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## Anti-bias classrooms: A case study of two teachers

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# Confronting and Countering Bias and Oppression through Early Childhood Policy and Practice: An Introduction

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“Anti-bias education is needed because children live in a world that is not yet a place where all of them have equal opportunity to become all they could be.” (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 3)

Across the globe, there has been sustained anti-bias and anti-oppressive scholarship and policy work addressing social inclusion in early childhood and teacher education, grounded in the work of Louise Derman-Sparks and the ABC Task Force, 1989 (Kumishiro, 2000; Murray & Urban, 2012; Swadener, Aquino-Sterling, Nagasawa, & Bartlett, 2009). In this special issue, contributors address a range of social inclusion focused policies and practices across continents, including the challenges and opportunities of implementing anti-bias education. This kind of research takes a principled stance as it works to ameliorate, and eventually eliminate, exclusionary practices impacting young children and their families. The primary goal of this special issue is to rethink the importance, conceptualizations, and enactments of scholarship on anti-bias and socially inclusive approaches in early childhood education contexts.

Since the publication of *The Anti-bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children* (Derman-Sparks & the ABC Task Force, 1989), concerns about issues of diversity, equality, inclusion, and social justice have become more mainstream in early childhood policy – if not always in practice. Recent patterns of social exclusion and violence affecting persons of color, refugees, and asylum seekers are a reminder that issues of discrimination and bias are ever present (Farago & Swadener, 2016).

Global uncertainty driven by pervasive neo-liberal and increasingly nativist policies is having a major impact on our relationships with each other as humankind. We are witnessing the risk of global war, rising ethnic cleansing, religious rivalry, increasing poverty, and political uncertainty. This is leading to a heightened urge to blame someone for mounting unemployment, housing penury, and random acts of violence. Matched with the lack of political leadership on social justice issues and increasingly trenchant views on difference, we see scapegoating, confusion, and fear in many sectors of society. We are living in a time in which race, ethnicity, sexuality, and religion, among other identities, have become divisive. At the time of writing this paper, several violent attacks were carried out. In the past months, we saw several attacks including in the Middle East and Afghanistan, and in the United Kingdom, in Manchester and London. Despite the fear of further attacks, the show of solidarity and love from local communities against terrorism was evident. This is an indication that a push back against fear is possible.

To counter and reduce social-ills, early childhood scholars and educators have proposed and practiced pedagogies that place diversity, equality, and social justice at the foundation of curriculum (Smith, Campbell, & Alexander, this issue). Historically, scholars, including Swadener (1988; 1989), have looked at “understanding the roots of racism, sexism, ableism, and other forms of oppression as they were learned (or resisted) in the early years” (Farago & Swadener, 2016, p. 334). “The Anti-bias Curriculum,” first coined by Louise Derman-Sparks and the ABC Task Force in 1989, is an early childhood expression of critical education theories (Freire, 1970; hooks, 2010). The desire to address issues of social justice in early childhood began when Derman-Sparks’ son, Douglas, at 2-years-old, began to ask questions

about himself and his color. She became concerned that the established wing of early childhood education was not addressing young children's developing racial identity and attitudes. Additionally, early childhood educators were continuing and continue today to be trained, without this understanding (Video recorded conversation with Louise Derman-Sparks in 2002 with DECET & VBJK<sup>1</sup>; Farago, Sanders, & Gaias, 2015). Derman-Sparks' personal history of activism, coupled with her emotions about parenting and role as an early childhood educator convinced her that anti-bias work was critical for young children as well as for adults, including educators.

The Anti-bias Approach is a transformative educational approach. Its aim is inclusion and empowerment of all children, and activism in the face of discrimination and oppression. The emphasis is on equality and social justice for both majority and minority children. The four foundational goals for children and adults have been adapted and expanded over many years in collaboration with colleagues internationally and in the U.S. The goals were built on evidence pertaining to children's early development of prejudice and a desire to create a better world for all children.

**Goals for Children** (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006, p. 5)

1. Nurture each child's construction of a knowledgeable, confident self-concept and group identity.
2. Promote each child's comfortable, emphatic interaction with people from diverse backgrounds.
3. Foster each child's critical thinking about bias.
4. Cultivate each child's ability to stand up for her/himself and for others in the face of bias.

**Goals for Adults** (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 21)

1. Increase your awareness and understanding of your own social identity in its many facets (gender, race, ethnicity, economic class, family structure, sexual orientation, abilities/disabilities) and your own cultural contexts, both childhood and current.
2. Examine what you have learned about differences, connections, and what you enjoy or fear across lines of human diversity.
3. Identify how you have been advantaged or disadvantaged by the "isms" (racism, sexism, classism, ableism, heterosexism) and the stereotypes or prejudices you have absorbed about yourself or others.
4. Explore your ideas, feelings, and experiences of social justice activism.
5. Open up dialogue with colleagues and families about all these goals.

While the Anti-bias Approach has been an inspirational resource and has had a substantial impact in raising awareness at policy, professional development, and practice levels in the United States and internationally, there is still much work to be done, as is evident in the articles in this special issue. The Anti-bias Approach has become part of the fabric of much international advocacy and research. The Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training Network (DECET) in Europe was founded on the Anti-bias Approach working collaboratively with Derman-Sparks. The work of DECET has influenced developments at national levels, for example the Equality and Diversity Early Childhood National Network (EDeNn) founded by Colette Murray in Ireland.

Ground-breaking work in the U.S. has long advocated for the mainstreaming of anti-bias education (e.g., Derman-Sparks, 1989; Derman-Sparks, LeeKeenan & Nimmo, 2015; Souto-Manning, 2013; Swadener, 1988, 1989; Swadener & Miller-Marsh, 1995). In Australia, there is a renewed push to ignite the anti-bias movement (see Scarlet, 2016), building on the work of Elizabeth Dau (2001), Glenda MacNaughton (2003), and others. Much of this work is based on, or draws on, the Anti-bias Approach founded by Louise Derman-Sparks and the ABC Task Force (1989).

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<sup>1</sup> Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training (DECET; [www.decet.org](http://www.decet.org)) & Vernieuwing in de Basisvoorzieningen voor Jonge Kinderen (VBJK)

Doing anti-bias work in early childhood can come with personal and professional challenges as Louise Derman-Sparks outlined in 2004, in the foreword to *Ar an mBealach*, an Irish anti-bias training manual. There is increasing agreement among educators in many countries that best practice in early childhood care and education includes implementing principles of diversity and equality. However, learning to do this is not easy nor is there a 'quick fix'. The systems of prejudice and discrimination that shape teachers' personal attitudes and behaviors, and continue to cause inequality in all educational institutions, including early childhood programs, have a long history in our countries. Undoing the effects of this legacy, as well as building more equitable programs, is as challenging as it is rewarding. It needs a commitment of resources and time, effort, persistence, and training that is grounded in a developmental process and active adult learning. (Derman-Sparks in Murray, Cooke, & O'Doherty, 2004, p. 9)

This special issue reminds us of the relevance, indeed urgency, of anti-bias education, given what we continue to witness in our field nationally and internationally regarding numerous examples of segregation and non-recognition of difference (including Indigenous communities and refugee children, gender and family structures). In the research presented here, we all too often witness unintended consequences, including the reinforcement of stereotyping through sometimes well-meaning efforts. Lack of awareness, discomfort, or non-recognition of incidents of bias, discrimination, or racism in early childhood settings are evident. Contributions to this special issue represent a range of research issues and approaches to addressing anti-bias, inclusive, and anti-oppressive education in early childhood contexts. Contributors draw from experiences and research across five nations and the African Diaspora to focus on enactment of anti-bias approaches in early childhood classrooms, in communities, in teacher education, and in national and local policy.

Authors complicate and expand notions of which issues and groups are included in discussions of anti-bias approaches in early childhood contexts, including Indigenous cultures (e.g., Maori, Irish Travellers), marginalized groups (e.g., Children of Color), and sexual minorities (e.g., transgender and gender non-conforming children). Further, several of the articles revisit the persistence and harmfulness of "colorblindness" and provide nuanced discussions of why arguments in support of racial recognition in early childhood are critical. Scholarship in this issue also adds to the documentation that many early childhood educators, particularly those who are white, find it easier to address gender equity than race, and yet often stop short of confronting heterosexism in the classroom. Articles in this issue also interrogate the effects of policies that detract from anti-oppressive work in the field. Many of us doing work in this area have reflected on why anti-bias approaches seemed more visible in the 1980s and 90s, noting the impact of neoliberal policies that restrict time, support, and resources for culturally-based and more child-focused approaches. Finally, at least one article unmask and confronts examples of public resistance to anti-bias practices, particularly when heterosexism is confronted, and outlines the need for support of ally/anti-oppressive educators.

We begin the special issue with Flora Farago's case study of two teachers enacting their interpretations of anti-bias approaches in child care settings in the U.S. with 4- to 5-year-old children. Findings indicate that these educators, both of whom were white, felt more comfortable and skilled at addressing gender and sexism than race and racism, contributing to a growing literature on colorblindness or colormuting in education (e.g., Boutte, Lopez-Robertson, & Powers-Costello, 2011; Husband, 2016; Vittrup, 2016). Farago's findings also document discrepancies between educators' beliefs and classroom practices regarding race, gender, and anti-bias practices. Farago's discussion of implications for children's prejudice and stereotype development, as well as for educators' professional development, frames barriers to anti-bias enactment and raises issues addressed in several of the following articles.

Colette Murray's article provides further background on the Anti-bias Approach and policy, with a focus on pre-service training for early childhood educators in Ireland. Murray's

article unpacks an exercise built on anti-bias goals and principles, *Equality-Proofing* the physical environment, as implemented with 85 undergraduate students. The article discusses findings from student interviews with early childhood managers and practitioners, and students' implementation of the Equality-Proofing Exercise in an early childhood setting. Findings suggests that meaningful diversity and equality training, which supports critical thinking and interrogates diversity concepts and personal assumptions, is necessary to ensure that all children are acknowledged and represented in early childhood settings. Implications for current and future policy development, and pre-service and in-service professional development are highlighted and discussed. With this article, the roles of national policy are introduced, as Ireland, in contrast to the many other nations, has recently enacted policy requiring anti-bias training in professional development.

Mara Sapon-Shevin's essay confronts the "impossibility of learning not to see," as it relates to colorblindness, invisibility, and denial in anti-bias education. Analyzing discourses that compete with the notion that young children can be anti-bias activists, Sapon-Shevin deconstructs the belief that children are "colorblind" or should be taught to be "colorblind" as evidence of their lack of prejudice. Another pervasive belief Sapon-Shevin unpacks is that a "good" inclusive classroom is one in which differences have been rendered "invisible." She further argues that both of these arguments make it improbable that young children could develop skills to be good anti-bias activists. Through making explicit often implicit assumptions about discourses of "colorblindness" and "invisibility," Sapon-Shevin's article connects to Farago's and Berman et al.'s findings (this issue) that explore how children learn about and experience difference.

Rachel Berman, Alana Butler, Beverly-Jean Daniel, Margaret MacNevin, and Natalie Royer focus on tensions in the enactment of an anti-bias policy in Canada and share findings from in-depth interviews with early childhood educators who responded to a question about reporting racial incidents as a "Serious Occurrence" under the City of Toronto's guidelines. Framed in critical race and colorblind theories, and using a discursive analysis of participant narratives, findings suggest that early childhood professionals were reluctant to name and acknowledge incidents of racism, and engaged in discursive strategies that minimized and negated such incidents. Implications for the professional development of early childhood educators and for provincial policy are discussed.

Continuing a focus on Critical Race Theory and advocating an African Diaspora framework, Gloria Boutte, George L. Johnson, Kamania Wynter-Hoyte, and U. E. Uyoata's essay focuses on the revitalization of indigenous African knowledges to engage children and teachers in "leaning about African Diasporic history as a healing antidote against oppression." They discuss how such an approach contributes to imagining a better world and future, taking reflective actions to interrupt oppression. This approach maps well with the activist, anti-oppressive foundation of the anti-bias curriculum framework. This article also unpacks the damage done to Children of Color by persistent Eurocentric perspectives that convey a sense of superiority among white children. The power of teaching and learning about African thought and morality is described as a restorative and healing process for all involved. Consistent with both longer-term (Afrocentric and Pan-African education) and recent movements, including Black Lives Matter<sup>2</sup>, this article speaks to issues raised by W.E.B. Dubois and others in the long and rich tradition of Black intellectualism and dual consciousness.

Turning to Aotearoa New Zealand and a focus on younger children, the article by Ali Glasgow and Lesley Rameka foregrounds voices of Māori and Pacific communities using a narrative research approach, *pūrākau* (stories) of traditional and cultural knowledge and culturally embedded practices for infant and toddler care. The authors discuss findings from six infant and toddler case study settings and their communities based in Indigenous language nest services and other culturally grounded practices. This study has powerful policy

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<sup>2</sup> #BlackLivesMatter was created in 2012 after Trayvon Martin's murderer, George Zimmerman was acquitted for his crime, and dead 17-year old Trayvon was posthumously placed on trial for his own murder in the U.S. Rooted in the experiences of Black People who actively resists dehumanization, #BlackLivesMatter is a call to action and a response to the virulent anti-Black racism that permeates U.S. society ([www.blacklivesmatter.com](http://www.blacklivesmatter.com))

implications for culturally-based programs struggling to survive in an era of neoliberal policy, and makes a strong case for culturally sound pedagogical practice for Māori and Pacific communities in infant and toddler contexts.

Kylie Smith, Sheralyn Campbell, and Kate Alexander's article describes feminist post-structuralist attempts to enact anti-bias education as resistance to sexism and heterosexism in Australian early childhood education. Unpacking activism for gender equity of educators, children, and academics in early childhood classrooms, the authors link public reactions, power relations, and dominant discourses of gender and childhood innocence. The authors analyze the challenges and risks for educators and others "doing" anti-bias work that resists gender discrimination, particularly advocating for gender diversity and multiplicity, and forms of support that are needed for educators to continue their own forms of activism for anti-bias education. They conclude with theories and strategies that have helped them navigate the "roller coaster ride(s) of activism for anti-bias gender equity work." Sharing vulnerabilities as well as collective strengths, this article makes explicit the contestations and resistance to anti-bias activism, and ways to expand and sustain this critical work.

The final article, by Janice Kroeger and Lis Regula, continues the theme of gender equity through an analysis of nuances in teacher education for advocacy and anti-bias approaches for sexual minority and gender non-conforming young children, including transgender children and their families. The authors discuss the use of biological knowledge(s) and fuller understandings of sexuality versus gender, as fluid, but not equal, constructs. The authors discuss current challenges to full inclusion as well as anti-bias responses, rather than bully prevention, to support lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT+) young children and their families, and the role of teachers as a source of support.

The special issue concludes with a book review by Casey Myers, of *The Anti-bias Approach in Early Childhood, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*, edited by Red Ruby Scarlet (2016). This journal represents a collection of scholarship that reflects the diversity of issues and challenges in enacting anti-bias policies, training and practice, which serves to complicate the topic in important ways. We hope that readers will find this special issue relevant and helpful in the collective project of building more inclusive and powerful anti-bias approaches in global policy, and training and practice contexts.

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