnerable

Bringing all of who you are into the classroom comes with inherent risks—especially if your identities have been marginalized or differ from those represented in the community where you teach. Joyce Jackson, a Black teacher, reflected on responding to children's questions about her hair and skin color.

"Every year, my hair is a big topic. Because I love purple, sometimes I buy purple hair and get it braided into my hair. Children want to know things like why my hair is not like their hair. I just try to answer them in a way that they will understand, but the truth is, I just got to give it to them straight. I don't want them having any false ideas about anything, especially when they ask things that pertain to me.

"Sometimes they will say our skins are not the same color but our eyes are alike. We both have brown eyes. They will compare eye color, hair color, and

Photo (courtesy of Filiz Efe McKinney, John Nimmo & Debbie LeeKeenan

Teachers Brian Silveira and Nadia Jaboneta in conversation.

hair texture. They will say, 'But your hair is curly.' I am like, 'Oh yeah, it is curly.' We will compare curly and straight.

"Then I used to get a lot of them just wanting to touch my hair, which is fine with me. I mean, some of their parents will come and say, 'Does that really bother you to have them touch your hair?' I reply, 'No, they are just 4- and 5-years-old, you know. They are curious. For some of them, you know, maybe they never had a Black teacher before.'"

Joyce recognizes the vulnerability this might raise, but is committed to honoring children's curiosity about diversity.

Photo (courtesy of Filiz Efe McKinney, John Nimmo & Debbie LeeKeenan

Teacher Joyce Jackson discusses hair texture and shares a picture book with a preschooler.

"Some of their questions kind of throw you off. I had one child ask why am I Black, and I was like, 'Hmm, here I am.' But in those situations, you know I do not want to leave them hanging. But I will tell them, 'Let me think about that and let me get back to you,' because I do want their questions to be answered."

In a similar vein, Veronica, who identifies as Latina, reflected on her childhood experiences and how her identity as a person of color provokes questions and conversations with children who do not share her heritage.

"I grew up in Chicago in a community that reflected mine, which was mostly first-generation or immigrant Mexican families, and so being a teacher of color is already a kind of provocation to the environment that I am in now, which is largely [White] with some children of color. Being a teacher of color, I think it is a lot easier answering the children's questions, because I am very comfortable with my identity and my culture, and have had many years to develop that. It is such a vulnerable place, because you are sharing a lot about yourself, and they are sharing a lot about themselves."

For White teachers, it is particularly imperative to recognize that they, too, have a culture and heritage that can be shared in everyday ways that decenter themselves as the "norm."

In one of the classrooms we filmed, each of the teachers uses a life-size persona doll that reflects aspects of their own identities—as well as those of the children—for storytelling and problem solving. Teacher Maddie Piper, who is White and identifies as non-binary, introduced her doll, Nash, during a meeting time.

"Today I want to introduce you to a new friend in our class. This is my friend Nash. It is their first day in our class and they are just looking around at all of you and they are so curious to know who you all are.

"A friend likes to ask the question, 'Are you a boy or a girl?'

"Nash answers, 'I am just a kid.'"

A child comments, "But kids can be boys or girls."

Another quickly adds, "Or they," followed by a third child who says, "Yeah or maybe non-binary."

Maddie continues, "Yeah, just like me, Nash is non-binary, so they are not sure if they are a boy or a girl, so when people ask them are you a boy or a girl, right now they just feel like saying, 'I am a kid,' while they are figuring it out.'"

Later in a team conversation, Maddie reflected on the persona doll story.

"I did not know what questions kiddos were going to have, or what they were going to say, which was nerve-wracking, but also kind of exciting. It is that place of not knowing as a teacher and just being okay with that."

Photo (courtesy of Filiz Efe McKinney, John Nimmo & Debbie LeeKeenan

Teacher Maddie Piper shares their persona doll Nash with preschoolers.

Being Fully Human in the Classroom

In our teacher conversations, we were struck by Veronica's plea to think about our humanity in the classroom. She said, "Whether it is fairness, whether it is your identity, whether it is sharing your cultural diversity or diversity throughout—it is a lot about who you are, how you feel as a human, your emotions, empathy towards others and yourself too. It is all down to that. It is down to, what kind of human do you want to be?"

Veronica challenges us to not only be willing to share more of who we are in the classroom, but also to think about how we support children and families to be fully visible no matter their backgrounds. We see this as not only a matter of our vision and dreams for the children in our care, but also how we, as teachers, want to be in the classroom. This requires challenging the stark dividing lines between our personal and professional lives.

Paulo Freire (1971/2000), the great Brazilian liberatory educator, implored us to be subjects in our lives—to "become more fully human" (p. 44). Likewise, teachers should feel able to bring all of themselves in through the classroom door, an act that is critical to welcoming all children and families into their community, and to opening up honest conversations about diversity and bias.

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