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END DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICES AND PRIORITISE MEANINGFUL INCLUSION.

Coalition-building toward social justice

Dr Shaddai Tembo

Opening

The revised EYFS framework states the need for practitioners to embed anti-discriminatory practice, whilst ensuring that every child is included and supported to flourish. This is welcome given the political context where discussions about equality appear increasingly polarised and contested. However, definitions of what counts as anti-discriminatory practice vary and implementation can take different forms. For instance, it can be approached on narrower terms as an issue of resources (not enough brown dolls in the home corner), topically (thematic weeks to celebrate particular cultures), or at a deeper level through critical staff reflection and *proactive* engagement with parents, carers, and the wider community.

As a former early years practitioner, recognising the need for anti-discriminatory practice has been a journey that I remain on today. I remain aware that there are always more opportunities to deepen our understanding of anti-discriminatory practice. I remind myself constantly that, for anyone working in education with children, the need to stand firm against inequality is part and parcel of *why we do what we do*, even if we do not consistently articulate it this way. Undoubtedly, we all want the best opportunities for our children to grow, unrestricted by inequalities.

Anti-discriminatory practice through Freire

My learning about anti-discriminatory practice has long been motivated by insights from Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educational philosopher. He was born less than forty years after the abolition of slavery in Brazil in 1888 (the last Latin American nation to abolish slavery and perhaps the last in the Western world). Freire (1972) understood that only a radical re-formation of the socio-economic base could establish the conditions necessary for a radical reconstitution of the polity. His ideas have had an enormous influence on the theory and practice of education worldwide.

Freire believed that education is a critical activity which can provide the conditions for learners to reflect upon, shape and even transform their world in the interests of social responsibility. Examples in the current context might include Malala Yousafzai or the youth activists leading the recent Black Lives Matter and climate activism campaigns. Here, education, including the early years, takes on a social justice agenda that orients pedagogy in line with a broader political responsibility. This perspective challenges any notion of neutrality in education and instead maintains that all educators perpetuate political values of the world in one way or another. Freire (2000, p.48) himself wrote that:

I do not see why I should omit or hide my political stance by proclaiming a neutral position that does not exist. On the contrary, my role as a teacher is to assent the student's right to compare, to choose, to rupture, to decide.

Working in the early years, then, it becomes one's responsibility to engage in what the philosopher termed 'critical pedagogy', to actively challenge discriminatory practices by disrupting discourses that underpin inequalities and produce spaces where children can transform their own worlds. Critical pedagogy promotes social justice since it deals with challenging and disrupting discourses that underpin inequalities and focuses primarily on identifying and understanding the everyday relations of power that constitute and maintain these.

Early years settings can further be seen as political spaces involved in the construction, control, and containment of social groups through the ways in which they police (consciously or otherwise) norms and values. For instance, the statutory guidance on promoting 'fundamental British values' states that early education providers who "fail to promote the fundamental British values ... do not receive funding from local authorities for the free early years entitlement" (Home Office, 2021). This can potentially produce an atmosphere of suspicion where practitioners are constrained to deliver a pedagogy of diversity that implicitly supports certain (white, British) cultural values over and above more pluralist ways of knowing about difference (Habib, 2018; Osgood, 2021). Against this, Freire would ask that we *reflect* and *act* to align our educational settings with the principles of social justice where difference is unconditionally valued over oppressive forms of control.

Changing habits

My research on anti-discriminatory practice has explored the role of 'habit' to understand how our subconscious feelings inform how we act in certain situations. Habits are individual and

informed by our environment and the social world around us. Becoming attentive to our habits and those of others in relation to equality can enable us to better grasp who holds the power in certain situations, and whether the actions we take for-granted might be reproducing inequality. The teacher in the BBC documentary ‘No More Boys and Girls’ (IMDB,2017), recognised his habits around language when talking to children (“love” for girls, and “mate” for boys). A more subtle example amongst children themselves might be noticing who speaks first in certain situations (therefore tending to dominate discussions), or noticing which bodies take up more space in your setting. While it is usual for some children to be louder than others, it is not necessarily natural - paying attention to those who are habitually less able to raise their voice or tend to linger on the fringes of play is an integral part of anti-discriminatory practice. This is an invitation to understand how you might promote equality and inclusion beyond challenging only explicit behaviours. Noticing everyday habits is fundamental to challenging how certain norms are often subtly reproduced.

Build coalitions

Definitions of what counts as anti-discriminatory practice vary and can be differently implemented. Good practice often remains siloed, such that two settings on the same street might have very different interpretations of how to promote equity and inclusion. Early years conferences can offer a precious space for colleagues across settings to come together, connect and more consistently reflect on their work. . Freire writes of the value of dialogue between educators to fashion a unity of process through joint engagement and foster practice-critical reflections. Meeting and learning from others is also essential for maintaining momentum and overcoming fatigue that can be felt with this work – especially if one feels they are doing it alone. At the best conferences, speakers talk less, giving delegates space to talk more. Engaging in anti-discriminatory practice involves building and maintaining coalitional relationships with others whom you can learn from and rely on for support. Working *with* other settings can only enhance your work *within* your setting.

While we have come a long way in meeting our equalities duties, there is still some distance to go. Reflecting on Freire’s values, noticing minor habits alongside explicit acts of discrimination, and building coalitions with others are important avenues as you continue your journey toward anti-discriminatory practice.

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