

Beginning (or Continuing) the Journey to a More Equitable Classroom

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Carly is preparing to read aloud her 4-year-old students' favorite book, *The Pigeon Finds a Hot Dog*, by Mo Willems. All except for Jamal are quietly sitting on the rug and waiting for her to begin. As she scans the group, her eyes stop on Jamal. She takes a breath and thinks, "Why is Jamal always interrupting, fidgeting, and bothering everyone while I read?" Just then, Jamal starts to make loud chewing noises and offers imaginary hot dogs to the children sitting next to him. "Why is he so difficult?" she ponders.

As many Americans become more aware of the many ways that bias permeates our everyday lives, things are changing. Companies (big and small), sports organizations, musicians, and other popular figures are reexamining—or examining for the first time—the words and images that they convey. In some cases, they are making changes to their products and advertisements to counter stereotypical, unfair, or hurtful representations of race, gender, and other aspects of identity. For example, the professional baseball team formerly known as the Cleveland Indians changed the team's name to the Cleveland Guardians, acknowledging the previous name's culturally insensitive origins. And to encourage gender identity inclusion, the Disney Channel has introduced more LGBTQIA+ visibility, including developing a nonbinary character, Raine Whispers, on their popular show *The Owl House*, which won a Peabody Award for its positive representation.

As educators, we too must take a look inward and evaluate our own thoughts, ideas, and practices as we acknowledge our past mistakes and strive for equity. Doing this kind of thinking, reflecting, and improvement can be overwhelming, uncomfortable, or upsetting. It is also a necessity. Here are just a few reasons why:

- › Some White preschool teachers unconsciously feel that Black boys are more likely to misbehave and have lower expectations for Black boys than for other children. Black boys are much more likely to be suspended and even expelled from preschool than their White peers (Gaias et al. 2022; Wright 2019; see also Chapter 5 in this book).
- › There are inaccuracies and gaps in how cultures, groups of people, and events are written about and represented in books, in the media, and in education. For example, Columbus Day and Thanksgiving are not celebrations for many Native Americans (Fleming 2006).
- › Native American children have been prohibited from speaking their languages and practicing their cultural traditions in schools (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, with Goins 2020).
- › Children from LGBTQIA+ families, or children who identify as gender fluid or gender nonconforming, may be bullied and marginalized (Espelage et al. 2019; Goodboy & Martin 2018; Kimura, Antón-Oldenburg, & Pinderhughes 2022).

These findings from research by no means represent the wide range of biased thinking, language, and behaviors that can occur in educational settings. Indeed, what research shows is that we all have implicit or unconscious associations and feelings that affect the way we make decisions and act. Sometimes we have these feelings even though they are contrary to our conscious or declared beliefs. They are the stories we unconsciously make up in our minds about people or groups without knowing or understanding the facts. Becoming aware of them can help us grow and change.

Several key NAEYC publications ask us to carefully consider how biases contribute to our work with children and families (see the position statement on advancing equity; the fourth edition of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8*; and the second edition of *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves*). Biases can influence the verbal and nonverbal interactions and messages we send children and the way we look at particular classroom situations and children's behavior.

Knowing that we all have implicit biases and, simultaneously, have the capacity to change our thinking and improve our practices, we've outlined four steps that early childhood educators can take to understand their own biases and to advance equity:

1. Reflect on your current beliefs, attitudes, and practices.
2. Set goals that connect to or come from your self-reflection.
3. Identify steps to take toward achieving your goals, finding resources, and taking action.
4. Assess your progress and look ahead.

Early childhood educators are known for being lifelong learners and committed to continually growing as professionals. These steps can be a part of your overall professional development, and we suggest finding supportive colleagues and mentors to join you on this journey.

Reflect on Current Beliefs, Attitudes, and Practices

To begin, ask yourself a series of questions about your beliefs, attitudes, and experiences related to children, families, and the broader world around you. For example,

- › Do you notice when a Black boy starts wiggling around on the rug more than when a White boy does this?
- › Do you engage in one-on-one conversations with certain children much more often than others?

- › Do you feel uncomfortable during a conference with two moms?
- › Do you think that it is silly when you hear that some teachers don't want to have a Thanksgiving feast or teach the names of Columbus's three ships?

Set Goals

Based on your reflections, create one to two goals. Give yourself a timeline with at least one short-term and one long-term goal. For example,

- › Find developmentally appropriate ways to acknowledge and support the positive behaviors of students who display challenging behaviors.
- › Get to know each child and family in your setting.
- › Understand the history and issues behind the LGBTQIA+ movement.
- › Learn more about why Columbus Day and Thanksgiving are days of mourning for Native American people and how to accurately teach children about the history of these days.

Identify Steps to Take, Find Resources, and Take Action

After creating your goals, select and engage in activities that will help you make progress toward reaching them. These actions may include

- › Reading books, articles, and blogs
- › Watching videos online and listening to podcasts
- › Attending workshops and conference sessions (in person or virtually)
- › Trying out new strategies, activities, and materials in your setting
- › Discussing your questions, learning, and progress with a trusted colleague and asking them to observe you
- › Connecting with families to learn more about their experiences, hopes, and concerns

Assess Your Progress and Look Ahead

After giving yourself sufficient time to take action, it is important to gauge your progress, including

- › Successes you've experienced
- › Challenges or setbacks you've encountered
- › How children's learning and your relationships with them have been impacted
- › How partnerships with families have improved
- › Questions that remain
- › Evidence of your journey (writing, photos, video recordings)

Let's take a peek at Carly's journey as she used these four steps to understand more about her perceptions of Jamal and to grow as an educator and person.

Carly begins by reflecting back on her thoughts about Jamal. Is he *really* always engaged in negative behaviors, or does she notice his behaviors more than others'? Does she recognize and build on his strengths? Carly thinks about the fact that she has only one or two Black children in her class each year. She wonders whether she unconsciously has different opinions and expectations about children of color, and she wonders if she takes the time to connect with families of color as often as she does with White families.

So she sets goals for herself. Her long-term goal is to identify and understand her own biases. One short-term goal is to observe Jamal's behaviors during read-aloud and morning meetings for two weeks. She will then analyze her notes for any patterns in her words and actions and in Jamal's behaviors. Another short-term goal is to reach out to Jamal's family to learn about their expectations for him, his strengths, and any questions they may have.



While Jamal's behavior during read-alouds may have been entirely age and individually appropriate, and only an issue because of Carly's heightened attention to his behavior, it may also have indicated that Jamal would benefit from support for developing self-regulation. Because play promotes self-regulation, offering highly engaging play experiences for children who are developing self-regulation skills is an excellent tool. Observing and recording a child's behavior and that of the teachers, as Carly did, helps illuminate the reasons behind a behavior.

After setting these goals, Carly identifies steps to take to support her efforts. She creates a form to record her and Jamal's behaviors and asks her assistant teacher to use it too so they can compare notes. Carly also begins using a journal for each child to send home a positive note about the child's day. Families can add to the journal too. Finally, Carly asks the director of the program if they can devote time during each staff meeting to discuss resources about understanding and countering bias, with each teacher having a chance to lead a discussion about one resource. (See "Resources to Begin [or Continue] Your Journey Toward Equity" on page 144 for some suggestions.)

Six months later, Carly looks back to assess her work with Jamal and her own growth. She notes successes. For example, she placed picture books and props into the dramatic play area and observed Jamal frequently acting out stories and creating puppet shows with the other children. She also notes that he likes to bring some of these materials home to perform for his family. After meeting with his family to share his strengths and challenges at home and at school, Carly started texting photos of Jamal's puppet shows to his parents. In response, his mom is now making sock puppets of favorite picture book characters for the classroom.

Her program's staff has also begun to engage in many meaningful, sometimes difficult conversations during their monthly meetings. Spurred by these powerful discussions, they plan to hold a book club next year focused on *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves*, and they will set goals, take action, and assess their progress in implementing anti-bias strategies and examining their own thinking and behaviors.

Having committed to this journey, Carly feels proud that she has started to confront her biases and reexamine how she interacts with students and families, to improve her classroom practices, and to move forward in a lifelong process of growing as an early childhood educator.

Conclusion

It can be intimidating to have conversations about race, gender, and other topics that you aren't comfortable talking about. But with dedicated planning, action, and reflection, your quest to understand and address your own biases will make a difference in young children's and families' lives—and yours too.

Resources to Begin (or Continue) Your Journey Toward Equity

Read Online

- › Dena Simmons's "How to Be an Antiracist Educator" in *ASCD Education Update*, October 2019
- › Dana Williams's *Beyond the Golden Rule: A Parent's Guide to Preventing and Responding to Prejudice*
- › NAEYC's advancing equity initiative, advocacy resources, and content on equity and diversity from NAEYC's publications
- › Learning for Justice resources (use the search word "preschool") and online magazine

Listen to These Podcasts

- › NPR's *Parenting: Difficult Conversations*: "Talking Race with Young Children" (20 minutes)
- › Harvard *EdCast*: "Unconscious Bias in Schools" (28 minutes)
- › *The Early Link Podcast*: "Soobin Oh Discusses Anti-Bias Education in Early Childhood" (34 minutes)
- › BBC Radio 4's *Analysis*: "Implicit Bias" (27 minutes)

Watch Online

- › Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "The Danger of a Single Story" (18 minutes)
- › Russell McClain's "Implicit Bias, Stereotype Threat, and Higher Education" for TEDxUMBaltimore (11 minutes)
- › Alice Goffman's *How We're Priming Some Kids for College and Others for Prisons* (15 minutes)
- › "Tyler Perry Speaks from the Heart About Racial Injustice and the World He Wants for His Son" for *People* magazine (9 minutes)
- › "Native American Girls Describe the Real History Behind Thanksgiving" for *Teen Vogue* (2 minutes)
- › "Why These Native Americans Observe a National Day of Mourning Each Thanksgiving" for *HuffPost* (5 minutes)
- › "Columbus Day vs. Indigenous Peoples Day" for KARE 11 News (4 minutes)

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