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Let's Talk About Race

Developing Anti-Bias Curricula in Elementary Schools

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Abstract

This study investigates the theories and potential teaching practices for implementing

an anti-bias curriculum in today's elementary schools. Drawing on the work of

Louise Derman-Sparks (1989, 1997, and 2011), Frances Kendall (1996), Gary

Howard (2006), Ann Pelo (2000 and 2008), six characteristics of effective anti-bias

curricula are explored and analyzed as frameworks for developing curricula. In

addition, the study chronicles the experience of one grade level team of four teachers

working to transform the social studies curriculum they were given into one that is

more intentionally anti-bias. Finally, it offers lessons learned and implications for

future curriculum development.

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Introduction

Racism and racial inequality are still alive in the United States today. Recently, a study was released by the Pew Research Center (as cited in Wright, 2011) indicating that the wealth gap between White families and Black and Latino families is now wider than ever. The median income of a White family in the United States is now 20 times higher than the median income of a Black family, and 18 times higher than the median income of a Latino family. This discrepancy in wealth has very real effects and consequences for families of color and their quality of life, and is demonstrative of the racial inequality that still exists today.

Right now, the problem is not going away. In order to combat the institutional racism and racial inequality that is still pervasive in American society today, we will need people working on all fronts to find solutions to its causes and ensure a different future for our nation. We need economists, lawyers, politicians, and bankers. We need doctors, nurses, architects, and activists. We need all of these people and countless more to work to find solutions that will enable all people in our to country to access the resources they need in order to lead happy, healthy lives.

But how will the economists, activists, and architects learn how to do their jobs? Someone will have to teach them. How will they know how to critically analyze the world around them? How will they feel empowered to self-advocate and to be allies - to say, "That's not fair!" to their peers? How will they develop the skills necessary to know that a study like the one conducted by the Pew Research Center reveals a much larger problem of institutionalized racism? Someone will have to support them in developing these critical thinking skills. Perhaps most importantly,

how will they come to intrinsically value and respect people who may be different from them? Certainly, the world around us does not always send these messages.

Developing the skills and qualities I've listed here is a life-long process, and it requires a great deal of education. This education must begin in elementary school. Just as elementary school teaches students the basic mathematics skills that provide the foundation for children to tackle more complex algorithms later in life, so must it provide an environment that supports children to begin to recognize bias and inequity. Elementary school must support children in valuing themselves for all of who they are, including their skin color and cultural identity, as well as to stand up for others when they are treated unfairly.

When I became an elementary school teacher, I knew that I wanted my classroom to be a place where my students would be empowered and begin to develop skills in recognizing disparities, but I didn't know quite where to start. I realized that I had very little concept of how elementary school students thought about race to begin with, and I found it very difficult to find a way to talk about race and justice with my students in a way that was accessible to them. I needed a more thoughtful approach.

A colleague told me to look into "anti-bias curricula," an approach to education that had been developed in the 1980s with the intent of combating the development of bias in young children. I found the work of Louise Derman-Sparks (1989, 1997, 2011), and began to implement parts of her anti-bias education program into my classroom. The first thing that I did was to create self-portraits with my kindergarten students. We read a few books about the beauty of different skin colors,

and planned to create self-portraits that celebrated the diversity that existed in our classroom. We mixed paints until we found accurate colors that matched their skin tones, and used textured materials to match their hair. The students used mirrors as they worked to draw themselves, working with an intent focus that I had only seen a handful of times before.

After a few days of working on their self-portraits, we shared them as a class. It was incredible to listen to the way my students described their portraits with such pride, detail, and joy – "I had to mix a little bit of white with brown to make my skin, because my skin is the color of a graham cracker! Yum!" While one person shared about their portrait, the other children listened intently and provided thoughtful comments – "Your hair is like mine!" Talking this way helped to create a culture of respectful questions and dialogue about each other's physical appearances, and gave the children a chance to self-identify how they would describe their own physical features. It was an empowering experience for them.

Activities like self-portraits are just a small part of creating an anti-bias classroom, and they cannot be done in isolation. Anti-bias education is a holistic, comprehensive approach to education, and its philosophy must be embedded in every aspect of the classroom. In this study, I seek to share what I have learned about how to create a successfully anti-bias classroom in the hopes that more teachers will engage in this necessary task. It has been one of the most worthwhile decisions I have made as a teacher, one that has given me hope in the possibility of beginning to eliminate racial inequity through education.

PART 1: Why Implement an Anti-Bias Curriculum?

Elementary education serves a variety of purposes in the lives of young children – according to the developmental-interaction approach, the role of the school is to "strengthen the child's competence to deal effectively with the environment." (Shapiro and Nager, 2000, p. 24) Dewey insists that the individual child must always be considered within the context of their community: "the process of mental development is essentially a social process, a process of participation." (as cited in Shapiro and Nager, 2000, p. 24) Vygotsky also writes that thinking occurs when children participate in social activities with others. (as cited in Shapiro and Nager, 2000, p. 23)

If we accept these theories as the basic tenets of education, it follows that children will be curious about each other. This includes the ways in which other children may be similar to or different from them. As Shapiro and Nager (2000) write, "the culture into which children are born is understood to have basic and formative impact on how even the youngest children express themselves and behave with other children and adults, as well as how they form expectations of others' interactions with them" (p. 28). This is important to consider as educators support children's identity development. It is crucial that educators support children in developing positive associations with their own culture or race, as well as the ability to adapt to and appreciate other children whose culture or race may be different from their own. In order to do this, it is necessary for teachers to construct actively anti-racist classrooms, as well as curricula that support this philosophy. It is important to mention that race and culture are, of course, not the only factors in a person's identity.

Intertwined with race and culture are a person's gender identity, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, family structure, and many other aspects of identity that shape a person's experience of the world. However, for the purposes of this paper, I will be focusing primarily on race and skin color. I am choosing this focus because my experience has been that young children, who are typically concrete thinkers, tend to focus on and talk more about race and color earlier than most other cultural markers, with the possible exception of gender. However, the anti-bias framework for curriculum can be applied to combat bias in all its many forms.

Before discussing this further, it is important to make a note about language. Derman-Sparks and Phillips (1997) write that "the notion of race as a determining factor in human behavior and ability has no scientific basis. Nevertheless, as a sociopolitical construct, it remains very real in terms of the treatment people receive in all aspects of their lives" (p. 12). Skin color is generally seen as the primary factor in defining one's race, as well as a variety of other physical and behavioral characteristics associated with racial groups. Though individuals may construct their own identities, the "legal power to determine racial group categories and membership is in the hands of the dominant group in society, rather than up for individual choice" (p. 12). For the purposes of this study, I will refer to Americans of European descent as *White*, and *people of color* to refer to Americans who have been historically targeted by racism. This term may include people of African, Caribbean, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American, and/or Latin American descent. I would be remiss not to acknowledge the limiting nature of these terms – certainly, they do not

encompass all of the identities represented in the United States, and I fully support the right of individuals to self-determine their own identities.

It is because the nature of identity is so complex and because of the history of racism in the United States that it is necessary for elementary educators to support children in their exploration of racial identity and difference. Doing so allows children to make greater sense of their world and enact change within it.

Over the last three years, I have worked as an elementary school teacher in New York City, with students ranging in age from five to ten years. I have worked in classrooms that were culturally and racially diverse, and I have also worked in classrooms that were relatively culturally and racially homogeneous. In all of these classrooms, children were asking questions about and attempting to make sense of why people have different skin colors and hair textures, and what this meant in the context of their world. So, how might educators respond to these questions? How can educators use curriculum to support positive development of a child's racial identity as well as positive attitudes toward other children's racial identities? How can educators help children to develop a critical awareness of and resistance to the existence of White privilege?

The first job of the educator in developing appropriate curriculum is to educate themselves about the racial groups and cultures that their students represent. For White teachers whose students belong to racial/cultural groups that are different than their own, this presents a challenging but necessary task. In his book *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know* (2006), Gary Howard details steps that White educators

must first take to understand and analyze their own Whiteness, and then how they can

begin to build culturally responsive curricula for their students.

As a White educator who works predominately with students of color, it has

been important for me to be reflective about my own history and experience, and to

work to understand the lens through which I view the world. I was raised in rural

Maryland, in a small farming town whose population was over 95% White. My

parents met in graduate school, and they were both trained as linguists. My mother

left her career to become a stay-at-home parent, while my father commuted to a

government job. I attended local public schools through middle school. In this school

system, I was placed on an "honors" track by fifth grade that separated me from my

peers with special needs, as well as from the few students of color that attended my

school.

Throughout middle school, I faced bullying that was largely grounded in

homophobia and gender bias. I became depressed and reluctant to go to school. My

grades suffered, though I had always been a high-achieving student. My parents

began to look into alternatives to the local public school, and sent me to a Quaker

boarding school an hour away from my home. My experience at this school was

overwhelmingly positive - I was engaged in my classes, participated in extracurricular

activities, and developed a strong social circle. My friends included people from a

wide variety of geographical, racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Overall, I felt accepted for who I was. It was at this school that my critical education

began – I began to learn about the ugly history of colonization and resistance

movements throughout the world.

Tatum (1997) might suggest that I was beginning to move through the stages of White identity development. These stages, as she describes them, are: *contact, disintegration, reintegration, pseudo-independence, immersion,* and *autonomy.* In the *contact* phase, White people often do not describe themselves as White, and may think of themselves as "part of the racial norm and take this for granted without conscious consideration of their White privilege." (p.95)

The *disintegration* phase is characterized by a "growing awareness of racism and White privilege as a result of personal encounters in which the social significance of race is made visible." (p. 96) It may also be accompanied by feelings of guilt or discomfort around one's own race.

In the *reintegration* phase, "previous feelings of guilt or denial may be transformed into fear and anger directed toward people of color." (p. 101) Here, White people sometimes "blame the victim" for the problem of racism. They may suggest, for example, that the problem of racism would go away if people of color were somehow different. This absolves the White person of any responsibility for taking action against racism. Additionally, White people may resent being seen as part of a larger culture of Whiteness, and point out how they are unlike other White people in order to deflect acceptance of their White privilege.

The next phase, *pseudo-independence*, develops as the White person gains a deeper understanding of the structural and institutional nature of racism. Tatum (1997) describes this phase as often "epitomized by the 'guilty White liberal' personal, the pseudo independent individual has an intellectual understanding of racism as a system of advantage, but doesn't quite know what to do with it." (p. 106)

At this stage, White people may make an effort to include more people of color in their social circles, but may be afraid to talk about race for fear of revealing their own privilege.

To move on to the next phase, *immersion*, a White person must "confront the reality of his or her own Whiteness." (p.107) They must work toward a positive self-identity around their race. Tatum suggests that at this stage, White people need to find role models in "other Whites who are further along in the process and can help show [them] the way." (p. 107) At the *immersion* stage, it is helpful for White people to learn about the history of White allies who have supported communities of color throughout history, and those who are doing so today.

After moving through the immersion stage, the White person "incorporates the newly defined view of Whiteness as part of a personal identity. The positive feelings associated with this redefinition energize the person's efforts to confront racism and oppression in daily life." (p. 112) This is referred to as the *autonomy* phase. However, Tatum emphasizes that although a White person may have worked through all of these stages, their racial identity development never truly ends. "Whites," she explains, "like people of color, continue to be works in progress." (p. 112)

Before high school, I existed within the *contact* phase. Since I had attended schools that were more than 90% white, and which utilized curricula that was written by and generally focused on the experience of White people, I was relatively unaware of my own privilege as a White person. I knew that racism existed, but thought of myself as part of the racial norm. I took that for granted without conscious

consideration of my White privilege – that is, I did not understand the complex

system of structural advantages I received simply because of the color of my skin.

I entered the *disintegration* phase and became aware of my own White

privilege at this new school. I lived in a dormitory in which I was the racial minority

for the first time in my life, and became increasingly aware of racism and White

privilege. I noticed the difference in the way my peers of color were treated when we

went on local outings. They were eyed suspiciously in drug stores, and stopped by the

police for no identifiable reason. Even the mere sight of a multi-racial group of

friends made some White people around us uncomfortable. I had never experienced

this before, and it made me very uncomfortable. I felt hyperaware of the implications

of my own skin color, and began to feel a sense of guilt for the privilege that I was

beginning to become aware of. I felt angry that I had not been taught about this

before. I felt anger toward family members and other White people in my life for the

biased comments and behavior that I witnessed in them.

There was a short period in which I existed within the *reintegration* phase,

which Tatum (1997) describes as being characterized by frustration as being seen in

as a member of a group, that our skin is not only representative of my own identity,

but exists in association with other White people. I remember thinking things like,

"Well, I'm not like other White people! I'm not a racist." I became frustrated when I

felt like people of color were making assumptions about me based on my race. I

didn't understand that most people of color experience this on a daily basis. I was

used to being perceived as an individual most of the time.

By my junior year of high school, I moved into the *pseudo-independence* phase, in which I possessed an intellectual understanding of racism as a system of advantage, but still felt a great deal of shame and guilt around my own Whiteness. As Tatum describes in her book, I often attempted to escape these feelings of shame by spending most of my time with people of color. This was certainly my experience, as the majority of my friends at the time were students of color. These friendships were incredibly valuable to me as a young person, and I learned a great deal from the relationships I built during that time. During this stage, it was very difficult for me to talk about my own race without feeling defensive or anxious that I would upset or offend someone. This stemmed from the residual guilt and shame that I felt about being White. Given the horrific oppression of people of color by Whites throughout history, how could I possible associate my skin color with anything positive?

This phase continued throughout my first two years of college. As a student in New York City, I was able to connect what I was learning in the classroom to my work as a campus activist and as a resident of an incredibly diverse and complex city. It was among a community of campus activists that I began to witness White people who weren't afraid to talk about their own racial identity, who did not seem to feel guilty about their Whiteness. Instead, they accepted it as one of many parts of their identity, one that required careful consideration. This exposure brought me into the *immersion* phase. My feelings of shame and guilt around race began to dissipate as I learned more about the work of White activists allies throughout history. It was helpful for me to identify people in my own ancestry who had worked for a more equitable society by participating in anti-racist movements. I became more connected

to my identity as a Quaker, as I learned more about the role of Quaker men and women in the Civil War and Civil Rights movement. I had found a place in my own family history where being White did not equate the intentional oppression of others – in fact, it stood for an opportunity for resistance against racism and building alliances with people of color.

By the time I graduated college, I believe that I had reached what I identify as the *autonomy* stage of White racial identity development. Tatum describes this phase as "energizing the person's efforts to confront racism and oppression in daily life" (p.112). I attribute this enthusiasm for being a part of an actively anti-racist movement largely to my high school and college educations. My high school education, in which I was exposed to the experiences of people of color both on a social and academic level, helped to build a strong foundation for more critical analysis of race and structural racism throughout my studies in college. I got excited about the opportunities that educational settings provided for students to think about race, racism, and other forms of oppression. It was this excitement that was the driving force for my entry into a career as an educator.

Considering my journey through my own interpretation of Tatum's model of the White identity development process was instrumental in my work in becoming an anti-racist educator. Though such reflection will look different for different White people based on their own life experiences, it is crucial for all White educators to be reflective of their own racial identity. We need to retrace how we have come to identify our role in society, and what further work we need to do in developing an anti-racist consciousness. It is an ongoing process, as Tatum (1997) describes:

> "Even when active antiracist thinking predominates, there
> may still be particular situations that trigger old modes of
> responding. Whites, like people of color, continue to be
> works in progress." (p.112)

The process of racial identity development is quite different for people of

color than it is for Whites, and is not something that I can speak to from personal

experience. Tatum writes that the process of racial identity development varies for

different people of color – that is, for example, the racial identity development of a

Latino or multiracial person will differ from that of a Black person. Given the wide

range of experience and culture among different groups of people of color, it would

be impossible to describe the specifics of each groups' racial identity development

process in this paper. Even so, Tatum writes, "the basic tenets of such models [of

racial identity development] can be applied to all people of color who have shared

similar patterns of racial, ethnic, or cultural oppression." (p. 132) She refers to the

work of Jean Phinney, whose research on adolescent ethnic identity development

includes young people from various racial and ethnic groups. His model consists of

three stages:

1.   Unexamined ethnic identity, when race or ethnicity is not
     particularly salient for the individual.
2.   Ethnic identity search, when individuals are actively engaged in
     defining for themselves what it means to be a member of their own
     racial or ethnic group.
3.   Achieved ethnic identity, when individuals are able to assert a clear,
     positive sense of their own racial or ethnic identity. (Phinney as
     Cited in Tatum, 1997, p. 132)

Tatum writes that if young people are supported through this process, they

will achieve "eventual internalization of a positive, self-defined sense of [their] own

racial or ethnic identity." (Tatum, 1997, p. 132) By creating a consciously anti-bias

classroom, teachers can play an important role in this process.

Thinking through my own racial identity development as well as that of

people of color has been one of the most important steps I have taken in finding ways

to understand and support my students' social and emotional development, as well as

in becoming a stronger ally to my colleagues of color. While I was in graduate

school, I began to wonder what my life might have been like if I had been supported

in an exploration of race, culture, and identity in an educational context from a

younger age. What if the sort of conversations I was introduced to in high school and

college had begun in an age- and developmentally-appropriate way in early

childhood? Would this have altered the construction of my own White identity and

shifted the way I related to other students? Would it have helped me to see the

intersections between the bullying I faced as an adolescent and other forms of

oppression? This final question is significant because in order for people who

possess privilege of some kind (whether it is racial, gender, class, or some other form)

to acknowledge and understand the workings of systemic privilege, we must

understand what oppression looks like, sounds like, and feels like.

Understanding my own White privilege has helped me to become more

mindful of my role as an educator – in everything from lesson planning to classroom

management, I work hard to examine my classroom through an antiracist lens, and

strive to resist creating systems of oppression in my classroom environment. In

working to understand the process of racial identity development, I have also found

ways in which I can support all of my students in developing a positive, empowered

racial identity. Just as I consider my students' cognitive development in selecting tasks and activities for them to complete, I also consider their racial identity development as I create and design curriculum. This includes things like thinking through what books to read aloud or in literature circles, which historical figures to highlight in our social studies curriculum, and creating groups for collaborative projects.

Some teachers may assert that race and color are not something that children notice or can understand until adolescence. However, research on child development reaffirms that, indeed, skin color is something that young children notice is significant, and develop ideas about. Child development researchers generally agree that a child's racial awareness has begun by age three or four. At the same age, children begin to attach positive and negative qualities to different skin colors. In Goodman's study of Black and White children in the 1950s and 60s, 25% of White children had negative feelings about Black people, and more White children felt positive feelings about their own skin color than their Black peers. (Goodman as cited in Kendall, 1996, p. 38) Tatum (2007) explains that children develop the conception of *race constancy* by age six or seven - that is, they develop the notion that racial group membership is fixed and cannot change. This suggests that, whether or not we talk about it openly, children are developing ideas about the significance of skin color and the concept of racial identity.

Pelo (2000) writes that early childhood educators have a major opportunity to guide students through this process:

"As part of their daily work with children, teachers notice details about their development: whether or not a child is walking, or that they love to draw, or that their speech is hard to understand, or that they can count by threes, or that they hate to get dirty and never play in the water table. In the same way, teachers who are using [an anti-bias framework] notice the ways in which children show a strong sense of who they are, or their comfort or discomfort with differences, or their ability to speak up in the face of unfairness." (Pelo, 2000, p. 3)

Pelo's observations highlight how important it is for teachers to acknowledge and support students in their exploration of race. As I taught in a variety of elementary classrooms throughout Brooklyn and Manhattan, I witnessed children beginning to interrogate the meaning of their own differences. For children in early childhood, this began with curiosity around concrete visible differences in skin color and hair texture. I watched as many of my White colleagues responded to such questions by shutting them down in a variety of ways, ranging from replying with a simple "Shhh!" to a child's noticing of another's skin tone, to going so far as to respond to questions about why another child had a different hair texture by saying "We don't talk about that in school." I began to see that many White adults are unprepared to talk about race and difference, and did not appear to have moved beyond the first few stages of racial identity development, as Tatum (1997) describes. Teachers appeared to shut down children's inquiries about race more out of their own discomfort and inability to engage in dialogue around this topic, rather than because it was developmentally inappropriate. The comments that I witnessed also occurred in schools where there was little to no professional development for teachers on creating anti-bias classrooms, leaving teachers without the language and skills necessary for engaging with what can be a difficult topic.

This is especially concerning considering the fact that across the United States, White teachers make up most of our nation's teaching force. For example, according to recent studies by the U.S. Department of Education (2008), students of color made up 49% of New York State's elementary school student population in 2008, but the teaching staff was 84% White. Without careful examination of the significance of our own skin color and working to understand how racial identity develops in children, White teachers risk failing to positively support a major part of identity formation in our students.

PART 2: What is an Anti-Bias Curriculum?

In order to support positive identity formation in our students and to help them to develop a critical analysis of the world around them (including the social construction of race and the existence of oppression), it is important to develop a curriculum that actively resists the internalization of racism and oppression in the classroom. This work must begin from the child's earliest experiences in school, and must be done in a developmentally appropriate way.

It is important to note that although some of its activities may be similar, anti-bias curriculum intentionally differs slightly from what has historically been termed "multicultural curriculum." Though the purpose and motivation for multicultural curriculum is often positive and intends to help children to appreciate people who differ from them, several problems often emerge. Frequently, the concept of diversity is represented through units of study focused on other countries, which can lead to the idea that American culture is homogenous and other cultures exist only outside the U.S., rather than exploring diversity within the United States by coupling such studies with investigation into the experience of Japanese- or Mexican-Americans, for example. Additionally, some teachers make the mistake of believing that such curriculum is only necessary if there are students of color in the classroom. In fact, it may be White students in homogenous classrooms who are most in need of an anti-bias curriculum that includes representations of a variety of cultural experiences, as well as supporting students in exploring their own family history and culture. (Ramsey as cited in Sparks, p. 7, 1989)

Louise Derman-Sparks (1989, 1997, 2011) and Ann Pelo (2008) have been national leaders in the movement to incorporate anti-bias curriculum into elementary level classrooms. They provide a theoretical framework for this type of curriculum, as well as concrete suggestions for what an anti-bias curriculum might look like in practice.

Louise Derman-Sparks and the Anti-Bias Curriculum Task Force (1989) describe three major philosophical ideals of an anti-bias curriculum:

> "(a) It addresses more than cultural diversity by including gender and differences in physical abilities; (b) it is based on children's developmental tasks as they construct identity and attitudes; and (c) it directly addresses the impact of stereotypic, bias, and discriminatory behavior in young children's development and interactions." (p. 8)

Ann Pelo (2008), a leader in anti-bias work with children, particularly those in preschool, has designed a framework of four goals for teachers in creating an anti-bias classroom. These goals are to nurture each child's construction of positive self- and group identity(ies), to support students in comfortable and empathetic interactions with people who are different from them, to foster children's critical thinking about bias, and to cultivate each child's ability to stand up for themselves and others in the face of bias. (Pelo, 2008, p. 5)

But how does one actually enact anti-bias curricula in the classroom? After careful examination of the work of multiple anti-bias educators, including Gary Howard (2006), Louise Derman-Sparks (1989, 1997, and 2011) Frances Kendall (1996), and Ann Pelo (2000), I have identified characteristics of the most successful anti-bias curricula for elementary schools. These include but are not limited to the following:

1. Self-reflective educator(s) in the classroom environment
2. **Careful planning of the classroom's physical environment**
3. **Consideration of cognitive, social, and emotional development of children**
4. **Providing opportunities for activism**
5. **Positive relationships with and involvement of the students' families and caregivers**
6. **Open discussion of difference**

A Self-Reflective Educator

An anti-bias classroom requires a teacher's careful examination and consideration of the significance of their own racial and cultural experience and identity. As I have described my reflection on my own biases and experience of oppression in Part 1, a teacher who wants to develop an anti-bias curriculum would benefit from critical analysis of the way they have experienced race and privilege in order to effectively support their students in this process. In order for the teacher to engage in this type of self-reflection, they will need to seek out colleagues and professional resources that will support their reflection and education about how to develop an anti-bias curriculum. Some of these resources are featured in Section 3 of this paper.

Planning the Classroom Environment

Before the school year begins, most teachers spend a great deal of time planning their classroom layout. Where will the desks or tables be? Where will they put their books and belongings? Where will the meeting area be? How can I set my classroom up in a way that facilitates small-group instruction and conferencing? How can I make sure that the materials and equipment in the classroom are accessible to students with special needs?

Of equal importance and not disconnected from these questions are

broader ones about philosophy: How will my students know that I value racial

equity in my classroom? What will I do to make sure that they see

representations of themselves and their culture in the environment? How will I

expose my students to people who are different from them? What tools and

resources can they use to explore racial identity? How can I foster

collaboration between students whose cultural experiences may differ? How

can I make them feel a sense of responsibility to each other and the classroom

environment? How will I create high expectations for my students that

demonstrate my trust in them as they work and play independently?

Sparks (1989, p.11) writes that, "Creating a diverse environment is the

first step in implementing new curriculum. Then the classroom has the

materials and conditions which serve as a basis for children's initiating

conversations and for teachers introducing activities." She challenges

educators to "increase materials that reflect children and adults who are of

color, who are differently abled, and who are engaged in non-stereotypic

gender activities; and to eliminate stereotypic and inaccurate materials from

daily use."

In order to do this, Sparks suggests putting images of the children,

their families, and their communities on the walls of the classroom. There

should also be pictures of children and adults from racial/cultural groups that

are not represented in the classroom. These images should represent a variety

of occupations, ages, genders, abilities, and family arrangements. Dolls and other toy figures should represent a similar diversity.

This is also true for other classroom materials. The books in the classroom should represent a wide range of experience and identity, and do so in an accurate (and not stereotypic) way. There should also be books in a variety of languages. Music played in the classroom should be from a variety of cultures and in various languages. Art materials should include crayons that represent multiple skin shades, paint, and textured materials (yarn, string, etc.) for students to create accurate self portraits and portraits of others. Sparks also suggests that teachers take pictures regularly throughout the school year and displaying them so that students' experiences are continually represented.

Consideration of Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Development of Children

Kendall (1996) emphasizes that crucial to the developmental-interaction theory of education is the "assumption that an individual child's developmental needs must be assessed *in relation to* that child's cultural and social experience" (p.17). That is, development does not look uniformly the same for all children. Though most children may go through a similar set of developmental stages, they may take on different meaning for children depending on their socio-cultural experience. Kendall provides the example of *egocentrism*, which Piaget refers to as the preschool child's inability to another person's point of view. Though this may be true for most children,

egocentrism may provide a basis for *ethnocentrism* in some children who belong to a dominant racial group. Kendall (1996) writes that,

> One explanation for this phenomenon is that egocentrism is a quality that many cultures reject, including much of middle-class American culture. There are all sorts of maxims encouraging children to be less egocentric ... Ethnocentrism, however, is firmly rooted in our culture. Many mainstream Americans expect everyone to speak English and to adhere to our culture's rules. (p.21)

A successful anti-bias classroom is one that actively discourages ethnocentrism in White children and disempowerment of children of color, and does so in a way that recognizes the children's stage(s) of development. Much of this can be accomplished in the environmental design of the early childhood classroom by not over-representing White people in images and toys presented in the classroom. White people must also not be over-represented in the curriculum. For example, books read aloud should feature an abundance of people of color, and music in the classroom should represent a variety of cultures and languages.

By ages two to five, most children begin making early observations of racial cues, form basic concepts or race, engage in conceptual differentiation, begin to understand race constancy, and begin to develop conclusions about racial groups (Katz as cited in Sparks, 1989, p. 2). Three- to five-year-old children wonder: "What gives me my skin color? Can I change it?" By age 4, they may use racial reasons for refusing to interact with children different from themselves and exhibit discomfort with people whose race may be different from their own. (Sparks, 1989, p. 2)

The exploration of racial identity, of course, will look different for different student populations. Sparks (1989) writes that in order for anti-bias curriculum to succeed, it must be grounded in a developmental approach that responds to the needs of the children in the classroom. She elaborates,

> In order to develop activities that respond effectively to children's specific interests and concerns, it is first necessary to understand what it is a child is asking, wants to know, or means by a question or comment. Moreover, unless curriculum consistently takes into account children's perspectives, it may become oppressive to them. (p.3)

Based on Sparks' ideas about curriculum development, a teacher must be a careful observer of their students' experiences, reactions, and interactions.

Once teachers know how their students conceive of race developmentally, they may begin to set developmentally appropriate goals for them. Carter and Curtis (as cited in Pelo, 2008) have developed a useful set of developmental goals for young children as they navigate racial differences and similarities. Two-year olds should be working "to develop a positive awareness of [their] own racial identity; to learn words for observations of differences; to develop a comfortable awareness of others." (p.15) As they study colors and textures, they may do this with reference to their own skin and hair, and learn how to describe physical features in others in a curious but respectful manner. Threes and fours should work "to understand that racial identity does not change; to learn accurate information about racial identity to counter bias; to understand that one is part of a large group with similar characteristics (not 'different') and to feel comfortable with exactly who one is." (p.15) Fives ought to "understand and value the range of differences

among racial groups." (p.15) If children achieve these goals in early childhood and they are reinforced continually, they will be able to begin working toward activist projects that expand in scope throughout elementary school.

Trisha Whitney, a teacher in Oregon, wrote in <u>Rethinking Early Childhood Education</u> (2000, p. 23) about how she has developed a responsive and developmentally appropriate anti-bias curriculum for preschool children using "persona dolls." Persona dolls can be made or purchased, and are designed to represent a diverse group of children around the same age as the students in the classroom. Each doll becomes a character with a unique personality, family, and culture that is consistent throughout the year. They ought to reflect the identities of the children in the class, as well as others who are not represented in the classroom. Teachers can use the dolls for storytelling purposes that support anti-bias curriculum. For example, Whitney (2000) writes of a story she told her students about an Asian-American doll to help them identify racial bias:

> "The kids were having fun up on top of the jungle gym.
> When Mei Lin cam and tried to climb up, Rachel yelled
> 'NO! ONLY AMERICANS UP HERE!'"

She then worked with the children in her classroom to identify why this comment was hurtful, and to come up with ways that Mei Lin and the other dolls could work together to find a solution.

Sparks (1989, p.19) also writes about the use of persona dolls for multiple anti-bias purposes. Storytelling with the dolls can reflect interactions that children in the classroom have had, current events in the news (for

example, a doll may have family who lives in a country that has experienced

an earthquake), or issues the teacher believes are important for children to

think about. Tools like these persona dolls can be used to support pre-school

aged children in learning accurate information about a variety of cultural

identities, and in helping them to develop skills to begin to stand up for

themselves and others in a way that is developmentally appropriate.

Providing Opportunities for Activism

Pelo (2000) emphasizes the importance of incorporating age-

appropriate activism into anti-bias curricula for young children. She writes,

> Activism is an empowering process for young children;
> it calls on them to flex their social, emotional,
> intellectual, and sometimes even their physical muscles.
> They work together to solve complex problems, make
> forays out into the adult community, ask questions, and
> declare their feelings. Children understand and feel
> proud that their activism is meaningful, real-life work
> about doing good in the world.(p.9)

Children often demonstrate their understanding of racism by saying

"That's not fair!" when they hear stories of a child of color being mistreated,

or treated differently from their White peers. This is the first step toward

activism, as they are recognizing inequality. Guiding children toward taking

action when they witness injustice is a concrete way for them to build a

positive and empowered identity, whether that is as an ally to people of color,

or a self-advocate. This may be as simple as engaging in a role-play with a

persona doll, in which students can practice standing up for a doll that has

been mistreated, or it may be a more complex and long-term activist project.

Activist projects can also serve as a means by which to integrate and connect units of study in different content areas. For example, as a part of a neighborhood study in a first-grade classroom in which I taught, the children designed an activist project as part of their unit culmination. Within this unit, we were able to integrate social studies, mathematics, writing, and reading around into the same project-based unit. They identified one challenge that they had witnessed during their four month neighborhood study, and were asked to come up with a way to address that challenge.

Throughout the study, the students had noticed trash on the streets of their neighborhood, and wanted to do something to get rid of it. Over the next five weeks, my co-teacher and I provided lessons and research materials on ways that cities deal with trash (including landfills, dumps, compost, recycling, and others). We went out into the neighborhood with the children and diagrammed where we saw the most trash, and what kind of trash it was. We used this information to construct graphs with the children. Finally, they came up with their own proposal on how to address the trash in their neighborhood, and described it in a persuasive letter to the city mayor. At the end of the unit, they ceremoniously mailed these letters, and shared the work they had done with their families.

In my experience and the experience of many of my colleagues, we have found that projects like these lead to greater student (and teacher!) enthusiasm and engagement. They also make practical and concrete the

students' vision of what is "fair" and "unfair." Though these projects may not

always make direct mention of race, Pelo (2000) asserts that

> When teachers consistently keep anti-bias goals at the center of
> classroom life, both adults and children get better at recognizing social
> injustice and understanding of its origins. (p. 2)

In other words, such projects support the development of "dispositions for

activism," (Pelo, 2000, p. 2) in which children begin to create a preliminary

understanding of structures of oppression. It helps them to develop a keen eye

for injustice and disparities, and encourages them to do something about it.

This is a central part of anti-bias education. When teachers go beyond

acknowledging that something is unfair and begin to ask. "What do you think

can we do about it?" and support students with the resources to take action,

they can foster activism in their classrooms.

Positive Relationships With and Involvement of the Students' Parents and Caregivers

Education researchers and philosophers have long touted the importance of

involving parents and caregivers in their children's education. The same is true in

anti-bias education. So, how ought teachers actually put this into place? Kendall

(1996) writes:

> First, build strong relationships with the families of the children in
> your school or classroom; second, continue the ongoing process of
> examining your own biases and attitudes; and third, create strategies
> for addressing both the concern about what to include in the
> curriculum and how to involve parents. Above all, remember: If
> parents know that they are able to be a part of their children's
> education and that they and their perspectives are respected, the
> elements of successful interaction are in place. (p. 66)

Pelo (2000) goes further, and writes that it is *essential* for educators to

acknowledge parents' values, and that when they do, children and teachers benefit as

well as the parents themselves. She emphasizes that in doing so, "teachers build

bridges for children between their experiences at home and at school," (p. 105) which

provides greater opportunities for family involvement in the classroom and ultimately

leads to students' deeper understanding of the curriculum.

Pelo (2000) suggests six key points to successful partnership-building
strategies:

- Create a program that is relevant to family cultures.
- Ask parents directly about their values and goals.
- Be honest, clear, and forthcoming about your own values and
  goals.
- Encourage dialogue among the parents.
- Maintain communication with parents.
- Nurture adult dispositions for activism. (p. 108)

Though parents and caregivers may not be involved in the actual

curriculum writing process, it is important that they feel that the curriculum is

reflective (and includes representations of) the cultures and racial identities

represented in their family. Pelo asserts that it may not be so simple to include

the values and goals of each individual family represented in the classroom,

and that sometimes, these values and goals may differ starkly from those of

the educator. Even so, it is crucial for educators to face these differences

rather than avoiding dialogue around them in order to build a cooperative

relationship between families and the classroom environment.

In her book, Pelo (2000) illustrates the importance of family/teacher

dialogue around values through a meaningful anecdote about a preschool

teacher who guided her students through an activist project in which the

children voiced their opposition to a military airshow in their town. The

teacher did not ask for parent input on this project, and when the children

shared their work with their families, many parents were very angry, as they

valued the military as an institution of public defense. Pelo (2000) writes that,

had the teacher talked with families about the students' anger at the military

immediately after their encounter with the airshow on a field trip,

> They might never have agreed on the role or value of the
> military, but they probably would have found their way together
> to an activism project that responded to the children's feelings
> and ideas that respected family beliefs. (p.108)

Though the work of communicating and engaging with families in anti-

bias curriculum may not always be simple or easy, doing so is to the

benefit of the entire classroom community – teachers, families, and

children.

Open Discussion of Difference

In developing an anti-bias classroom, we must ensure that race,

culture, and identity are topics that are purposefully integrated into the

curriculum. We must also provide space for our students to discuss these

topics individually or as a group when they have questions or conflicts that

arise and are connected to identity. It is crucial that children's observations

and questions about race and identity are never silenced, and are addressed as

often as possible. Tatum (1997) describes the particular problem of silencing

such observations from White students:

> When White children make racial observations, they are often
> silenced by their parents, who feel uncomfortable and unsure of
> how to respond. With time the observed contradictions
> between parental attitudes and behaviors, or between societal
> messages about meritocracy and visible inequities, become
> difficult to process in a culture of silence. In order to prevent
> chronic discomfort, Whites may learn not to notice. (p. 201)

She adds that although many people of color are more fluent in the discourse

of racism and aware of its effects on their lives than White people, it is still a

difficult conversation, especially when it is across racial lines. Adults struggle

to engage in conversations about race, largely because as children, we are

socialized out of engaging in conversations that directly acknowledge race and

racism, as well as ones that interrogate the social construction of race.

In order to reduce fear and anxiety about such conversations, educators

must support children's open discussion of difference, rather than shutting

them down. They must also plan to initiate these discussions by asking key

questions of their students. Kendall (1996) suggests that:

> "You can deliberately find occasions to talk about such things
> as skin color, hair and the other physical characteristics that
> can distinguish different races. One way to do this is by
> introducing new materials. For example, you could read a book
> to the children about a Chinese American family and then talk
> about the appearance of the characters in the book. 'Do the
> people in the book look the same as the people in your family
> or in our class? In what ways? How do they look different?'"
> (p. 88)

In having these types of conversations, educators should take care not to

tokenize particular groups, or to reinforce dominant ideology, embodied in

such language as "*they* are different from *us*." Their primary role is not to

assign particular qualities to differences. Rather, their role is to acknowledge

what students observe and support them in thinking about (and questioning) what these differences may mean.

Classrooms that seek to work against bias and to empower students must have self-reflective educators in the classroom, a carefully planned physical environment, consideration of the cognitive, social, and emotional development of children, opportunities for activism, partnerships with families and caregivers, as well as frequent and open discussions of difference. These principles serve as the building blocks of an anti-bias classroom, and these classrooms will be most successful when each of these elements is consciously integrated to the fullest extent possible.

PART 3: Theory Into Practice - Transforming Curriculum

The theory that supports the construction of anti-bias classrooms is ultimately worth nothing if not put into practice. At first, the task may seem daunting. It requires (re) examining every aspect of classroom life, from the physical environment to curriculum. For teachers who are interested in implementing an anti-racist practice into their classroom for the first time, it may be useful to first examine some of the curricula that have been created by others. In addition to the valuable work of individual teachers worldwide, there are many non-profit organizations that have developed anti-bias curriculum that teachers can adapt and use for their own classrooms. Three such organizations that provide an enormous volume of useful curriculum for students and professional development for teachers are the Morningside Center, Teaching Tolerance (a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center), and the Zinn Education Project.

Morningside Center: www.teachablemoment.org

The Morningside Center was founded in New York City in the early 1980s as a non-profit organization designed to bring strategies for conflict resolution and intercultural understanding into New York City Public Schools. In the years since its founding, Morningside has created a K-12 conflict resolution curriculum called the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP), a language-arts based conflict resolution curriculum called the 4Rs Program, and a website (www.teachablemoment.org) with hundreds of lesson

plans and resources for teachers to integrate classroom activities that respond to current political issues as well as supporting intercultural understanding and conflict resolution in the classroom.

A study published in 2003 by Columbia University on the effectiveness of Morningside Center's RCCP curricula has proven it to be extremely successful. Students who have taken part in its programming have demonstrated a more positive outlook on the world and their peers, greater academic success in the classroom, and increased scores on standardized tests.

Teaching Tolerance – a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center: www.teachingtolerance.org

Teaching Tolerance, which is a project of the civil rights law organization Southern Poverty Law Center, strives to create and support anti-bias classrooms with curriculum and teacher development. They offer such resources as a monthly magazine featuring articles on how to tackle current political issues in the classroom, teaching kits with curriculum around such issues as racism and identifying moral values, and professional development resources for teachers. Most of these resources are offered for a small fee, or are entirely free of cost.

Teaching Tolerance also sponsors the annual Mix it Up at Lunch Day, in which students are encouraged to sit with new people during their lunch period – namely, students whose cultures differ from their own in some way. Teaching Tolerance supplements this lunchtime activity with resources for

discussion and follow-up activities in the classroom that examine the experience of " social border crossing."

As previously stated, Teaching Tolerance is a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), an organization focused on achieving civil rights for all people and on working against hate groups in the United States. The SPLC also conducts research on topics relevant to civil rights, including reports on the experiences of immigrants and the prevalence of hate groups in the United States. Additionally, they conduct research relevant to education on topics such as the juvenile justice system, the effects of suspension on students, and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina with regard to the New Orleans public school system. This research is intended to support educational reform, and is useful for teachers in considering the connection between curriculum and education policy.

The Zinn Education Project: http://www.zinnedproject.com

The Zinn Education Project is a website for teachers that includes a large library of lessons and articles for teachers and students that incorporate critical analysis and a variety of perspectives into history education. It works in partnership with two non-profits: Rethinking Schools and Teaching for Change, social justice education organizations that provide a wealth of resources for teachers interested in engaging in anti-bias work in their classrooms. The website is based on the work of Howard Zinn, arguably one of the most famous social justice educators, who wrote A People's History of

the United States (2003), an adult non-fiction text, as well as the Young

People's History of the United States (2007) series, which serves as an

alternative to mainstream historical textbooks. His books incorporate more

writing about the history of resistance movements and actions by oppressed

groups than is typically seen in most history books for children.

On the website, teachers can search for resources based on theme (ie.

Civil Rights, immigration, foreign politics, etc.) or time period. Most

activities are designed for middle and high school students, but I have adapted

many of them for an elementary-level classroom. Most of the resources

designed for children are highly interactive and provide hands-on materials for

children to explore as they engage in the activity.

The Zinn Education Project's website has proven especially helpful in

own experience as a fourth grade teacher, as it provides interactive lesson

plans and activities that directly link to common social studies topics. Though

most of the material provided on the website is targeted at middle and high

school students, my colleagues and I have found that these activities are easily

modified for elementary school students. Every activity that we have used

from this website has been incredibly engaging and exciting for our students,

and has helped them to understand complex social studies topics such as the

U.S. Constitutional Convention and the New York Draft Riots during the

Civil War through interactive role plays and studying hands-on materials.

All of these organizations, as well as many others, are extremely useful resources for teachers. They provide supplemental resources for classroom instruction and community building, and provide a variety of activities for students at every age level. Each of these organizations have websites that allow users to search by topic or age level for an activity that meets the needs of the group of children with whom they work.

These resources are especially valuable for teachers in response to current events. During the school year, teachers often do not have time to pause and redesign their own curriculum to reflect social and political events that may arise. However, as progressive educators, it is important that we respond to students' inquiries and curiosities about the world with inquiry-based activities that incorporate critical analysis.

Generally, the activities offered by these non-profit organizations are most useful when teachers are new to anti-bias curricula, or when political events occur and teachers struggle with how to address the issue in their classroom. They also serve as an excellent inspiration for teachers seeking to design their own curriculum around anti-bias issues that meets the needs of their students. There are, however, limitations to these curricula, just as there are with any sort of curriculum created by authors who are disconnected from the students with whom the curriculum may be implemented. Teachers should adapt and differentiate these activities for students based on their abilities and life experience.

The Anti-Bias Curriculum Dilemma

In today's public schools, it may also be difficult for teachers to find more time to incorporate supplemental anti-bias curriculum materials. Facing aggressive demands to score well on high-stakes tests and to cover increasing amounts of mandated curriculum, teachers often struggle just to teach what is required of them, let alone implement supplemental instruction. However, this does not mean that teachers cannot or should not find other means to incorporate anti-bias curriculum into their classroom. Rather, it means that it must be incorporated into the existing curricula wherever possible. This approach is also a more holistic one, avoiding the implicit (or explicit) idea that an anti-bias curriculum is only appropriate for morning meeting or community building time, and not academic subjects.

Certainly, to reform existing curriculum or to divert from whatever scripted curriculum one's school employs poses significant challenges. It requires more work on the part of the teacher outside of the classroom in order to save time within the school day. The teacher must be willing and able to conduct outside research and commit to rewriting unit and lesson plans, as well as to reflecting and adjusting the curriculum where necessary.

My own experience with reforming existing curricula has been that although it is challenging, the benefits to the entire classroom community are enormous. When I began teaching fourth grade at a progressive public charter school in New York City, I was given a pre-existing curriculum map to use as I guided my students through a study of Colonial America. This curriculum

map was based on New York City and state social studies standards, and had only been used once before in the year prior. In the year that I began working at the school, three out of four members of my grade level team were new to the school. Like any group of teachers new to a school, we were overwhelmed and were still learning how to work effectively together. Additionally, although we were given a curriculum map, we still had to develop a unit plan of daily objectives for this study, and unfortunately we didn't have much time to do so.

The curriculum map we had been given incorporated important questions for our students to grapple with about the origins of power and in the United States. It examined the push and pull factors that caused the first white settlers to move to America. It allowed quite a bit of room for student inquiry. All of these things were strengths, but there were also major weaknesses in the curriculum. Most of the content was focused on white settlers, and very little examined the experience of people of color in what would later become the United States – namely, that of Native Americans and enslaved Africans. Overall, the curriculum oversimplified colonization and, ultimately, glossed over the violence and brutality that occurred during the time period. After spending years studying colonization and its effects, I was disturbed by this, and felt uncomfortable teaching the material as the map directed me.

We were unable to make significant changes to the curriculum as we enacted it that first year. The reasons for this were many, but to list a few: we

were overwhelmed by adapting to a new school, the curriculum was brand

new to us, my grade team was unprepared to talk about such a difficult time

period with complex and lasting effects in a developmentally appropriate way,

and the resources available to elementary school teachers on teaching about

the colonial period are incredibly limited and oversimplified. We did manage

to supplement what we were given with lessons that attempted to incorporate

an anti-bias focus, including lessons about black colonies and resistance to

colonization by communities of color, discussions of the effects of

colonization on Native Americans. However, the entirety of the study was not

enacted with the intent of supporting our students in developing a critical

analysis of colonization.

The effects of teaching the study in this way were negative in a variety

of ways. My grade team often felt frustrated in teaching this unit. It felt like an

impossible task – how could we teach about a time period that established so

much of the hegemonic and oppressive structures that still exist in the United

States today in a way that is developmentally appropriate for 9 and 10 year

olds, many of whom have special needs? As a result of this frustration, we

often felt unmotivated in our work. This led to decreased motivation in our

students, as well. Additionally, teaching the study without a consistent anti-

bias approach led to frustration from our students' parents. Some parents

asked why we weren't talking more about the negative impact of colonization,

and were concerned about the effect that might have on their children. Finally,

what was perhaps most concerning about this study was that our students

(about 75% of whom were African- or Caribbean-American) had not been introduced to the history or culture of Africa in their social studies education prior to their fourth grade study of colonization. This meant that many of our students' first experience in formal education about their ancestors began with the enslavement of West Africans.

Throughout our implementation of this curriculum, I found myself in a moral and political crisis. I had become an educator largely out of a desire to enact anti-bias curriculum, but was finding it particularly difficult to do with this unit of study. Prior to teaching fourth grade, I had been teaching in early childhood classrooms, where I felt much more able to enact an integrated anti-bias approach. Part of this was because there were many more resources available for teaching about families and neighborhoods (the New York State social studies curricula for kindergarten and first grade) with a multicultural, anti-bias approach. As a fourth grade teacher attempting to talk about colonization with our students, I found myself scrambling to find similar resources, largely coming up empty-handed.

Confronting the Challenge of Creating Anti-Bias Curricula

First, I want to acknowledge that to enact anti-bias curriculum is not an easy task. When it comes to anti-bias curriculum in social studies, it is much more difficult with some topics than others, and there are many more resources available on particular topics and time periods, while there are very few available for others. Secondly, I want to share with you the effects of not

enacting a truly anti-bias curriculum. The way this unit was implemented

affected my relationships with other teachers, my school's administrators, my

students, and their parents. On a personal level, it felt frustrating to gloss over

the negative effects of colonization with my students after having studied the

lasting impact of the colonial period while I was in college. Certainly, my

nine- and ten-year-old students were not developmentally ready to study this

topic in the way that I had as an undergraduate college student, but I felt a

strong sense of responsibility not to teach about the time period in a way that

glorified the colonists and grossly oversimplified the relationship between

them and the other groups that existed in America at the time.

Most importantly, I share this experience in order to illustrate the point

from which my grade team started. Our work during the Colonial Times study

served as a major wake-up call for us as educators. At different points in the

unit, each of the fourth grade teachers began to see the major failings of this

unit, whether it was because of an interaction with a frustrated parent, or

observing disengagement in our students.

All of these experiences impacted the ways in which the social studies

curriculum was enacted for the remainder of the year. The units that we were

required to teach for the remainder of the year included studies of the

American Revolutionary and Civil Wars. In our planning for these units, we

were much clearer about the importance of developing anti-bias curriculum in

social studies. We invested more time in setting clear goals for what we

wanted our students to gain from each unit, and in developing a unit plan that

each of us felt comfortable with, and which reflected historical perspectives with which our students could identify. The main focus of our Revolutionary War study became the practice of examining history and war through a variety of perspectives. We highlighted five in particular: Loyalists, Patriots, women, African Americans, and Native Americans. We were careful to acknowledge that many people were members of more than one group. After providing our students with content about the varied experiences of each of these groups, we worked hard to help our students develop skills in critically analyzing historical text, considering the author's bias, and seeking to find alternative texts from other perspectives. When we could not find texts that represented people or events that we felt it was important for our students to know about (which happened frequently), we wrote them ourselves. As our students read articles and other texts about the battles and other events that occurred during the American Revolution, they were always analyzing the author's perspective. By the end of our Revolutionary War study, our students were becoming critical historians.

Using Historical Role Plays as a Way to Engage With Multiple Perspectives

We culminated the Revolutionary War study with a modified re-enactment of the Constitutional Convention of 1787 that we adapted from an activity designed by the Zinn Education Project (2011) for middle and high school students. First, we studied the Convention as it actually happened,

including an examination of its participants, the questions that were debated, and the final results of the Convention. Instead of re-enacting the Convention with only the people who were present (read: white male property owners) we re-enacted the event with representatives from each of the perspectives we had studied throughout the unit. The goal of doing this was to see if and how the proceedings and results of the Convention might have been different if it had been a true representation of all of the groups present in America at the time. The students debated one of the more controversial questions that arose at the Convention, whether or not to continue the practice of slavery in the colonies. They divided into groups that represented one of the five perspectives, and conducted research on how their group would have responded to this question. Ultimately, they determined that slavery might not have been allowed to continue if everyone who was present in America at the time had representatives at the Constitutional Convention. This opportunity to conduct independent research and "speak back" to history was incredibly empowering to our students. We recorded the re-enactment on video, and were able to share it with our students' families at our celebration of the unit, and many of them were brought to tears by how committed the students were to the project as well as the meaning behind it.

Connecting Multiple Perspectives to Significant Historical Events

Our Constitutional Convention culminating activity served as an excellent transition into our Civil War study. The primary goals of this unit

were to build upon the childrens' understanding of multiple perspectives in history and continue to examine the question of what freedom in America meant to different groups. In this study, we presented the perspectives of different groups in a more complex way – students learned about the dominant ideology of a particular group, as well as divergent ideologies and/or resistance movements within those groups. They delved deeper into the question of how one's perspective is shaped through factors such as religion, geography, and their family's cultural experience.

We began the unit with further investigation around the history of slavery. As teachers, we prepared for this in a variety of ways, including reading articles about teaching about slavery in a developmentally appropriate way, and attending lectures at local African American research institutions about teaching about this time period. Though these lectures were targeted more toward high school teachers, we learned about people and events during the Civil War era that we had no knowledge of previously. We engaged in dialogue with each other as a team about our own perspectives on this time period, as well as our own hopes and fears about teaching about such a difficult topic.

Before we began the study, we spoke with each student's family at our spring family conferences to explain how we were planning to proceed with the unit and to allow time for families to engage in dialogue with their children in preparation for the study. Having these conversations with our students' families prior to the study greatly increased their trust in us as

teachers, and gave them an opportunity to ask questions and share concerns about the study. It also led to an increased dialogue between teachers and families throughout the unit, which had an enormous benefit for our students. We examined the history of slavery through children's literature, field trips to local African-American history museums and a house that was a stop on the Underground Railroad, and through first-person narratives adapted for our students' reading levels. From the beginning, it was crucial for us to discuss various forms of resistance that enslaved people took against their oppressors. We taught about the Amistad rebellion, and the rebellions led by John Brown and Nat Turner, so that our students would know that as long as slavery was an institution in the United States, there were resistance movements against it.

After our study of slavery, we taught about the dominant and divergent perspectives of people in the Northern and Southern regions of the United States. They engaged in another role-play adapted from curriculum at the Zinn Education Project (2011), this time about the election of 1860 and the strategy that Abraham Lincoln used to win the election. From there, we explored the battles of the war and the varied perspectives of soldiers who fought for the Union and the Confederacy, including soldiers of color and women who disguised as men to fight in the Civil War. They also learned about the "supporting actors" in the war – all of the people who supported the Civil War effort, like families at home and nurses on the battlefield. We introduced several different historians' perspectives on the Emancipation Proclamation and its intent and political significance, and returned to the question of why

history is sometimes recorded differently by different people. We also studied

the public reaction to the Emancipation Proclamation, and the riots that arose

in New York City after a draft was instituted in the War, which largely

represented conflict between white Northern immigrants and African

Americans.

The students culminated their study of the Civil War by creating their

own multimedia slideshow on iMovie, in which they chose one perspective to

represent. They identified three topics important to their group's perspective,

gathered images to represent those topics, and wrote text to accompany the

images. With the help of our school's music teacher, they did musical

recordings of the class singing songs from a variety of perspectives during the

Civil War, and used these as the soundtracks to their slideshows.

Shifting Curriculum

The difference in the quality of the social studies curriculum we

enacted in our fourth grade classrooms from the beginning of the year to the

end was enormous. After beginning the year with a unit that felt nearly devoid

of critical analysis or anti-bias instruction, we worked hard to transform our

classrooms into environments that were empowering to our students, in which

they were learning history that included representations of people from

cultural groups they could identify with, and were learning to critically

examine deeply painful and difficult parts of American history. Social studies

became the favorite subject of many of our students by the end of the year. As

educators, we earned the trust and respect of our students' families, and were able to engage in greater dialogue with them around the classroom curriculum. We also felt incredibly proud of our work together, which strengthened our personal and professional relationships with each other. Certainly, as we continue to work together, we must continue to work for improvement in the curriculum we designed, but we are highly motivated to do so because we believe that it is *possible*.

Implications for Future Curricula

As my grade team looks forward to conducting the Colonial Times study again in the fall, my colleagues and I have been engaging in dialogue around how to improve the curriculum, investing far more time in researching and developing improved materials from what we were working with in the past, and considering what is developmentally appropriate for our students.

A key change that we will make next year is to begin our study with a month-long investigation of pre-colonial West Africa, in order for our students to experience some of the rich history and culture of this region prior to their study of slavery. We will focus on providing the students with educational experiences that begin to examine the questions of perspective, power, and freedom that they will engage in for the rest of the year. We will place greater emphasis on the experience of people of color during colonization. We will introduce the history of slavery earlier in the year, so

that our students understand clearly that slavery did not begin just before the

Civil War, but that it has been a part of American history since the 1600s.

It has also been important for us to remember and acknowledge that

our students are all at different points in their racial identity development.

Some students are just beginning to become aware of the significance of their

skin color, whereas others are beginning to see the structural nature of racism,

often by making connections between historical events. For example, when

discussing the American Civil War, one of my students remarked, "I'm

noticing that the United States has had a lot of wars for freedom, but at the

end of them, White people still have the most power."

In order to support students in developing an empowered racial

identity and critical analysis of history, we as teachers must make sure that

students are provided with an opportunity to engage with these concepts

regardless of where they are in their own racial identity development. If we

return to the developmental interaction approach (as cited in Shapiro and

Nager, 2000, p. 24) as described at the beginning of this paper, we will see

that both theory and practice suggest that this is most successful when

students engage in participatory education and are able to engage with their

peers on the topic. This means more discussions, group work, and hands-on

activities wherein children who are at different stages in their own racial

identity development can interact with each other.

Lessons Learned

The most significant lesson that I have learned in my experience of teaching fourth grade has been that developing an anti-bias curriculum in social studies is not always easy. In fact, it can be incredibly difficult, and requires a great deal of work on the part of the educators in the classroom(s). However, we cannot simply throw up our hands in exasperation and give up. Though there are many factors working against us in developing curriculum that provides our students with the time and resources to critically examine the world around them in an empowering way, it is our responsibility to do everything in our power to work toward a curriculum that practices these values.

The six principles of anti-bias curricula as described in Section 2 can serve as a framework for developing a classroom and curricula that supports anti-bias work. This process begins with re-examining the work we are doing with a lens of self-improvement, as teachers need to be continual learners in order to meet the needs of their own students. Tatum (1997) reminds us, "If we wait for perfection, we will never break the silence. The cycle of racism will continue uninterrupted" (p.205). My grade team engaged in this process as soon as we realized the major failings of our Colonial Times unit. Our collective commitment to improvement and reflection was a critical factor in our work as we sought to create a progressive, anti-bias curriculum for the students we teach. As we move forward, it will be important for us to continue to seek professional development and self-education materials for the purpose of collective reflection. It may be helpful for us to read some of Tatum's

(1997) work together so that we have a common understanding of and language for our own racial identity development and that of our students.

As we planned for the units that followed our Colonial Times study, my grade team put greater emphasis on student autonomy, group work, historical role-plays, and small- and whole-group discussions about difficult questions that arose in our studies. Additionally, we made sure that the materials and visuals we displayed in the classroom (timelines, charts, etc) were representative of the multiple perspectives that we were teaching. These materials "serve[d] as a basis for children's initiating conversations and for teachers introducing activities" as Sparks (1989, p. 11) suggested. Paying attention to these elements of the classroom environment with regard to our social studies curriculum supported the development of a democratic, anti-bias education. In the future, Sparks (1989) would suggest that we more thoroughly examine other aspects of our classroom environment, such as the classroom library (including the social studies texts), to be sure that these materials do not over represent White people. Instead, the classroom library ought to represent the students of our classroom, who are mostly students of color, many of whom have special needs.

In our curriculum, we engaged our students in conversations about the multiple perspectives that existed throughout American history. Through direct instruction, we supported them in developing the skills necessary to discern an author or historian's bias in writing about a historical time period. By the end of the school year, our students were beginning to independently

cross-check sources to determine how an event may have been seen or interpreted differently by a variety of people who were affected by it. These experiences reinforced the importance of guiding our students to work against oppression and to examine the world critically in a way that was developmentally appropriate, so that they were able to truly grasp what they were learning.

It is important to provide our students with opportunities for activism and to "speak back" to history wherever possible. We have begun to provide our students with such opportunities through the historical role-plays that we have incorporated into our curriculum. This has allowed them to "work together to solve complex problems ... ask questions, and declare their feelings" as Pelo (2000, p.9) suggested. For example, our role-play of the Constitutional Convention of 1787 was powerful for our students because they were able to examine this historical event through a new lens. They "spoke back" to history by questioning how the proceedings of the Constitutional Convention likely would have been different had they been more truly representative of the diverse population of America at the time. As we move forward, Pelo (2000) would likely encourage my grade team to find ways to connect the history curriculum with current events so that students could engage in activism relevant to current events.

It is crucial for us to always remember to communicate with families about the curriculum, allowing room for them to ask questions and share concerns, because our students' educational experiences are vastly improved

when we work in partnership with their families. We began this process this

year by having open conversations with students' families about how we

would be teaching and talking about slavery in our classroom, which gave

them an opportunity to raise concerns and ask questions of us, as well as time

to talk with their children prior to the start of the unit. After we did this, our

students' families were much more eager to participate and volunteer for

classroom support, and our relationships with them improved.

In the future, we need to be more proactive about building

relationships with families, as Kendall (1996) emphasized. As teachers, we

must begin the process of relationship building before school begins, and be

mindful of our own biases and attitudes that may affect those relationships.

We must also seek to create dialogue with our students' families about their

perspectives on the topics we teach as soon as possible, especially with what

we know to be controversial or difficult subjects. As Sparks (1989, p. 97)

writes, "Teachers ... demonstrate respect when they challenge parents to

struggle with them when there are disagreements, keep communication open,

and search for solutions agreeable to both." Working through difficult issues

with families ultimately helps to build the bridge between home and school

that Pelo (2000) described.

Finally, we must always remember that difference is not something to

be afraid of, it is something to be embraced and discussed openly and

respectfully. Tatum (1997) refers to a wise remark by James Baldwin (as cited

in Tatum, 1997, p. xv): "Not everything that is faced can be changed. But

nothing can be changed until it is faced." Tatum (1997) writes, "Talking about racism is an essential part of facing racism and changing it." (p.xv) Everyone, regardless of the color of their skin, must "face" and discuss racism in order to take action against it. We found that our students were curious and eager to engage in thoughtful conversations about race and culture, and with support in developing ground rules and expectations, they were able to discuss these topics with the utmost respect and care for each other.

At the school where I work, we have only just begun the process of attempting to enact the six principles of anti-bias curriculum. There is still a great deal of work to do. This was our first year enacting this curriculum with our fourth graders (and only the second year that our school has had a fourth grade!). The curriculum will continue to shift and change as we encounter new teaching strategies and materials, work with different groups of students, and as we reflect on the success of each lesson and unit. Additionally, there is more work for our school to do as a whole in order to better support the development of anti-bias curricula. Ideally, our entire teaching staff would examine their classrooms through this lens, and although many are beginning to do so, we do not share a common language or approach at this time. As our school continues to grow and develop, it will be important for the administration to provide professional development that will create this common language and philosophy around the kind of classrooms and curriculum that we want to create in this regard.

What Should I Do Next?

In order to begin the process of developing or improving your own anti-bias classroom, one must first turn inward. Though it may be tempting to immediately begin revamping and reshaping curriculum, it is crucial to invest time in self-reflection. Ask yourself: *What are my own experiences with race and bias, and what are some experiences that my students may have? Why is it important to me to create an anti-bias classroom? What steps will I need to take in order to create an anti-bias culture in my classroom? Where can I find the support, allies, and professional development resources in order to enact my vision for change in my classroom?* Asking these questions will help you to become clear on your motivations for creating an anti-bias classroom, and will support you in taking inventory of your own personal and institutional resources for doing so. It may be useful to read some of the literature cited in this study as you engage in this reflection, so that you may consider your own racial identity development (Tatum, 1997), and the work of other anti-bias educators, such as Pelo (2000 and 2008), Derman-Sparks (1989, 1997, and 2011), Howard (2006), and Kendall (1996). Engaging in this practice will allow you to begin envisioning what your own anti-bias classroom might look like.

Once you have invested time in the self-reflection that will serve as the foundation for your work in anti-bias education, you can begin to plan and make changes to your classroom environment and to the curriculum (wherever possible). In making such changes, it is important to consider the

demographics of the students in your classroom, so that the various parts of their identities and those of their families can be physically represented in the classroom as well as in the curriculum. As described in Section 2, it is crucial to bear in mind the both the cognitive and racial identity developmental stage(s) of the students you teach so that the materials you provide are accessible to them.

When the curriculum and classroom materials reflect the diversity of your students and the world that surrounds them, they will likely make observations about the similarities and differences between people. As teachers, we play a critical role in supporting and guiding students through their exploration of similarity and difference between people. Therefore, we must allow room for these discussions to occur, rather than shutting them down. As students do engage in such discussions, we as their educators must listen and observe carefully to determine how we can support our students' understanding and acceptance of racial and cultural diversity.

It will also be useful to stay abreast of current issues that are relevant to the curriculum you are teaching, so that you can integrate natural opportunities for activism for your students. This may happen organically – listen carefully for the moments when your students say, "That's not fair!" or begin to observe inequality and injustice in their surroundings. Providing students with the opportunity to take action when they notice unfairness or inequality is incredibly empowering to them.

Throughout your work as an anti-bias educator, it will be beneficial to your entire classroom community to include your students' parents and families as partners. This might begin with explaining your philosophy around anti-bias education to your students' families at the beginning of the year, and may include investigation into the values and traditions of your students' families, as well as issues facing them and their communities. When we work with families cooperatively, we help our students to construct the bridge between home and school.

When we combine all six of these elements, our classrooms will be truly empowering environments for our students and their families. In my own experience, I feel much more connected to my values and purpose as a teacher in my efforts to design anti-bias curriculum. My students and their families are more engaged and comfortable in the classroom, taking greater ownership over their commitment to understanding social studies. Though our work in creating anti-bias classrooms will never be "done," the challenges and rewards of developing this type of curriculum are well worth the endeavor.

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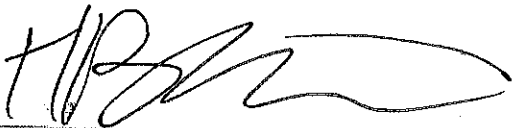Wright, K. (2011, July 26). The Racial Wealth Gap's Larger Than Ever.
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