

WHY AN ANTI-BIAS CURRICULUM?

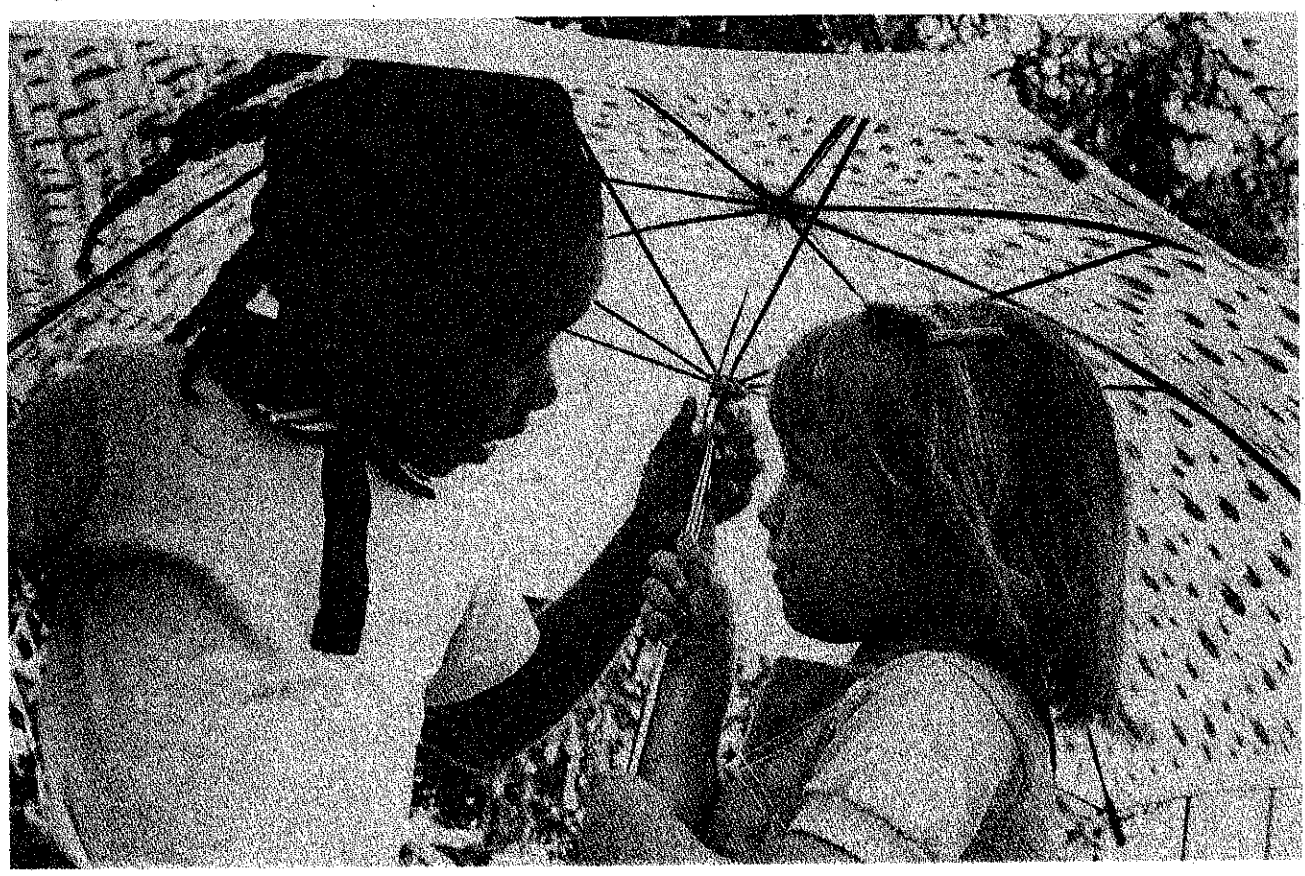


Children's Identity and Attitudes

“Why can't we just let children be? Children don't know anything about prejudice or stereotypes. They don't notice what color a person is. If we just leave them alone and let them play with each other, then everything will be fine,” argue many parents and early childhood teachers. Many adults assume that children are unaffected by the biases in U.S. society. Nevertheless, what we know about children's identity and attitude development challenges this comfortable assumption.

Research data reveal that

- children begin to notice differences and construct classificatory and evaluative categories very early;
- there are overlapping but distinguishable developmental tasks and steps in the construction of identity and attitudes; and
- societal stereotyping and bias influence children's self-concept and attitudes toward others.



Data about how young children first develop awareness about different physical abilities are still sparse, but do suggest that the same three points apply. Awareness of other types of disabilities seems to appear later than the preschool years (Levitt & Cohen, 1976).

Children construct their identity and attitudes through the interaction of three factors:

- experience with their bodies,
- experience with their social environments, and
- their cognitive developmental stage.

Thus, their growing ideas and feelings are not simply direct reflections either of cultural patterns or of innate, biological structures.

Phyllis Katz, writing about racial awareness, suggests that from 2 through 5 or 6, children (1) make early observations of racial cues; (2) form rudimentary concepts; (3) engage in conceptual differentiation; (4) recognize the irrevocability of cues (cues remain constant—skin color will not change); (5) consolidate group concepts; and (6) elaborate group concepts. Evaluative judgments begin to influence this process at step 2 (Katz, 1982). Kohlberg's (1966) stages of gender identity development suggest a similar developmental sequence to Katz. Alejandro-Wright (1985) also finds that racial awareness begins in the preschool years, but cautions that full understanding occurs much later (age 10 or 11). She states that "knowledge of racial classification evolves from a vague, undifferentiated awareness of skin color differences to knowledge of the cluster of physical-biological attributes associated with racial membership and eventually to a social understanding of racial categorization" (p. 186).

Even toddlers are aware . . .

Let's look briefly at what these developmental patterns mean. During their third year of life, children begin to notice gender and racial differences. They may also begin noticing physical disabilities, although so far indications are that this may begin a year or two later. By 2 years of age, children are learning the appropriate use of gender labels (girl, boy) and learning color names, which they begin to apply to skin color.

By 3 years of age (and sometimes even earlier), children show signs of being influenced by societal norms and biases and may exhibit "pre-prejudice" toward others on the basis of gender or race or being differently abled.

Between 3 and 5 years of age, children try to figure out what are the essential attributes of their selfhood, what aspects of self remain constant. They wonder:

Will I always be a girl or a boy?

If I like to climb trees, do I become a boy?

If I like to play with dolls, do I become a girl?

What gives me my skin color?

Can I change it?

If I interact with a child who has a physical disability, will I get it?

Will I always need a prosthesis in place of my arm?

During this time, children need a lot of help sorting through the many experiences and variables of identity as they journey the path to self-awareness.

By 4 or 5 years of age, children not only engage in gender-appropriate behavior defined by socially prevailing norms, they also reinforce it among themselves without adult intervention (Honig, 1983; Roopnarine, 1984). They use racial reasons for refusing to interact with children different from themselves and exhibit discomfort and rejection of differently abled people. The degree to which 4-year-olds have already internalized stereotypic gender roles, racial bias, and fear of the differently abled forcefully points out the need for anti-bias education with young children.

Do we know what we are teaching?

How adults teach children to conform to societal norms and biases, sometimes without intention or awareness of how they are acting, is also documented through many ingenious studies. In one study, done in 1982, observations and teacher-directed interviews in more than a dozen mainstream and special education early childhood classrooms in California, North Carolina, Illinois, and New York revealed not a single classroom with images of differently abled people (Froschl & Sprung, 1983). In an observational study of 158 children ages 2½ to 5 years, in preschools, girls and children with disabilities were particularly likely to experience "over-help" and "over-praise" from teachers. The researcher concluded that differently abled children and girls in general are trained for dependence and passivity, not for independence:

If a three-year-old boy and girl are getting ready to go out to play and are attempting to put on jackets, the girl is more likely to receive help. If both receive help, the girl will probably have her jacket put on for her, the boy will be shown a technique for putting it on himself. If the same situation arises and one child is disabled, it is the disabled child who will have the jacket put on, whether a girl or a boy. This is the beginning of the syndrome of "learned helplessness." (Froschl & Sprung, 1983, p. 21).

Studies also reveal that teachers praise young girls mainly for appearance, cooperation, and ob-

dience while praising young boys mainly for achievement. Teachers tend to describe boys as more active than girls, even in cases where research instruments showed similar levels of activity (Hoffman, 1983).

Homophobia, the fear and hatred of gay men and lesbians, is another form of gender bias adults teach young children. As Letty Cottin Pogrebin, author of *Growing Up Free: Raising Your Child in the 80's*, points out:

Before children have the vaguest ideas about who or what is a homosexual, they learn that homosex-

Some Definitions of Terms

Anti-bias: An active/activist approach to challenging prejudice, stereotyping, bias, and the "isms." In a society in which institutional structures create and maintain sexism, racism, and handicappism, it is not sufficient to be non-biased (and also highly unlikely), nor is it sufficient to be an observer. It is necessary for each individual to actively intervene, to challenge and counter the personal and institutional behaviors that perpetuate oppression.

Bias: Any attitude, belief, or feeling that results in, and helps to justify, unfair treatment of an individual because of his or her identity.

Handicappism: Any attitude, action, or institutional practice that subordinates people due to their disability. Handicappist institutional practices prevent the integration of disabled people into the mainstream of society and keep them socially and economically oppressed.*

Homophobia: A fear and hatred of gay men and lesbians backed up by institutional policies and power that discriminate against them.**

People of color: All the different national or ethnic groups that are targets of racism in the U.S. This includes Asian-Pacific Americans, Black Americans, Latino and Puerto Rican Americans, Native Americans. Use of the inclusive term is not intended to deny the significant cultural and historical differences among these groups.

Prejudice: An attitude, opinion, or feeling formed without adequate prior knowledge, thought, or

reason. Prejudice can be prejudgment for or against any person, group, or sex.*

Pre-prejudice: Beginning ideas and feelings in very young children that may develop into real prejudice through reinforcement by prevailing societal biases. Pre-prejudice may be misconceptions based on young children's limited experience and developmental level, or it may consist of imitations of adult behavior. More serious forms are behaviors that indicate discomfort, fear, or rejection of differences.

Racism: Any attitude, action, or institutional practice backed up by institutional power that subordinates people because of their color. This includes the imposition of one ethnic group's culture in such a way as to withhold respect for, to demean, or to destroy the cultures of other races.

Sexism: Any attitude, action, or institutional practice backed up by institutional power that subordinates people because of their sex.*

Stereotype: An oversimplified generalization about a particular group, race, or sex which usually carries derogatory implication.

Whites: All the different national ethnic groups of European origin who as a group are disproportionately represented in the control of the economic, political, and cultural institutions in the United States.

* From *Guidelines for Selecting Bias-Free Textbooks and Storybooks* (CIBC, 1980).

** From *Homophobia and Education* (CIBC, 1983).

uality is something frightening, horrid and nasty. They become homophobic long before they understand what it is they fear. They learn that "what are you, a sissy?" is the fastest way to coerce boys into self-destructive exploits. (Pogrebin, 1980, p. 12)

Moreover, homophobic attitudes and misconceptions about homosexuality also interfere with opening up nonsexist play options for young children when teachers and parents accept the false assumption that what a child does determines his or her sexual orientation.

Lessons about the value of racial identity also occur repeatedly. Just speaking English teaches differential values for whiteness and blackness. The dictionary lists 44 positive meanings for whiteness, while blackness has 60 negative ones (Hoffman, 1983). One pervasive example is the equation of white with cleanliness and black with dirt. Think of the popular children's book *Harry the Dirty Dog* (Zion, 1956). A white dog falls into a coal bin and becomes all black, i.e., dirty. His family doesn't recognize him until he gets washed and then reemerges as the dog they love—white.

Young children are harmed by the impact of sexism, racism, and handicappism on their development. Gender stereotyping closes off whole areas of experience to children simply because of their sex. Consequently, neither boys nor girls are fully prepared to deal intellectually or emotionally with the realities and demands of present life. Handicappism severely harms differently abled children by limiting access to the educational experiences necessary for well-rounded development and by interfering with the establishment of a proud self-concept. Able-bodied children are also harmed because handicappism prevents them from understanding and comfortably interacting with the full range of human variability and teaches a false and anxiety-producing sense of superiority based on their not being "disabled."

Research exists

Research about the impact of racism on children's identity development exposes the damage it inflicts on both White children and children of color. Most of the studies about children of color have focused on Black children. After reviewing these studies, Cross (1985) argues that to understand Black children's identity development, it is necessary to distinguish between personal identity

and reference group orientation. The first category includes self-concept factors such as self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-evaluation. The second category includes factors such as racial identity and awareness, race esteem, and racial ideology. Using his two categories to analyze the research results of studies on Black children's self-concept, Cross concludes that (1) most studies actually looked at reference group orientation and not personal identity; (2) Black children's personal identity is equal to or surpasses White children's; (3) Black children's reference group orientation comes out low in many of the studies; and (4) low reference group orientation impedes Black children's ability to withstand and challenge the damaging impact of racism on their life experiences (Cross, 1985).

Low reference group orientation is a product of young Black children's (and other children of color's) experiences in the dominant culture, in which schooling plays a major role. In addition, Black and other children of color are disproportionately faced from an early age with the risks of poor housing, inadequate health care, poverty, and family unemployment. Given these realities, a number of Black writers conclude that Black children need to develop an extended self-identity (Semaj, 1985) that includes a strong group identity as well as an individual identity. Race consciousness and pride, or, in Cross's words, high reference group orientation, provide a foundation for the resilience and coping strategies necessary for resisting racism (Cross, 1985). Studies on children of color from other groups are fewer in number; however, some also suggest that all children in a political and cultural "minority" status in our society need to construct a strong group identity for healthy development (Beuf, 1977; Gutierrez, 1982; Levine & Ruiz, 1978; Milner, 1983).

Only a handful of studies have been done about White children. Those that do exist agree that racism damages White children intellectually and psychologically. Bernard Kutner (1985) found that racial prejudice in young children affects their ability to reason and distorts their judgment and perception of reality. Kenneth Clark (1955) identified the disturbing moral hypocrisy and double messages White children are taught about racial equality. Alice Miel (1976) also found that White children "learn to be hypocritical about differences at a very early age. The prejudices of their society

were still very much with them, but they had it drilled into them that it was 'not nice' to *express* such feelings" (p. 13).

What is our responsibility?

Early childhood educators have a serious responsibility to find ways to prevent and counter the damage before it becomes too deep. Selma Greenberg (1980) forcefully argues for active intervention to remedy the cognitive, social-emotional, and physical deficits brought about by constraining gender stereotypes that limit growing children's access to specific areas of experience:

When they enter an early childhood environment, children are more open to friendships with members of the other sex, and more open to non-stereotypic play experiences than they are when they leave. Clearly, while the early childhood environment cannot be held solely responsible for this biased development, it cannot be held totally guiltless either. (p. 5)

Greenberg suggests that early childhood teachers reevaluate existing early childhood curriculum and develop ways to prevent and remediate the developmental deficiencies created by gender stereotyping.

Other researchers also conclude that active intervention by teachers is necessary if children are to develop positive attitudes about people of different races and physical abilities. Contact with children of various backgrounds is *not* enough. For

example, Cohen (1977) states that "in the absence of a variety of supports, direct contact can exacerbate mildly negative reactions" (p. 8). Moreover, Sapon-Shevin (1983) finds that "interventions not handling the direct confrontation of difference seem doomed, or do little more than bring temporary changes in the patterns of social interaction and acceptance within integrated groups." Consequently, "mainstreaming should not be viewed as an effort to teach children to minimize or ignore difference, but as an effort to teach them *positive, appropriate* response to these differences" (p. 24).

Goodman's (1964) research about young children's racial attitudes adds further substantiation to the position that direct contact is not enough. She documented numerous examples of biased behavior and feelings as she watched children play "freely" with each other in interracial, "nonbiased" preschool programs. Emihovich (1980), looking at children's social relationships in two integrated kindergartens, found that structure and teaching methodology significantly affected the amount and quality of children's interracial peer interaction. Even though both teachers espoused pro-integration attitudes, interracial interaction was high and positive in one classroom but low and negative in the other.

In sum, if children are to grow up with the attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary for effective living in a complex, diverse world, early childhood programs must actively challenge the impact of bias on children's development.