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From Our Readers

***This is NOT like that Martin Luther King guy***

Barbara James Thomson's article in the January 1993 issue of *Young Children* suggests a "No" signs activity as a means of teaching young children about how it feels to be discriminated against. I would agree with her position that resolution to the problems of prejudice and discrimination lies, at least in part, in the attitudes we model for young children in our classrooms; however, I believe that her "No" signs activity is neither developmentally appropriate nor an authentic learning experience.

In reference to developmental appropriateness, the parent who responded with "We think Wabash got the idea of discrimination as well as a five-year-old can" exemplifies my point perfectly. The concepts of prejudice and discrimination in a national and cosmopolitan context or "as a legal concept" are quite abstract. I would like to suggest that even tied to a concrete activity, the egocentric nature of young children does not enable them to generalize the experience as a serious societal problem. And, of more importance, this activity does not assist children in developing an understanding of what nondiscriminatory behavior is. What children will carry away from "No" signs day is the sadness to which Thomson eludes.

Thomson stated that the purpose for the "No" signs activity is for children to briefly experience discrimination; however, the activity does not emulate real life—it is not authentic. Rather, the teacher selects characteristics like *those wearing sweat pants* as a means of identifying children who will be discriminated against (I presume her idea is to minimize the sadness by selecting characteristics that can be changed). In real life, however, victims of prejudice do not briefly experience discrimination, and it is not relative to characteristics they can change. So, even if these four- and five-year-olds could conceptualize discrimination, they have not been presented with an accurate picture of its source in our society. At best, I think these children might learn to change, be like everyone else, as a way of avoiding that thing called *discrimination*.

I would advocate for teachers taking a more proactive stance, and Thomson does elude to this in her article—that is, learning experiences need to incorporate acceptance, fairness, and inclusion as continuous characteristics of school. This means that teachers capture opportunities to nurture children's unique characteristics, reflect on authentic experiences that may have been discriminatory, and encourage children to develop according to their abilities and interests. Through such experiences children can begin to understand that whether we are Black, White, handicapped, or otherwise, each of us is alike in some ways and different in some ways. Children become empowered by knowing and accepting who they are rather than who they are not.

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**The author responds:**

Martha Taylor Dever raises some thoughtful questions about the “no” signs activity. Activities and curriculum about antibias are certainly evolving; dialogue among teachers and parents is crucial. Certainly this kind of activity should not be and could not be authentic in the way that taking children to the riverfront when studying rivers or fixing different kinds of food for a study on nutrition might be. Some children do *not* experience significant discrimination in the course of their daily lives.

Given teacher support during the reflection time, children can share feelings they have had after their participation in the activity. These feelings give them, I believe, some data to use as they, through a variety of experiences—certainly not just this one—build their understanding of prejudice and discrimination. Generalizations come at a later developmental stage. My hope is that children who have participated in this prepared activity and have received assistance from teachers in all the relevant situations that spontaneously arise will be building an understanding that includes empathy as well as knowledge.

Barbara James Thomson