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Louise Derman-Sparks

Debbie LeeKeenan
Lesley University

John Nimmo
Portland State University

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**Louise Derman-Sparks, Debbie LeeKeenan, and John Nimmo**

Building Anti-Bias Early Childhood Programs: The Role of the Leader

This article is excerpted from *Leading Anti-Bias Early Childhood Programs: A Guide for Change* (2015), by Louise Derman-Sparks, Debbie LeeKeenan, and John Nimmo, published jointly by Teachers College Press and NAEYC. The book provides a framework and detailed practical strategies for the leader's role in working strategically with staff, families, and the community to implement an anti-bias approach.

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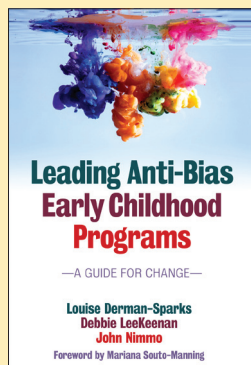
AN ANTI-BIAS EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND education (ECCE) program puts diversity and equity goals at the center of all aspects of its organization and daily life. It involves much more than adding new materials and activities into the already existing learning environment. Rather, broad systemic changes are necessary. The learning environment and curriculum, as well as program policies, structures, procedures, and processes, all come into play. Change also includes the attitudes of the individuals who serve the children and families. In sum, it is "a process, not an event" (Kugelmass 2004, 6).

While the urgency to implement anti-bias education is great from the perspective of the children's needs, the process of change happens over time; an anti-bias education leader must plan for the long haul. Successful anti-bias

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education change needs an intentional and thoughtful strategic approach.

Building an anti-bias ECCE program requires shifting the dominant-culture core of a program's thinking, organizational structures, and practice. It means intentionally moving to a many-cultures anti-bias approach. Shifting the culture of a program brings groups at the margin of early childhood theory and practice into the center of all that happens. Shifting the culture also requires adjustment to the dominant and traditional approaches to ECCE to incorporate other ways of thinking and doing (Anderson & Collins 2001).

Anti-bias leadership builds on the core principles and best leadership practices of the early childhood care and education field. These include relationships of mutual caring and respect; sharing knowledge; reflective, intentional teaching; and collaboration among the staff and between staff and the program leader (Morgan 2000).

Fostering reflective anti-bias educators

Anti-bias education cannot be mastered in a one-time workshop or by reading a book. Most teachers largely learn how to do anti-bias education on the job, in specific settings with specific children and families. Anti-bias leaders provide the necessary time, space, resources, support, and facilitation for teachers and other staff to be part of the process of change. They build a community of learners that enables everyone to explore and grapple with anti-bias issues. A collaborative style of leadership, the preferred early childhood education model, empowers staff members to first begin and then take ownership of their anti-bias work. Anti-bias work grows best in an environment where collegial, mutually respectful relationships among staff and between staff and the program leader are the norm and where a culture exists that fosters open conversation and dialogue, reflection, and risk taking.

All early childhood programs have a staff with a range of awareness, interests, and experiences with diversity and anti-bias education. As the program leader, your charge is to find ways to provide a variety of learning opportunities for all of the staff. You should scaffold the anti-bias education growth of the individual staff members, as well as the movement of the group as a whole.

Managing and negotiating disequilibrium and conflict

Anti-bias work does generate disagreements and dissonance. These dynamics are inevitable as teachers, families, and administrators act on their deeply held and diverse values regarding childrearing and education. Broader contested grounds in ECCE, such as whether schools should have a role in achieving social justice, also fuel these conflicts. Emotional and cognitive disequilibrium often occur in conflict situations, accompanied by a range of feelings such as anger, frustration, and discomfort.

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From a constructivist framework, conflict is a productive part of the learning process. The disequilibrium created by conflict is a prelude to problem solving and sharing information, creating opportunities for people to expand and shift their perspectives and behaviors. With this in mind, anti-bias education leaders embrace conflict as a healthy dynamic in the pursuit of change.

Conflicts in anti-bias endeavors occur when there is dissonance between two or more perspectives on a specific equity, diversity, or bias issue. As program leader, you have significant influence over the course of anti-bias conflict situations at your program and the potential for positive learning and behavioral outcomes. These efforts do not begin when an angry parent or staff member storms into the office. The program climate you create affects which issues become conflicts, as well as the possibility for productive change through conflict. Uncovering and examining one's own fears about the potential for conflict is [another] important step. As part of being strategic, it is necessary to think realistically about the possible reactions to anti-bias change from the various stakeholders and broader community. At the same time, you do not want fears about those real reactions to rule what you do or don't do. You have to do a mental assessment and determine if your fears stem from a perceived or a real problem.

About the Authors

Louise Derman-Sparks, MA, is a longtime early childhood anti-bias educator of children and adults. A former NAEYC Governing Board member, she is the senior author of *Teaching Young Children to Resist Bias: What Parents Can Do* and *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves* (published by NAEYC), and *What If All the Kids Are White? Anti-Bias Multicultural Education With Young Children and Families* (published by Teachers College Press and available from NAEYC). She speaks, conducts workshops, and consults widely throughout the United States and internationally. rldsparks@aol.com

Debbie LeeKeenan, MA, is a consultant and a visiting professor of early childhood education at Lesley University, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and former director of the Eliot-Pearson Children's School, Tufts University, from 1996–2013. debbie.leekeenan@gmail.com

John Nimmo, EdD, is an adjunct professor in early childhood education at Wheelock College, Boston, Massachusetts. From 2003–2013 John was executive director of the Child Study and Development Center and associate professor of family studies at the University of New Hampshire, Durham. jnimmoECE@gmail.com

Conflict among stakeholders about anti-bias work is not, in principle, about winners and losers. Finding win-win solutions to specific conflicts is always the first strategy. However, reality is likely to be more complex.

We have found that working from the concept of conflict maintenance (Olatunji 1998) is particularly useful. From this perspective, you manage conflict in a way that moves the program forward to greater equity and inclusion, rather than simply seeking a quick end to the conflict. Managing conflict productively requires dealing with each situation in its real-life context. You would listen closely to stakeholders, support the respectful sharing of perspectives, and reflect on decisions in the context of multiple views. This requires perseverance and the ability to accept the uncertainty of not knowing the outcome immediately. It also calls on all involved to be open to changing their thinking and to trying out new ways of acting.

Finding the third space

We view the third space as a place where people in conflict, through a distinct process of communication, reach agreement that goes beyond their initial positions. A third-space solution is particularly desirable because it draws on the creativity and openness of both parties to arrive at a new alternative that does not favor either position. This is both an intellectual and emotional experience in which the participants create fresh understandings and solutions. Engaging in it requires that people are willing to enter into dialogue with respect for each other and a willingness to learn (Freire 1970). When possible, the leader models this process in conflicts with stakeholders and facilitates these discussions between teachers and families.

The following steps of *acknowledge, ask,* and *adapt* constitute a useful third-space strategy for responding to conflicts, particularly those involving differences in cultural perspectives (adapted from Derman-Sparks 2013).

Step 1: Acknowledge

- Acknowledge that a culture or values clash exists
- Recognize the feelings for yourself and those involved
- Clearly communicate that a problem exists and needs attending
- Avoid becoming defensive or rushing to judgment

Step 2: Ask

- Collect information that contributes to understanding the underlying issues
- Find out what the issue means to the family, what the family would do or has done in the past
- Clarify the priorities and the values involved
- Examine your own fears and limitations
- Be open to the need to learn
- Hasten slowly—attend to relationships

Step 3: Adapt

- Seek common ground
- Think creatively about alternative approaches
- Consider ways to adapt program policies and practices
- Consider the needs of the child as well as your responsibilities to other children and families
- Be honest about nonnegotiable social justice values

Affirm nonnegotiable values

Conflict discussions and the resulting outcomes highlight the complexity of anti-bias work. A basic premise is that the anti-bias approach does not mean that all beliefs and values are acceptable. Rather, the four core goals of anti-bias education create a framework within which discussions take place (Derman-Sparks & Edwards 2010). In a given situation, one or more anti-bias principles may clash. Since these are not abstract discussions, but attempts to reach behavioral decisions, one principle may have more weight than another in any given outcome.

Strategic leadership requires you to step back from the fray in order to see what is going on. Both teachers and families can lock into a particular viewpoint about what is best for the child. At times, cultural practices will come into conflict with anti-bias values, and you will need to tread carefully, show sensitivity, and be understanding of how change can be difficult. You have to try to balance the several values of anti-bias education and create movement toward the program's mission. The hope is that ultimately groups in a conflict come together and create a workable solution. Nevertheless, while it is important not to be dogmatic and inflexible about goals, you also do not want to abandon the nonnegotiable values of the program's anti-bias mission.

Sometimes respecting the desires of families on the one hand, and of practicing nonprejudice and nondiscrimination on the other hand, may be in contradiction. Consider these possibilities: A parent tells the teacher that he does not want a child with a disability in his son's class because the child will take up too much of the teacher's time. Another parent informs the teacher she does not want her daughter sitting next to a child whose mother is incarcerated. She is afraid that the child will be a bad influence or hurt her own child. Finally, a parent asks the teacher to keep his child out of the dramatic play area because playing there undermines cultural values about the role of men.

How can you balance the principles of respect for a family's beliefs and of nonprejudice and discrimination in these situations? Finding a resolution begins with communicating:

I understand that you are uncomfortable with your child learning about this aspect of diversity. Here at the center we believe strongly that we have to be inclusive of every family. That makes it tough for us to resolve your concern. Tell me more about why you feel so strongly. What might make it

more comfortable for you, even though we cannot do what you are asking because it discriminates against other children?

Fortunately, most conflict situations that rest on cultural differences in childrearing practices have reachable solutions. All parties usually have to accept some changes from what they had wanted. Sometimes the balance tips in favor of the family's needs, at other times in favor of the program. In some cases, you would need to make a final decision, especially when the issue concerns what happens at the program or affects the community rather than a single family or staff member. If it is about a practice at the center, you may need to say, "Well, this is the best we can do," and the parent may respond, "Okay, we can live with that." If it is a practice in the home, ultimately the parents have the right to make that decision if it does not affect what happens in the program.

You will also have times when you have to let go of a desired outcome, at least for the time being, in order to build deeper relationships of trust in the program. We have found that even when a third-space outcome is not possible, staff, families, and administrators still learn from the exploration of the multiple perspectives about the specific conflict. Deeper and more authentic relationships often result.

Concluding thoughts: Documenting the shift toward anti-bias change

Program leaders have an ethical responsibility to hold themselves accountable to move forward in their anti-bias mission. Documenting change in a program's culture, staff, and leadership throughout the year guides the forward movement of anti-bias work. You can identify accomplishments, what more needs doing, and the patterns of change in your program at the individual, classroom, and program levels. Revisions in practice and policy; transformations in beliefs, assumptions, and attitudes; and shifts in the relationships among community members are all part of what gets documented and analyzed.

One of the key challenges for you is capturing the changes in a staff's consciousness as well as the quality of adult–child and adult–adult interactions and relationships. The authenticity and effectiveness of an anti-bias program is as much a function of these elements as it is a result of changes in the curriculum and learning materials. Although documenting changes in consciousness and interactions is delicate, it is important to try.

On a more personal level, we see [the documentation] process as an important opportunity to celebrate your own and the community's efforts and successes along the way. Change is a long-term undertaking and program leaders do not always see the fruits of their commitment to an anti-bias vision. A clear picture of where you have been and where you are now in the journey helps sustain you.

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