

The Resurgence of Racism

Building Tolerance in Early Childhood

Teachers of young children can help them understand issues of fairness and individual rights.

Building tolerance and understanding is important at each level of learning, including early childhood. Young children learn through hands-on experiences, through active involvement with materials and people; therefore, activities to foster ethnic awareness must involve both their hands and minds. Children will not develop tolerance by coloring dittoes of Rosa Parks, painting flags of other countries, or having parents fill in family trees; these activities involve muscles but do not engage minds. They will develop tolerance by pretending to be Martin Luther King, Jr., in a bus boycott role-play, by choosing between the unknown contents of a beautiful box and a dirty carton, and by encountering discriminatory signs in a classroom activity. The open-ended nature of these activities allows for queries from children as well as teachers' questions. Both encourage critical and creative thinking.

Seeing Beyond Appearances

To encourage my students to see beyond appearances, I offer them a choice between the contents of a large, elegantly wrapped box and a

small, torn, dirty carton. They agree they want what's in the big, beautiful box; then they consider the small, ugly box. Slowly they begin to realize that something yucky or delightful could be in *either* box. When we open the boxes, we find garbage in the big box and a group snack in the little box. We then consider whether we would decide to play with a new child in our class depending on how well he or

she were dressed or on some other criterion. We may also brainstorm other times when appearance is not a reliable indicator of worth.

Understanding Discrimination

Of course, young children cannot comprehend the wide-ranging laws and attitudes that have discriminated against minorities in every aspect of life. They can, however, begin to understand issues of fairness and individual rights. A role-playing activity, for example, can develop such awareness. I have my students act out the Montgomery bus boycott, allowing children to choose to be black or white bus passengers, Rosa Parks, the bus driver, or Martin Luther King, Jr. Large necklace-like signs identify characters and underscore that any child can be any person in the story. I narrate and give dialogue as necessary to keep the play moving, from Rosa Parks' refusal to let a white passenger have her seat to a meeting led by Martin Luther King, Jr., where blacks decide to boycott the buses. Fortunately I don't have to decide who benefits more from this activity: black children taking on roles of heroic blacks or white children feeling a little discrimination.

Activities to foster ethnic awareness must involve both the hands and minds of young children.

Good and Bad Laws

The question of distinguishing between good and bad laws is a delicate but significant one. Here an early childhood curriculum that regularly includes problem solving and the development of thinking skills can be helpful. For example, in a large-group meeting I tell the children there will be new rules for "choice time." A sign at each activity center indicates who cannot play there (for example, no one with blue pants at the blocks, no one with stripes at the easel). These restrictions are all based on non-personal attributes, primarily clothing. At first I monitor the play areas, reminding children who cannot play there. Each year I am surprised at how quickly the children police themselves, often confessing to stripes on socks or writing on an inner shirt that probably would have gone unnoticed. I resist comforting or making suggestions for alternatives, instead com-

menting matter-of-factly on how hard it is to have a particular rule. We conclude the morning with small-group discussions about their feelings about the signs, in which I raise issues of fairness and lawmaking authority. I also relate this activity to King's efforts and have students consider what our school would be like if laws allowing racial discrimination were still part of our legal system today. The children, I hope, are building a base of experiences that will encourage them to treat persons as individuals and to ensure rights for all.

Daily Lessons

Developing tolerance and understanding is a task that reaches beyond a curriculum unit or a schoolwide theme. Teachers also help children develop tolerance and understanding through the daily routines of the classroom: listening to the aggressor and the victim (roles that are usually

"shared") in a playground dispute, supporting girls' entry at the legos table, and affirming boys' rights to dress up in the housekeeping area.

When they encourage girls to play with blocks, urge children to observe rather than kill a spider, encourage gentleness in boys' play, and delight in differences in skin color and family size, early childhood educators combat stereotypes daily.

An old Jewish folktale tells of a rabbi who is asked how one can know the moment of dawn. The rabbi says simply, "Dawn is that moment when there is enough light for us to see the face of another as that of a brother or sister." Dawn has not come to our world as yet, early childhood education can and should work toward its coming. □

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