Confronting Prejudice in the Early Childhood Classroom

by Luisa Araujo and Janis Strasser

When teachers confront prejudice actively in early childhood settings, the classroom can be a place where children celebrate diversity.

(1) Ms. B.: Okay, let's talk about *Peter's Chair* (Keats 1967). Did you like the story? What was your favorite part?
(2) Brittany: When Peter helped the father paint the chair.
(3) Nelson: I like when he sees the high chair and then runs away.
(4) Laura: When he was hiding.
(5) Jose: I didn't like the story.
(6) Ms. B.: So, Jose, you didn't like the story. Why not?
(7) Jose: Black people are bad.
(8) Ms. B.: Just because they are a different color doesn't mean they are bad or good.
(9) Lucas: Blacks are strangers.
(10) Ms. B.: There are whites who are strangers. Tell me something: If you go on this street right now and if a white man comes and tells you 'Lucas, your father said you can come with me; I'm taking you home,' is he a stranger? There are whites who are strangers; there are blacks who are strangers. We shouldn't look at people's color.
(11) Lucas: Only if you know them, you can go with them.
(12) Ms. B.: Right, and there is no difference if they're black or white.
(13) Nelson: People are black, and they think they are good people.
(14) Ms. B.: Very good. There are white teachers and black teachers here at school, and I have a lot of black friends.
(15) Melissa: There *are* black teachers.
(16) Ms. B.: What you have to understand is that your skin color doesn't matter. Look at me and look at Brianna. I'm darker. That doesn't make me a bad person.
(17) Jessica: I have a black friend.
(18) Ms. B.: Good. What we have to understand is that sometimes mom or dad or TV tells us that there are bad people around.

After Jose's comment that "black people are bad" (line 7), Ms. B., the kindergarten classroom teacher, took an active role in clarifying this misunderstanding. First, she responded promptly to the misconception advanced by another child that "blacks are strangers" (line 9). She created a problem-solving scenario to show that a stranger can include both black and white people (line 10). She thereby minimized the importance of skin color and focused instead on the understanding of the concept of strangers. This, in turn, led Lucas to conclude that you can go with people if you know them (line 11), regardless of their skin color.

Secondly, Ms. B. used Nelson's positive comment about African-American people being good (line 13) to offer concrete examples about African-American teachers in the school. Finally, she addressed stereotypes, again using a concrete example—her skin color—to illustrate that skin color doesn't make a person bad (line 16). Jessica followed her lead and shared her personal experience: "I have a black friend" (line 17). In summary, Ms. B. emphasized that human qualities, as portrayed in

the media and mentioned by family members, are about people in general and not about a specific group of people who share the same skin color.

This example from an insightful teacher shows what an active role in addressing children's racial comments might look like. Clearly, this transcript shows that the children have developed "racial language" to describe themselves and others and that their teacher tried to change their misconceptions about race and skin color (Carnes 1997). Ms. B.'s practices in facing prejudice in her bilingual kindergarten classroom relate to research in the field of multicultural education. She has embarked on a journey toward celebrating diversity. Use of multicultural children's literature and the implementation of an antibias classroom environment enable children to confront their prejudices and to celebrate diversity.

Research into Practice

Ms. B. used many of Crary's (1992) guidelines for dealing with differences and helping young children to become more comfortable with different kinds of people:

- Respond promptly.
- Give simple answers.
- Model respectful behavior both verbally and nonverbally.
- Acknowledge children's fears.
- Clarify misconceptions.
- Introduce differences via books.
- Offer children experiences with real people.

By age three or four, children have already begun to construct their gender and racial identity. Stereotypes, prejudices, and practices in homes, communities, and the media can negatively affect children's feelings about them-

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selves and others. Derman-Sparks (1983, 3) warned that young children may develop "pre-prejudice," which she defined as "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."

Crary (1992) and Beaty (1997) have suggested several ways to deal with young children's fear and rejection of differences. The cultural diversity of young children can be celebrated by helping them see their common bonds and by incorporating into the curriculum children's literature and meaningful activities. Picture books, in particular, can inspire imaginative experiences for children (Keifer 1995). Furthermore, young children develop social-thinking strategies that enable them to be more assertive and effective in solving peer-related problems after being read specific picture books and engaging in related school activities (Bhavnagri and Samuels 1996).

The use of words such as "black" and "white" as they apply to skin color may be confusing and serve to categorize racial groups into "us" and "them" (Holmes 1995). Classrooms where children learn that people's skin color reflects an assortment of colors from peach to mahogany and honey mustard use language categories to reflect diversity. Thus, they build inclusive, equitable, and caring communities where there are a lot of "us." Of course, this can be done easily in diverse classrooms where children are from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. But what can teachers do to face prejudice when all the children in their classrooms are differing shades of peach?

In one study in a rural Colorado area without much racial or ethnic diversity, preschool children exchanged photos, videos, artwork, and other artifacts with children in a racially diverse New Jersey preschool (Koeppel 1992). By sharing aspects of their home, family, and school communities, in developmentally appropriate ways, the Colorado children began to refer to their penpals as "friends" rather than describing them as "black."

These are some of the ways through which we can help children understand similarities and differences between people and question race-related stereotypes. Nonetheless, teachers should move themselves and their children from a level of awareness or tolerance for diversity to celebrating diversity. In this way, teachers can engage in multicultural education that aims at social justice. Education in a democratic society should help students acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they will need to participate in civic action to make society more equitable and just (Banks 1991). Basic characteristics of multicultural education include education that is antiracist, important for all students, and pervasive, and that focuses on social justice and critical pedagogy (Nieto 2000).

From Awareness to Celebration

In addressing Jose's fears about "black people," Ms. B. journeyed beyond the initial level of tolerance toward a higher level of valuing diversity. Nieto (1994; 2000) proposed four levels of understanding diversity. Tolerance, the lowest level, implies that differences are acknowledged and, perhaps, accepted. Ms. B.'s acknowledgment of Jose's comment fit a portion of Nieto's definition of tolerance: "No overt signs of discrimination are acceptable" (Nieto 2000, 342). The highest level includes affirmation, solidarity, and critique and requires many opportunities for young children and their teachers to explore their values regularly as an integral part of the curriculum. Nieto (2000, 242) defined this level, in part, as when "policies and practices . . . affirm diversity and challenge racism" and "everyone takes responsibility for challenging racism and discrimination."

According to Nieto (2000), true multicultural education includes instructional strategies and interactions among teachers, children,

and families. Often, teachers introduce into their curricula activities such as "International Food Day" or "Pretend Visits to Another Country" and think that these tourist approaches to sharing diversity will promote cultural understanding. Although these activities may introduce students to tolerance, this approach does not lend itself to the affirmation of diversity.

Celebrating Diversity

The use of picture books, with discussions and related activities, can be a first step in creating within the early childhood classroom an "anti-bias environment" (Derman-Sparks 1989). Teachers can expand children's repertoire of "racial language" by reading diversity books, a new genre of children's picture books that addresses issues of skin color, gender, and ethnicity, and demystifies physical challenges (Strasser 1999). These books introduce children to rich language such as "the roaring browns of bears and soaring eagles" and "whispering golds of late summer grasses" (Hamanaka 1994) to describe skin color. Class discussions then can center on stereotypes of race, ethnicity, gender, and disabilities to enable children to express their feelings of bias.

A resource all teachers should have is *Building Bridges with Multicultural Picture Books: For Children 3–5* (Beaty 1997). The suggested selection of books with related activities depicts diverse children in the various roles of friends, helpers, and heroes, and portrays them as caring, sharing individuals. In addition, teachers can provide opportunities for children to engage in hands-on activities, like mixing paints to match their own skin color, to help children understand that each person's color is unique and comprised of a blend of tans and browns. Other resource books and articles for teachers offer abbreviated lists of diversity picture books (Derman-Sparks 1989; Neugebauer 1992; Strasser 1999).

The antibias classroom environment should include a range of materials reflecting children, adults, and diverse family configurations of various racial and ethnic makeup engaged in nonstereotypic

gender activities. Photos, books, and other images of people doing jobs in and out of the home, and engaged in various recreational activities, depicting diversity in family styles, also should be displayed. Dolls, dramatic play equipment, art materials, and manipulatives should reflect the same criteria. Checklists are available for teachers to evaluate their own early childhood classrooms and analyze books and materials for racism, sexism, and other diversity issues (Derman-Sparks 1989; Neugebauer 1992).

Oral storytelling by teachers, families, and students also can be used to address, either directly or indirectly, issues of diversity (Derman-Sparks 1989; Paley 1995). Emphasis on quiet classrooms and written work has failed to acknowledge the importance of oral traditions in learning in African-American cultures (Hale 1991; 1992). Through their oral stories, children share much information about themselves and their beliefs. Oral storytelling is congruent with the cultures of several minority groups and has proven to be an effective way for children, families, and schools to communicate, even in classrooms where children are from the same ethnic group. Parents' stories help build a sense of community within the classroom (Paley 1995).

Miller and Mehler (1994) have supported the importance of children's storytelling about their home and family life. Vivian Paley, a kindergarten teacher, researcher, and author of many books about life in the early childhood classroom, constructs her own stories for her kindergarten classes. When an African-American doll is not played with in a predominantly European-American classroom, Paley (1994, 147) shares a story about "Magpie," a bird, meeting a little princess:

> *Magpie watched the child a moment longer. Her skin reminded him of the soft brown of a young robin and her hair the black of a raven's tail. Where he came from the children were more the color of the pale peaches that grew in Princess Alexandra's courtyard.*

. . . 'Is this your castle?' Magpie asked. The girl nodded. 'I am Annabella and my father is Prince Kareem. That's an African name. We're descended from African kings and queens. Would you like to meet father?'

As Paley's story unfolds, it becomes the catalyst for the three African-American girls in Paley's class as well as the European-American girls to value the African-American doll. The story also becomes a vehicle for the children to explore their ethnic identity and a voice for Paley, a European-American teacher, to connect to her African-American students' identity.

Derman-Sparks (1989) noted four sources from which antibias stories can emerge:

- issues that emerge from children's daily lives;
- events that are currently happening in the world;
- information that the teacher wants children to have; and
- history.

She has advocated the use of "personna dolls" to enhance storytelling. These dolls have names, family histories, and specific characteristics. They, like Paley's Magpie, can become a vehicle for introducing and telling stories about feelings regarding differences, such as Jose's feelings about black people being bad. Derman-Sparks (1989) described 16 personna dolls. Teachers can create their own dolls or puppets as they shape the stories.

In addition, teachers can develop curricula around children's homes, families, and communities. Learning about the lives of their peers helps young children develop understandings of diversity. Inviting families into the classroom, asking them to share their traditions, family histories, and day-to-day lives can become a rich component of classroom life. Sending home a questionnaire about favorite family stories, games, songs, relatives, and other aspects of culture can be a good first step (Williams and De Gaetano 1985).

Similarly, teachers should help young children recognize, internalize, and use rules to guide their social behavior. Clear, simple rules that are developmentally appropriate can offer strategies to deal with name-calling, power struggles, and moral issues (Jordan, Cowan, and Roberts 1995). Paley (1992) titled a book after one such rule she created for her kindergarteners—*You Can't Say You Can't Play*. Rules that address issues of justice within the classroom help eliminate bias and promote fairness (Carnes 1997).

Finally, by engaging in constant self-reflection, teachers must become aware of their own unconscious racist assumptions and of the portrayal of racist stereotypes in their classrooms (Wynne 1999). Do we have high expectations for all children? Are our classrooms free of books and materials that perpetuate stereotypes and racism? Do we model fairness and understanding through what we say and do?

Through self-reflection and the creation of classrooms focusing on children, families, and language-rich strategies for using stories, books, materials, and activities, Ms. B. and all teachers can help Jose and all children redefine misconceptions about race, gender, ethnicity, and other forms of diversity.

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