

SPEECH BY LOUISE DERMAN-SPARKS: ANTI-BIAS EDUCATION/ PREJUDICE AWARE EDUCATION FOR EVERYONE

Louise Derman-Sparks

## Anti-Bias Education/ Prejudice Aware Education for Everyone

**“Be aware of the present you are constructing;  
it should be the future you want.”**

*(Alice Walker, 1989)*



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### Opening

I am honored and happy to be here with you today. Over the years of consulting with Kinderwelten on “Prejudice-Aware Education”, I have learned at least as much as they learned from me. Indeed, I have seen fantastic work here. As a Jewish woman, this has been especially moving and inspiring to me.

Before I move on, I want to mention a few terminology points. I use the term “Anti-Bias Education”, which is basically the same approach as what Kinderwelten calls “Prejudice-Aware Education”. In the United States, many people are also now using the term “social justice education” to name the various forms of diversity education work that includes a focus on inequity and equity. I will be using all three terms.

I also want to say a word about the term “inclusion”. In the USA, people tend to use it in a narrow way, to mean education for children with disabilities or special needs. However, another, and, I think, more useful meaning is that of being comprehensive or all-encompassing. This is the definition of inclusion embedded in the **Anti-Bias or Prejudice-Aware Education approach**.

Children develop their several social identities as a package. In the preschool years, children begin to construct their ideas and feelings about their own and others’ gender, race, ethnicity, language, abilities, economic class and family structures. In the years 5-8, children expand and consolidate these

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identities and attitudes. The dynamics of their developmental journey across social identities share much in common. I like to think about the dynamics of their developmental journey as a *kaleidoscope*: The basic elements are the same, as are the pieces of glass inside the kaleidoscope. Each turn, however, reveals a different pattern. This is also true of the details of children's development of specific identities and attitudes. They share overall elements and also have differences in their specific patterns.

Unfortunately, in the USA, and I understand here in Germany as well, we have tended to treat the educational issues related to various forms of diversity as separate entities. Thus, inclusion educators focus on disability issues, but may not pay attention to other core kinds of diversity, such as cultural, class and gender. People interested in gender and sexism may act as if the other forms of diversity are not part of their agenda. Or, teachers may think of multicultural education as only addressing cultural differences and ignore issues related to disability inclusion or sexism. True Anti-Bias and Prejudice-Aware Education pays attention to all of the social identities and attitudes with which children engage during their developmental journeys.



As I considered what I wanted to say to you today, a quotation from a novel by Alice Walker, a favorite African American author of mine, kept running through my mind. It is: *“Be aware of the present you are constructing; it should be the future you want.”* This concept is at the core of Anti-Bias Education and Prejudice-Aware Education. To explore this idea, I have organized my presentation into three themes. The first focuses on the connection between one's vision of society and Anti-Bias Education. The second theme looks at the goals and pedagogical principles

of Anti-Bias Education. The third theme offers my thoughts about what we need to do to keep social justice educational work thriving. Since my experiences related to these themes take place in the United States, that is, of course, the context from which my thoughts derive. I rely on you to think about them in relation to your experiences here.

### 1. Visions of society & Anti-Bias Education

Anti-Bias Education work is integrally tied to the larger social justice movements seeking to end all institutional and individual forms of prejudice and discrimination. The roots of this work runs deep in the USA - almost as old as the history of the US. In a sense, social justice education also began very early. Consider, for example, the clandestine efforts of enslaved Africans in the American south to teach themselves and their children to read - a skill that was forbidden and that carried a severe penalty if discovered. In the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, social justice movements address the human and civil rights of people of color (you use the term “ethnic minorities”), women, people with disabilities, gay/lesbians/transgender people, people living in poverty, and immigrants. Social justice education springs from and is a part of these movements. Pedagogical approaches that honor the strengths of cultures beyond the dominant culture, rather than treating them as inferior, was made possible by these movements. It took the efforts of many thousands of activists in the disability rights movement to achieve our national *“Individuals with Disabilities Education Act”*, which requires that all children with disabilities receive appropriate education in the *“least restrictive environment”*. This means that,

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those children must first have the opportunity to be included in inclusive programs, rather than to be placed automatically in separate special education programs.

The heart of anti-bias work is a vision of a world in which all children are able to blossom, and each child's particular abilities and gifts are able to flourish. In this world -

- all families have the resources they need to fully nurture their children,
- all children and families live in safe, peaceful, healthy, comfortable housing and neighborhoods and live free of discrimination and prejudice,
- children and adults know how to respectfully and easily live, learn, and work together in diverse and inclusive environments and have a sense of belonging,
- all children experience the rights detailed in the United Nations (1989) Declaration of the Rights of the Child. Among many other rights, all children have the right to:

§ 2: Government protection from any discrimination - no matter their color, sex, religion, or disability and whether they are rich or poor.

§ 29: An education that develops each child's personality and talents to the full, and also teaches respect of other peoples' rights and values, and their own and others' cultures.

§ 30: The right to learn and use the language, religion and customs of their families, whether they are shared by the majority of people in the country or not (I would add, or shared by the people in power in the country, which is not necessarily the numerical majority).

§ 23: Children with physical or mental disabilities are entitled to care and support to help them lead full and independent lives.

As in many other societies, way too many children in the USA still do not have equal access to all of the basic human rights and resources due to them. Deeply rooted in history, systemic inequity continues to profoundly influence the outcomes of children's lives. However, I deeply believe that people working together can change both their society and what it offers all of its children. Anti-bias and Prejudice-Aware Education can contribute to such positive change. I see it as one piece of a multi-component approach to creating societies where all children's needs are truly met. Our children need tools to navigate the complex issues of identity, diversity, prejudice, and power in their daily lives so that they may learn and thrive no matter what path their lives take. This education begins in their learning communities.

Teachers' explanations of what drew them to Anti-Bias Education reflect the hopefulness of Anti-Bias or Prejudice-Aware Education:

**Mary Pat Martin, a community college ECE instructor:**

*The Anti-Bias Education approach put into words everything in my life that I always thought was right about equality and justice. It gave me the tools to put into practice what I always knew was the right way for me to do early childhood education."*

**Brian Silveira, a preschool teacher:**

*"Anti-bias curriculum changed the way I looked at child development and the world. I probably wouldn't be such an activist today without it. We are creating a better world."*

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## 2. Anti-Bias Education Goals & Pedagogical Principles

The shared goals and pedagogical principles of Anti-Bias Education underlie all curriculums, across different educational settings.



### Goals

Anti-Bias Education has four core goals. Each goal interacts and builds on the other three and all four are essential to an effective Anti-Bias Education program. A lovely way to think about the interactions of the four goals is through the metaphor of four interlocking gears, an idea created by the *Kita Anne Frank in Jena*. Each gear represents one goal; when you move any one of the gears, the rest also move. I saw a construction of this the last time I was here in Berlin and I thank the teachers of the *Kita Anne Frank* for allowing me to use a picture of their construction in the revision of my Anti-Bias Education book.

#### **Goal 1: Each child will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities**

This goal is grounded in the concept that people have a personal identity and multiple social identities - all of which contribute to our sense of self (Cross 1991). Our *personal identity* includes factors such as our name, our specific family, age, place in the family, personality, and talents and interests. These attributes are what give us our sense of individuality. Our *social identities*, by contrast, refer to the significant group categorizations assigned to us by the society in which we grow up and live and which we share with many others. These include gender, race, ethnicity, religion, economic class, and disabilities/ special needs. It is through our social identities that our lives intersect with the larger systemic advantages and disadvantages in our society.

Goal 1 is the starting place for **all** children. As children develop a strong, positive sense of their individual and social identities, they also develop a foundation for learning to interact with others without prejudice. Furthermore, a strong, positive sense of their individual and social identities also plays an important role in children's successful cognitive and academic development.

#### **Goal 2: Each child will express comfort and joy with human diversity, accurate language for human differences, and deep, caring human connections**

This goal requires striking a balance between exploring people's similarities and differences. These are never "either/or" realities because people are simultaneously both the same and different from one another. We share similar biological attributes and needs (e.g., the need for food, shelter, and love, and the commonalities of language, families, and feelings) *and* we live these in many different ways. It works best to teach children by beginning with what they already know and have experienced. Therefore, it is important to explore the many kinds of similarities and differences present among the children in the group, even when they come from similar racial, cultural, class, and family backgrounds. This sets the stage for learning about diversity in their larger communities beyond their classroom.

Some people are not sure they should encourage children to "notice" and learn about differences among people - worrying that learning about differences causes prejudice. While well intentioned,

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this concern arises from a mistaken notion of the sources of bias. *Children learn prejudice from prejudice* - not from learning about human diversity.

**Goal 3: Each child will increasingly recognize unfairness, have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts**

Children cannot construct a strong self-concept or develop respect for others if they do not know how to identify and resist hurtful, stereotypical, and incorrect messages or actions directed toward themselves or others. Developing the ability to think critically strengthens children's sense of self, as well as their capacity to form caring relationships with others. Furthermore, being able to think critically about the world strengthens children's skills for school, and life success. Work on this goal also prepares children for goal 4.

**Goal 4: Each child will demonstrate empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions**

This fourth building block of Anti-Bias Education is about helping every child learn and practice a variety of ways to act when:

- another child behaves in a biased manner toward her/him;
- a child behaves in a biased manner toward another child;
- unfair situations occur in the center/classroom; and/or
- unfair situations occur in the children's immediate community.

Children's growth on Goal 4 strengthens their growth on the other three goals. If a child is the target of prejudice or discrimination, standing up for herself strengthens her sense of worth and empowerment. When a child speaks up for another child, it reinforces his empathy for other people's feelings (Goal 2). When children take action for themselves or others, it builds their capacity as subjects rather than the objects of society. Activities must be based on issues that directly affect children's lives, and to which they can relate.

Here is one example of an activity that works on Goals 3 & 4, and took place in a public school, inclusive kindergarten (the teacher, my husband, Bill Sparks, who is here):

*At the time do this activity the school did not have what we call "handicapped parking space". Therefore, some of the parents who had a disability had a hard time parking when they visited the school. Bill decided to raise the issue with children – first telling them about the situation. The children decided it wasn't fair. So, he then did a unit with the children about "handicapped" parking spaces. They looked at photos of handicapped parking signs and spaces in other parking lots. They then decided to create a handicapped space. They kept track of who parked in the space and found out that some teachers were inappropriately using it. Talking it over, they decided to make "parking tickets" for cars that were not supposed to use the handicapped parking area. Bill encouraged them to state their own ideas about what to put on their ticket. My favorite is "Monster says, move on back".*

**Finally, the four Anti-Bias Education goals are for and benefit all children.** This means children who experience advantage because of one or more of their social identities as well as children who experience disadvantage. For example, children from the dominant culture in a country need to be able to forge identities that are not based on ideas of superiority or on fear of people whose backgrounds differ from their own. They need skills for working fairly with people across all kinds of diversity. Similarly, children need the skills to interact respectfully and effectively with children who have disabili-

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ties. As adults they need to also know how to work for the societal policies and practices that enable people with disabilities to function as independently as possible.

### ***Putting anti-bias goals into action: Educational principles***

**Anti-bias or prejudice-aware work is always intentional, active, and part of the daily life of a classroom.**

Contact among children from various backgrounds and with different abilities is, by itself, not enough to create an inclusive, prejudice-aware learning environment. Neither is simply teaching superficial acceptance and politeness (e.g., “Be nice ... Play with everybody ... We love *all* children ... We *will* get along”). Teachers and other staff must use intentional strategies to create quality inclusive, prejudice-aware or Anti-Bias Education classrooms.

In an inclusive, anti-bias or prejudice-aware learning community all children are equitably nurtured and everyone is responsible for everyone’s learning and well-being. All children have respectful teachers who make sure that they are visible in their learning environment. All teachers know how to encourage and respond to children’s questions, provide accurate information, and help children explore their feelings. All teachers know how to foster every child’s strengths, abilities and knowledge.

**Anti-Bias Education work happens best when implemented in the context of critical pedagogy.**

For those of you working with Kinderwelten, this is not a new idea. We use some different terms in the US, but we essentially mean the same overall ideas. Critical pedagogy includes the following:

- Educational strategies and activities pay attention to home cultures and realities of children’s lives.

While the four Anti-Bias Education goals create a framework for all children, specific tasks will vary. These tasks reflect the context and details of each child’s life. Some children need support to resist social messages of inferiority, be it racial or cultural or economic class or ability. Some children need guidance to develop a positive self-concept without absorbing social messages of superiority because of their various social identities.

Anti-bias/prejudice-aware educators also take into account the specific cultural backgrounds of the individual children and families they serve. This requires connecting the goals of Anti-Bias and Prejudice-Aware education to the values and history of a child’s home culture. It often also means knowing how to resolve the challenges of children becoming bi-cultural, able to live in their family’s cultural community and in the larger society of their country.

- Critical pedagogy uses a co-constructing of curriculum, taking into account the children we teach, the families with whom we work, and our professional knowledge.

This requires several factors:

*One: We must ground our daily curriculum in what we know about how children construct their ideas and feelings - and specifically in how they think and act in regards to identity and diversity issues.*

Collecting this data on specific topics and analyzing its meaning is the first step for ongoing curriculum planning. Teachers can do careful listening and observing, use children’s books and persona doll stories to initiate conversations with individual and small groups of children.

*Two: Teachers must know themselves.* We are also on a journey as we work with children, families, and colleagues on the four Anti-Bias Education goals. Broadening our understanding of ourselves is both a challenge and a reward of being anti-bias educators.

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*Three: Critical pedagogy rests on strong relationships among staff and between staff and families.*

This requires teachers critically examining the power relationships that exist between them and families and among staff. While each group may have differing roles and responsibilities for the children, all must be treated as contributing members of the learning community. However, many teachers in USA find that rising issues of diversity, inequity and equity with other adults is much more challenging than working with children. They may want to hold on to their power over families, wanting to carry on a traditional model of professionals being superior to the client. On a somewhat contradictory fashion, many also fear adult responses to addressing anti-bias issues. They worry that it will be very uncomfortable. Or, they fear that families or other staff will be angry and hostile. Some teachers even fear that they may lose their job. Supporting each other to build respectful, power-sharing relationships is a core task for those of us practicing anti-bias or Prejudice-Aware Education.

**Finally, Anti-Bias or Prejudice-Aware teaching and learning is a life-long journey for children and adults.** Ideally, this education begins in the early years and continues throughout a child's education. As social justice educators, we continue the journey as we work with others in our schools and in the larger society.

### **3. What We Need To Do To Keep Anti-Bias Education Work Thriving**

***Recognize that social justice education continues to be needed.***

Of course, I can only speak in relation to the USA. We are not a post-racial society, despite what some think since the election of President Obama. In fact, we are experiencing the rise of a very public thread of virulent bigotry, which permeates the air waves, internet, and demonstrations.

Images of President Obama reflective of this racial bigotry include showing him as a chimpanzee; a savage "witch doctor"; a starving African child with a beer can; a Neanderthal man; a pimp. These reflect racist stereotypes that have been a staple of racism for a long time. In addition there are some new ones, such as President Obama is shown as Hitler and as an illegal immigrant. Hate groups that target people of color (I believe your term is "ethnic minorities"), immigrants and gay/lesbian people are at record level - 932 documented groups in 2009 (Southern Poverty Law Center). Some engage in physical violence. Armed men have come to President Obama's speeches, bearing signs suggesting violence against him. One popular sign said: "The 'tree of liberty' needs to be 'watered' with the 'blood of tyrants'". People at "Tea Party" demonstrations carrying signs saying "next time we will be armed". Sadly, groups posing these anti-human messages get significantly more TV coverage than do social justice movement marches and demonstrations (which, in fact, get significantly more people).

The rise in open racial bigotry, while disgusting, is not surprising. In addition to the election of the first American president who is not White, we are also living in a period of serious economic hardship. As Archbishop Tutu of South Africa remarked in 1992, during another period of economic hardship, "Racism is becoming respectful in western society because proponents are adept at playing on people's fears and anxiety at a time of economic difficulty...You have to stand up to be counted amongst those who oppose it". (Jet, 1/13/92)

***Understand ideological and political opposition to social justice education.***

Another way to think about the connection between the vision of society and social justice education is to look at the political perspective that is most opposed to it. Here is an example of the thinking of one of the US organized political groups that oppose Anti-Bias Education, as well as other forms of social justice education. Named the Eagle Forum, this group has been around since the 1970's - first organizing to oppose the views and demands of the Feminist Movement. The Eagle Forum was also

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one of the first groups to oppose Anti-Bias Education curriculum, accusing it of being a front for inculcating homosexuality in young children, or more generally, of being anti-Christian and anti-American. They still think so.

A January 2009 online article titled *“Social Justice: Code Word for Anti-Americanism”* declares *“The term ‘social justice’ does not define a moral cause: it is leftwing jargon to overturn those who have economic and political power”*. Further discussion continues this theme. *“Social justice teaching is shorthand for opposition to American traditions of individual justice and free-market economics ... It*



*teaches that “American society is ... systemically racist, sexist, and classist and thus discriminates institutionally against women, nonwhites, working-Americans and the poor”*. In addition to its other sins, social justice education also teaches *“kids to ... see themselves not just as a consumer [of information] but as an actor-critic in the world around you”*.

Clearly, this is a diametrically opposed perspective of society and education than that taken by those of us who practice social justice education. In the eyes of the political Right, all is well in the USA. Complete equal opportunity exists for all, so there is no such thing as racism, sexism, etc. If people live in poverty or drop out of school, it is because they are lazy or weak or come from an inferior cultural background or family. Thus, change is not needed - and anyone who says so is anti-American.

I, and others who practice social justice education, which includes Anti-Bias Education, think that our work is very much an American tradition - although a different one from the one espoused by the political Right. For example, here are the words of past Supreme Court Justice Thurmond Marshall, who was also the lawyer in the successful struggle for ending legal segregation in the American education system. Talking about the U.S. Constitution, the document drafted in 1787 that is at the core of the US governmental system, Thurmond Marshall pointed out that its framers left out a majority of Americans when they wrote the phrase *“We the People”*. Left out were all women; white, male, non-property owners; African Americans and Native Americans. Marshall also pointed out that the original deficiencies of the Constitution required *“two turbulent centuries to correct”*. And, more work still needs to be done.

These words were echoed by President Obama in a speech about race and racism in the USA:

*“What would be needed were Americans in successive generations who were willing to do their part—through protests and struggle, on the streets and in the courts, through a civil war and civil disobedience and sometimes at great risk - to narrow the gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of their time.”*

In the end, we each have to figure out our beliefs about the society in which we live and whether it fits with our hopes and dreams or whether we think it is necessary to still *“narrow the gap between the promise of our ideals and current reality”*.

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***Build relationships and connection with others and work together to implement and disseminate Anti-Bias Education/ Prejudice-Aware Education.***

To keep doing this work requires attention both within and beyond your own classroom. The infrastructure of the whole educational system, including early childhood education, will need some changing to support Prejudice-aware education. This means teacher training programs, teaching materials, on-going opportunities for teachers to keep learning, time to meet with others to reflect on and disprove work in the classroom. It also means advocating that Prejudice-Aware or Anti-Bias Education permeates the educational standards and so becomes an integral part of the school curriculum at all grades. It also requires building relationships and coalitions among the groups focusing on one aspect or the other of the identity and prejudice kaleidoscope.

In addition, improving the life of children outside the classroom calls on educators to connect to the larger social justice movements in our countries. Such connections keep us stronger, strengthen our awareness of and critical thinking about current issues and build our self-awareness and ability to be reflective about our work. As in the classroom, it is also essential to keep paying attention to the



interconnections between the various social and economic justice movements. Divide and conquer is a very old, and effective, strategy of those who hold and want to keep their power. We need each other - even when we focus our efforts on a particular aspect of the larger whole.

To keep carrying out and impinge our own work in our classrooms and our profession requires connecting with others. Forming small support/action groups with colleagues has proven to be one of the effective ways to create these connections. Support/action groups provide a place to keep building your self-awareness, your teaching and to be strategic about making changes within the education system. It also provides the emotional support when doing Anti-Bias or Prejudice-Aware Education is challenging. Another important strategy is to form committees within existing professional education organizations and to create national organizations that focus on social justice education in all its forms. Finally, community-based groups of teachers, families and other interested community members provide very useful local support.

***Expand the discourse about Prejudice-Aware Education with the families you serve and with colleagues.***

It is important not to confuse organized political opposition to Anti-Bias Education/prejudice-aware work with individual people's disagreement, discomfort or confusion about it. We have to get very good at holding conversations with all kinds of people about the reasons for, goals, and benefits of Anti-bias or Prejudice-Aware Education. In my experience, I find that this is one of the more challenging tasks for many early childhood educators.

They love working with children, but are anxious or uncomfortable working with parents and colleagues on the issues related to Anti-Bias Education work. Fears about adults getting angry with them, or pulling out of their program, or even losing their jobs thread, result in too many teachers' hesitation to engage families and colleagues in conversation about Anti-Bias Education. We all need to strengthen our skills and comfort with holding on-going conversations with people who disagree with

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us—at least initially. The revised version of my book—now called *Anti-Bias Education for young children and ourselves*—provides many suggestions for how to do this.

Since I drafted this presentation, international events taught me, once more, that social justice work and anti-bias education are always a journey—and a complex and painful one at times. The specific event, in this case, is the Israeli’s government’s horrendous response last week to the Flotilla of boats bringing desperately needed humanitarian aid to the people of Gaza. According to people like Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Tutu, as well as to many people around the world, the Israeli blockage against the Palestine people of Gaza is one of the worst current humanitarian crises.

I am Jewish, and I condemn these acts. So, yet again, I have had to struggle with what it means to me to embrace my Jewish identity while also keeping an independent, critical position about the apartheid policies and acts of the government of the Jewish state of Israel. You, too, may have already been struggling with these kinds of complexities in relation to your identity and your country’s history. It is perhaps an irony of history, that, as a Jewish woman, I find hope in the social justice and prejudice-aware education you are doing here. Perhaps it is actually not a coincidence that one of your child care program’s, which I mentioned in the new edition of my book on anti-bias education, is called *Anne Frank Kita* and is located on Martin Niemöller Street.

### Ending

Finally, we come to my last remark. One of the popular songs of the civil rights movement includes the refrain “Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on...” That is what we must do if we want to someday realize the dream of a world in which all children blossom and flourish. We must carry on both in periods when Anti-Bias or Prejudice-Aware Education receives support from foundations or governmental agencies or education systems, as well as through periods when our work is less in favor. During those times we must “tighten our belts” and find creative ways to keep working. Thank you - for all that you do.

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