

Reconceptualizing Inclusion Through Anti-Bias Curriculum

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Tensions can arise when biased thoughts and practices are uncovered through discursive events in early years classrooms. This paper challenges the common practice of disregarding childhood curiosities in an attempt to ease tension and remove the risk of discomfort for some adults in caregiving and educating roles. Through a conceptual shift from a futurity of inclusion to an urgent call to action that problematizes the exclusion of nonhuman subjects within the curriculum, the construction and implementation of anti-bias curriculum is offered as a vehicle to the realization of holistically inclusive early learning spaces.

Key words: anti-bias curriculum; interconnectedness; worlding; belonging; reflexivity

This paper reconceptualizes anti-bias curriculum in early years settings. In the spirit of inclusion and advocacy, this paper proposes to reimagine inclusivity to expand the definition of diverse learning spaces beyond a humancentric collective by offering the environment and nonhuman inhabitants agency in anti-bias curriculum making. The ideas expressed throughout this paper are intended as invitations to reflect as we work toward cultivating learning spaces that welcome the voices and influence of all early years stakeholders—educators, children, families, the indoor and outdoor environment, and the human and nonhuman communities where these spaces are investigated and explored.

In my early childhood education practice, I had not understood the term *anti-bias* as relevant to early years curriculum. This topic sounded heavy,

politically charged, and wrought with problematizations that could wait until we tackled more “appropriate” and timely subject matter. As is often the case, recent exposure to this contextual vocabulary spurred an initial exploration of the available literature on the subject. Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2019), focusing on (human) inclusion, offer four goals of anti-bias curriculum—identity, diversity, justice, and activism—which can be employed to “create a safe, supportive learning community for every child” (para. 2). Anti-bias curriculum foregrounds the development of “caring connections across all dimensions of human diversity,” “empathic interactions with people from diverse backgrounds,” and “comfort and joy with human diversity” (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020, p. 6). It occurred to me that I have been involved in anti-bias curriculum construction for many years. I had unknowingly been doing advocacy work through the lens of inclusion in my home since my children began to speak and observe their world. When pondering the importance of this advocacy work as conducted and contextualized in an early years carer/educator role, I realized that it is critical that educators become aware of their personal “feelings” in regards to these matters (Kuh et al., 2016, p. 61).

Comments that I had fielded in the moment throughout the years while mothering and working with children in care and educational settings began to find their way back into my awareness. “That guy has girl hair!” “Why don’t pets live with their parents?” “How does that character have two dads?” “That boy has black skin.” These comments coursed into the conversation with an element of curiosity, and not a stitch of judgment. It was an

audible articulation of a new observation with the readiness to commit this new experience to memory after dialoguing and reasoning occurred.

In an effort to coconstruct curriculum and make space for alternative ways of being, we can use situational events as they arise in our early years spaces. In my practice as a preschool director, I have often observed tensions between children as they negotiated roles in their imaginative play, as well as when they entangled with nonhuman elements of their learning spaces. Although anti-bias curriculum is traditionally viewed as a framework for living well together as humans, we can also explore the goals of this framework to reconceptualize diverse relationships and inclusion beyond a humancentric model. In the case of one event that I observed in a preschool classroom, the children had transformed their space into a world of crime and justice. The children were all interacting through a binary of superheroes or villains. Another child arrived and he was immediately met with invitations to choose his role: superhero or villain. The child declined those offers and said he wanted to be a dragon. The group of children then discussed whether the dragon would fit into the superhero or villain category. The majority felt the dragon would likely resemble a villain. The child rejected the binary and restated that he was neither superhero nor villain; he was a dragon. My involvement as the adult in this process was to observe and leave space for the children to traverse the tensions that can accompany the unknown while being present to co-explore differences, if needed in the spirit of inclusion. After some passionate discussion, the room became still for a moment as the group of children determined what the concept of breaking the binary would mean to their play. They then collectively welcomed the idea of a third option, and the play was back on with new and wonderful momentum as they navigated their world with acceptance of this different way of being. This is what can happen when we refuse to shy away from the discomfort often found in the beginning stages of reflexivity as we enter an awareness of our previously unacknowledged beliefs.

After some thought, I realized the impact a parent or educator can have in those moments, given that our reaction to differences can model and express bias and fear (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020). As a graduate student in the field of early childhood education, I am challenging myself to reflect on my multiple roles as a preschool director, Sunday school teacher, and mother of two young children while I explore anti-bias curriculum making.

Anti-bias curriculum making

An anti-bias approach requires educators to be accountable for the opinions we hold and to be aware of the biases we bring into the classroom. This is not to say that educators must realign their values, religion, or cultural imperatives, but there is an obligation to the children within the setting to accept them for who they are and where they come from. For their sense of self to be developed according to their intrinsic values, their curiosities must be respected and encouraged. We must mentally position ourselves to welcome each student to the classroom with an open heart and mind in an effort to understand and value our interconnectedness. We need to make our classrooms safe spaces for the children to feel a sense of belonging and not influence them to feel as though their home lives are to be a source of shame or grounds for othering. Children attending early years programs have varied experiences and home lives that contribute to their outlook and understandings of diversity. Some of the experiences that children carry with them to the classroom might have shaped a negative outlook on diversity; therefore, we must discover pathways to support these children in their journey through anti-bias curriculum. Bias is a learned behaviour that can also be unlearned and replaced with an openness to new possibilities and acceptance of others, not to replace one's own standing but to move forward with confidence that there is space for more than self within a setting. Rather than viewing acceptance dichotomously, we can learn alongside one another (human and nonhuman), as there is room for acceptance of self and others simultaneously. When we prioritize inclusion we can deconstruct barriers that have previously marginalized members of classrooms and communities.

Inclusion

In this paper, inclusion is explored as a collective-building entity. The essence of this entity honours diversity as it is found and acknowledged through organic and intentional encounters within early childhood education. While constructing anti-bias curriculum, we can entangle inclusion and diversity by welcoming an awareness of similarities and differences (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020). In doing so, we make an intentional choice to build a collective that is strengthened by the participants within the learning community. In this model of living together, we can observe, value, and discuss the differences found through diversity without breaking down the collective and risk privileging individuals over the community. We concurrently ensure that all children are heard, included, and appreciated as members of the collaborative. The parts of the whole are then able to entwine ecologically rather than block one another from the crucial components for growth. An ecological perspective considers the interconnections within an environment and offers an understanding that the function and well-being of one part relies on and affects its co-inhabitants. A collective can be impacted by either the strain or flourishing of one individual part.

Although anti-bias work has been active for decades, a satisfactory realization of this work is still highly speculative. What world could we create with children if the consistently modelled normative adult behaviour was that of inclusion? The observation of differences might encourage a deeper understanding of the fellow inhabitants of our temporal spaces rather than the status quo of eliciting a judgment response through a comparative algorithm of othering. Through pedagogical imaginaries, one could concur that relationships could deepen through the connective properties of pedagogy as we are elevating the relational tools developed in the early years. How could these relationships open space for the inclusion of a “more-than-human” (Hodgins et al., 2020, p. 17) collectivity?

Moving past humancentric curriculum

Discursive renderings of diversity in early years curriculum run the risk of “dichotomized consciousness” (Husband, 2010, p. 70), or a polarized misunderstanding that there are only two viable ways of being, generally one desirable and the other undesirable: good/bad, normal/different, human/nonhuman. When we push past these divisive narratives, we can encourage the children to lead us into new possibilities of thought and action that offer space for the advocacy of their co-inhabitants.

In addition to the inclusion of all humans regardless of race, sociocultural factors, religion, or gender, we have necessarily moved the marker and find ourselves going beyond the discourse of antiquated and exclusionary humancentric ideology. As imagined by Nelson et al. (2018), “common worlds consist of the full range of complex relationships, traditions, and legacies that we inherit in the specific places in which we live” (p. 7). A speculative depiction of a common world decenters humans by creating a holistically inclusive space that can and should include humans, various species, land, and the interconnections existing in modern practice as well as historically, where “playing well together is understood as a human–more-than-human ethical responsibility” (Hodgins et al., 2020, p. 17). This work is not optional in the global climate in which we live out our temporalities.

In general, we have been working toward inclusive spaces in early years settings and utilizing imaginaries of what inclusive spaces might render. We have vocalized an essential provocation to create learning communities that we speculate can be visualized as a future of living well together, but the enactment of inclusion for only the human world is no longer sufficient. In the field of early childhood education, as we diverge from a humancentric positionality, speculative imaginaries depict a space between the binaries we have previously accepted, in the form of a space to live that rejects the dichotomous concept of separating the “human and non-human” worlds (Nelson et al., 2018).

An experience I share with my children each summer as we navigate outdoor spaces is realized through learning to live with bees. My one son is terrified of being stung, so he will avoid situations where bees may be present, but he is also caring and would not want harm caused to bees to appease his avoidance. As a collaborative community, the children and I often discuss alternative approaches to interacting with nature without asking the space to be altered or the inhabitants to be excluded for our enjoyment. We are better equipped to “do the right thing” rather than “do things right” (Urban et al., 2011, p. 33) when we bring a pedagogical compass to our curriculum making rather than bringing information derived from a textbook through a methodical knowledge-transferring persona (Ingold, 2011). We can weather the storm of temporal uncertainty when we elevate building and merging relationships. Through this reimagining of environmental inclusivity, the world we inhabit is given agency within our pedagogical encounters. Encounters with multifarious elements in pedagogical spaces require a shift “from encouraging individual development to fostering collective dispositions” (Common Worlds Research Collective, 2020, p. 10).

Intentionality, interconnectivity, and reflection

To offer a greater understanding and encourage the construction of anti-bias curriculum, we can first inquire within ourselves to determine a degree of intention that supports our practices. This is ongoing, reflexive work that is inherently insatiable yet profoundly productive and necessary. Routines and rituals in an early years classroom are culturally bound practices that can inadvertently marginalize individuals who are newer to the group or who practice different routines in their families and cultures. We need to consider the impact of each routine and ritual on the collective by asking ourselves if these practices *other* different cultures, viewpoints, species, or ways of being. Furthermore, routines and rituals tend to be human-centered practices that fail to consider the impact on creatures, materials, and the environment. It is paramount to a reimagining of inclusive learning environments that these practices be explored reflexively to uncover the “foundational logics” that are a part of “everyday moments, practices, and understandings, including our own” (Hodgins et al., 2020, p. 7). We might ask ourselves some of the following questions:

- How did this practice become a routine in our classroom?
- Is there pedagogical value found within this practice?
- Who or what are we including in this routine? Who or what might we be excluding by maintaining this course of action?

Once we as educators have reflected on these questions, we can bring these provocations forward to public dialogue for further discussion. Tensions are a common occurrence while sharing space and forming a collective. We may determine through this reflexivity that exposure to the ritual is worthwhile, and as a result we can enter with the families into an exchange of thoughts on beliefs and intentions in an effort to “draw upon the knowledges and resources offered by diverse cultural perspectives” (Massing, 2018, p. 197).

A moment from my practice reveals the tensions that can arise when children come from varied backgrounds in which eating habits may be similar or different. One child in the group came from a family that followed a vegetarian diet, while another child came from a family with blended eating habits. The children were trying to consolidate their altering understandings of meat consumption, ethically and logistically, with their love for animals. Ultimately the conversation flowed and we walked alongside one another through the confusion and tension. The children displayed a remarkable contentedness in dialoguing and releasing the tension, even in the absence of swaying opinions. The educator’s personal values may be challenged, as the children’s familial structures,

values, beliefs, and experiences might not always align with their own. The educator's previously held beliefs and assumptions may be operationalized in their practice or they may simply desire to not form a stance on certain topics. Reflection and transparency in a democratic effort to live well together will safeguard our practice from any singular way of being "claiming to have the right answer" (Moss, 2014, p. 120).

These conversations could potentially expose biases and alternative thoughts, which can offer deeper deliberations to the context. Through intentionality, we can also use this anti-bias work to "foster each child's capacity to identify bias and ... nurture each child's empathy for the hurt bias causes" (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2019, para. 8). For example, an anti-bias framework can help us illuminate routines that have perpetuated harmful colonial practices. Children can become part of the discussion of animal and land use and investigate "resource extraction" as they learn alongside one another in a space that decenters humans (Nelson et al., 2018, p. 5). It is also important that we remove the bias of "humanist stewardship frameworks" in this coconstruction of environmental inclusion and explore nonhierarchical human roles of living with the land without viewing ourselves as environmental rescuers (Taylor, 2017, p. 1449).

According to Kuh et al. (2016), another typical adult approach to the avoidance of discoursing these tender matters is to "change the subject when anti-bias topics come up or redirect children to distract them from the topic at hand" (p. 61). When adults choose to accept the dialoguing with and among the children while they tackle these large issues, they use the opportunity to cocreate anti-bias curriculum with the children, consequently making "dialogical safe spaces" for the children to think critically and compose their own stance, which is essential to child-initiated social justice (Husband, 2010, p. 73). The construction of anti-bias curriculum occurs when we mindfully attend the conversations that many of us have been taught to recoil from.

We have an obligation to be intentional in our modelling within these early years dynamics, and we can do this "by experimenting with modes of collective (more-than-human) thinking and learning with rather than individual (human) thinking and learning about" (Taylor, 2017, p. 1458). While focusing on intentionality in anti-bias curriculum making, we can include literacy offerings such as books with themes related to diversity and inclusion, we can take our learning into the outdoors to learn alongside creatures, we can explore rainy days to understand the impact of our footsteps on puddles of water and the impact of puddles of water on our footsteps, and we can invite members of the community to come share their experiences through storytelling.

Conclusion

In recent times, we have become increasingly aware of our reliance on the well-being of our neighbours near and far, and the interconnectivity that encompasses living in the 21st century. A newly understood reliance on one another as we journey through public health initiatives brought on by the pandemic, the threat of environmental hazards such as wildfires and extreme weather conditions, and economic recovery plans to combat recessions evidences the impact our actions have on all inhabitants of our common world.

The work being done through a coconstruction of anti-bias curriculum making in the foundational years can rewire the societal framework that previously avoided discussing difficult topics of diversity and othering. The conversations that happen when we stay in the moment with children as they analyze the world they co-inhabit can be a starting point for the growth of a conceptual change that can trickle out to the children's homes and communities through a positive momentum of change making and awareness.

Reconceptualizing inclusion to consider relationships between humans and nonhumans is being done with intention, not as a pendulum of correction that leads to the opposite end of a spectrum. The ideas presented in this

paper are intended to move the conversation of inclusivity into actionable daily practice. It is our job as educators to dig into these albeit at times uncomfortable conversations and attempt to determine exactly what feelings bubble to the surface. According to Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2019), “these are early lessons in critical thinking for children, figuring out what they see and hear and testing it against the notions of kindness and fairness” (para. 9). It takes a great deal of intentionality to face these matters, but we must remember that in each act within our practice, we are making a choice. When we allow ourselves to perpetuate the practice of sweeping these conversations to the side to relieve discomfort, we communicate to the children that these matters are better left unsaid. Alternatively, by pressing in and creating space to construct anti-bias curriculum both organically and intentionally in our early learning spaces, we forge new pathways to inclusion.

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