

# On the Impossibility of Learning “Not to See”: Colorblindness, Invisibility, and Anti-Bias Education

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Several discourses compete with the notion that young children can be anti-bias activists. One of these is the belief that children are “colorblind” or should be taught to be “colorblind” to evidence lack of prejudice. The other belief is that a “good” inclusive classroom is one in which differences have been rendered “invisible” so that you can’t identify students with disabilities or identify how diverse the children are. The goals of this paper are to explore the relationship between discourses of “colorblindness” and “invisibility” and relate these to how young children are taught to respond to differences. Specifically, I wish to argue that valorizing “blindness” and invisibility impedes anti-bias education and conflicts with the goal of teaching young children to be inclusion activists and “upstanders” in the face of oppression. This paper also examines ways in which many of the current anti-bullying programs, while attempting to teach pro-social skills, may interfere with helping teachers and students to genuinely analyze teasing and bullying and respond in ways that are educative and content-specific. I conclude with some specific recommendations, consistent with an anti-bias commitment, for addressing differences in race, ability/disability, gender, and other areas.

## **What is Anti-bias Education?**

Husband (2016), citing the work of Kalin (2002), defines an anti-racist approach to education as one that “deals with issues of race and racial injustice in open and explicit ways,” enacted by teachers who implement “anti-racist pedagogies in their classrooms” and are “upfront, open, and honest about their commitment to racial justice” (p. 10). In other words, anti-bias education doesn’t just “happen,” but represents a committed ideology accompanied by specific pedagogical strategies and curricular choices designed to confront and counter oppressive beliefs and behaviors. Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2010) describe four goals of anti-bias education as follows:

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

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

Goal 3: Each child will increasingly recognize unfairness, have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts. Furthermore, being able to think critically about the world is a skill important for later school success.

Goal 4: Each child will demonstrate empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, pp. 3-6).

These four goals, however, are inextricably linked to one another. In explaining the relationship between them, Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2010) explain that:

Children cannot construct a strong self-concept or develop respect for others if they do not know how to identify and resist hurtful, stereotypical, and inaccurate messages or actions directed toward them or others. Developing the ability to think critically strengthens children's sense of self, as well as their capacity to form caring relationships with others. (p. 5)

Most significant to this paper is the relationship between Goals 2 and 3 and Goal 4; students cannot learn to be active allies in resisting oppressive behaviors they witness or experience, if they do not have sophisticated repertoires for noticing, naming, and talking about individual differences and identities, and recognizing "unfairness" (oppression) anchored in those identities. I describe here two common discourses related to how we teach teachers and children to interact with differences in skin color and dis/ability (colorblindness and invisibility), and then I analyze the ways in which both of these problematic discourses impede an anti-bias approach to early childhood education.

### **Colorblindness**

Colorblindness, as a medical diagnosis, is the inability to distinguish the differences between certain colors. This condition results from an absence of color-sensitive pigment in the cone cells of the retina, the nerve layer at the back of the eye. Most color vision problems are inherited and are present at birth. Approximately 1 out of 12 men and 1 out of 20 women are color blind. Used as a metaphor, colorblindness implies that differences are or should be irrelevant to how we behave or respond to individual differences, particularly differences in skin color; the implication is that to "not notice" (and therefore not mention) these differences is a positive accomplishment.

There have been extensive critiques of "colorblindness" as a goal for education. The majority center on the ways in which a colorblind ideology masks the significance of race and may lead to increased inequities (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Farago, 2016; Husband, 2016). Castagno (2008) argues that colorblindness leaves white supremacy and white privilege intact, and confuses people about the differences between noticing and talking about race, and being "racist." In an article entitled "*How conservatives hijacked 'colorblindness' and set civil rights back decades,*" Ian Haney-Lopez (2014) explains:

Today the dominant etiquette around race is colorblindness. It has a strong moral appeal, for it laudably envisions an ideal world in which race is no longer relevant to how we perceive or treat each other. It also has an intuitive practical appeal: to get beyond race, colorblindness urges, the best strategy is to immediately stop recognizing and talking about race. But it is especially as a strategy that colorblindness fails its liberal adherents. We cannot will ourselves to un-see something that we've already seen. In turn, refusing to talk about a powerful social reality doesn't make that reality go away, but it does leave confused thinking unchallenged, in ourselves and in others. [...] Differences in race—including physical variation and its connection to social position—resemble differences in gender: they are plainly visible to new minds eager to make sense of the world around them. When unexplained, however, children (and our unconscious minds) are left susceptible to the power of stereotypes (n.p.)

From a disability studies perspective, which attempts to de-stigmatize physical differences, using the word "blindness" to represent ignorance, indifference, or denial is problematic, but it is used here because of its currency. And, it is hard to imagine any other kind of "blindness" touted as a goal:

Me? I'm nature blind. I can be out in the woods for an hour and I can't tell the difference between a pine tree and a maple, and couldn't tell you what color the pond water was or the names of any of the fish that were swimming in it.

Our response to someone making such a statement would likely be "Oh, too bad" or "what a shame"; it's hard to imagine that we would respond: "Congratulations! You've certainly come a long way in your nature study!"

Although clearly quite problematic, we still do have teachers who boast, "I don't see color. I don't care if a child is brown or white or green or purple --- I treat them all the same." The give-away, to me, is often the mention of "green" or "purple" as possible colors for children, since it seems to deny the reality of the other colors mentioned --- the colors that do describe the skin tones of various humans. It appears to make a mockery of the notion that skin color does matter and should be noted and attended to. It is also not uncommon to hear adults talk admiringly about children's not noticing --- "Little children are so unprejudiced --- they just don't see color. Those are just their friends, and they don't care what color they are." To be generous, perhaps what adults are responding to is their perception that children interact with a wide variety of others without specifically mentioning or responding negatively to the differences. But this is far different from "not noticing."

"Colorblindness," if it implies "not seeing," is impossible for someone with typical sight. Learning to "not see" is different and is more accurately an act of suppression or repression with problematic implications for how we interact with others. Within the physical/medical realm, in addition to being born "colorblind," color blindness can also be produced by physical or chemical damage to the eye, the optic nerve, or parts of the brain. From a metaphorical perspective, what damage occurs to produce individuals who espouse or demonstrate colorblindness? How do we "teach" colorblindness to people who begin life with a full capacity for noticing? This damage can be produced by having colorblindness actively "instructed" (sometimes bullied) by those in positions of power or privilege. In other words, you see something, you search for words, and you don't get any. Or you see something, you name it in whatever way your current vocabulary allows, and you are told either that you didn't *really* see that, that it's not real, or, if it is real, that you shouldn't say anything about it.

Parallels can be made to the concept of families characterized by abuse, in which certain experiences of the child are actively denied, or described by an adult using benign or distorting language. In such families, children are often ignored, discounted, or criticized for their feelings and thoughts. The results of such experiences can "inhibit the development of children's trust in the world, in others, and in themselves" (Brown University, 2017).

Lawrence (1995) describes this phenomenon as a form of "massive denial" enforced by a strict "taboo against speaking publicly about that which we do not wish to see" (p. 33). The ways that many adults respond to children's questions about difference would fall into this category of taboo speech. Many people remember clearly being scolded or punished for their questions about difference.

"Mama, why does that boy only have one leg?" "SHHH?"  
"How come her skin is so dark?" "That's not polite!"  
"Daddy, how come that woman has no hair?" "Don't say that"

In describing problems with the goal of "not noticing differences," Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2010) state:

Some teachers and parents are not sure they should encourage children to “notice” and learn about differences among people. They think it is best to teach only about how people are the same, worrying that learning about differences causes prejudice. While well intentioned, this concern arises from a mistaken notion about the sources of bias. Differences, in and of themselves, do not create the problem. Children learn prejudice from prejudice—not from learning about human diversity. It is how people respond to differences that teaches bias and fear. Moreover, a difference-denial approach, which ignores children’s identities and family cultures, runs the risk of making invisible the many children who do not have the social identity of the dominant group. (p. 4)

In an analysis of why educators should abandon colorblind ideologies, Husband (2016) argues that colorblindness makes it difficult to identify racism and “allows teachers to avoid and conceal racial issues that are alive and well within many schools and classrooms” (p. 8). In addition to its effects on teachers, however, there is also evidence that the effects of colorblind ideologies and practices are significant for children and “can potentially decrease a student’s sensitivity to issues of racial injustice” (p. 9). Regimes of colorblindness, therefore, affect not only children’s abilities to “see” racism, but also their abilities to become active allies in responding to prejudice and discrimination. As Farago, Sanders, and Gaias (2015) state, “colorblind attitudes may contribute to the maintenance of a system in which racial injustice is interwoven into the fabric of society” (p. 33). The four-year-old who has been “taught” to be “colorblind” will not become the citizen or employer or neighbor who stands up to racism, homophobia, or any other form of oppression. Young children must develop critical awareness of diversity and oppression, if they are to be and become adults who resist bias and work to create more equitable, just environments throughout their lives.

Colorblind ideologies and practices also contribute to confusion between the difference between “talking about race” and “being racist.” (Priest et al., 2014; Walton et al., 2014), and even to decreased performance in cognitive tasks. In an article entitled “*Learning (not) to talk about race: When older children underperform in social categorization,*” Apfelbaum et al. (2008) demonstrate the inferior performance of older children in a categorization activity because they have learned *not* to mention skin color in describing people. I have often observed this form of painful awkwardness in my own pre-service teachers who visibly struggle with whether they can ever mention a person’s race --- sometimes omitting it when it might be relevant or helpful to the conversation and sometimes naming it when it is not relevant. Regimes of colorblindness and silencing make conversations about race fraught with discomfort and social “dis-ease,” thereby decreasing the possibilities for honest, essential conversations about race and racism.

### **Invisibility, Disability, and Silencing**

In addition to narratives of “colorblindness,” there are also different but related discourses about invisibility when discussing students with disabilities and others whose characteristics require thoughtful accommodation and modifications. In commenting on inclusive classrooms that are diverse, we often hear the “compliment,” “It’s such a great inclusion class --- you can’t even tell which kids have disabilities.” We might posit that the observers/commentators are (in fact) seeing some things, and not noticing others; perhaps the observers see a classroom which they know to be diverse but in which all children seem engaged or all children are working with peers. It’s possible they see that no one is isolated or separated from the group, off in a separate corner with a Velcro aide. Maybe they see evidence of a solid community with positive social interactions and connections.

However, linking “good inclusion” to discourses of invisibility is problematic for a number of reasons: (1) the implication is that the goal for students with disabilities is that they “pass” as “normal” so that their differences are not clearly discernible; (2) it

encourages us to minimize and hide children's differences in the service of having them "fit" into the classroom; (3) it discourages us from having open conversations with students about Nadia's hearing aids or Tim's diabetes because doing so would call attention to these "differences"; (4) it promotes making only those accommodations and modifications in the classrooms that can be made invisibly, because if we can clearly see how the classroom has been arranged or the curriculum or pedagogy has been broadened or altered, then we will be making the inclusion process *too* visible (Sapon-Shevin, 2001; 2007; 2010).

If we operate from the premise that it's preferable for differences to be made invisible, then inclusion, as the process of creating environments that are responsive and welcoming of those differences, is rendered as a covert, secretive process. This can be seen as a parallel to those invoking "colorblindness" as a positive attribute when observing a teacher who does refer to or treat racial differences pejoratively. The implication regarding both race and disability is that not being able to notice difference is a positive assessment of that which is being observed, and an achievement for the observer; while "colorblindness" implies that the viewer doesn't notice, invisibility implies that there is nothing extraordinary to see. Like a play in which transitions between scenes are seamless and smooth, inclusion is valued if none of the working parts of the process are visible.

A young woman with diabetes contrasted how two early childhood teachers responded to her dietary needs. The first teacher "secretly" placed sugar-free cookies on the plate she passed around the class and told Kathy which ones to take. The second teacher had Kathy explain diabetes to her classmates, and they not only supported her, but brainstormed inclusive snacks the class could organize. Kathy reports that the first teacher made her feel ashamed of her condition since clearly it wasn't something that could be discussed, while the second teacher "normalized" her diabetes and easily incorporated her needs.

The challenge, with reference to issues of disability, is that it can be difficult to discern what is the "right" amount of visibility --- what should be noted and attended to, and what should not. Just as people struggle with when or whether to name racial differences ("Can I say that the teacher was a Black woman?"), there are similar struggles about when to name/not name other differences including dis/ability. When my daughter, who has a hearing impairment and wears hearing aids, entered pre-school, I needed to tell her teacher about her hearing loss and necessary accommodations, but I did not want to introduce her or have her be known as "the deaf child" in the class. Not attending to children's individual dis/abilities is clearly problematic, but focusing on them exclusively is also inappropriate. This is additionally challenging because those labeled as "disabled" represent an extremely heterogeneous group. For example, those who have advocated for special treatment and accommodation (including, for example, those with visual impairments) and those who do not want to be called "disabled" at all, particularly members of the Deaf community (identified as capital-D deaf rather than being described by lack or impairment of hearing).

Van der Klift and Kunc (1994) use the term "disability spread" to refer to the way that one sees one aspect of a disability and then grows it to become the whole person. Rather than seeing each child as a complex human being with many strengths, challenges, skills, needs, gifts, and interests, they are reduced to the "cerebral palsied kid" or "the Down Syndrome boy" (p. 399). Because we often have misconceptions, stereotypes, and flat-out erroneous information about the "disability" itself, our propensity for enlarging its meaning and impact on the person becomes even more perilous (Sapon-Shevin, 2014). Also, every child has multiple identities (Sapon-Shevin, 2014), and intersectionality of identities can make it difficult to know which characteristics to attend to and which are better ignored. As Annamma et al. (2013) explain, race and dis/ability are both socially constructed categories, thus making it difficult to discern which human characteristics are fixed and immutable, and which are significant because of how they are read or given meaning by others, both interpersonally and institutionally. The dilemma for all of us, in the presence of an identity category or an observation of difference, is to discern what is

prejudice or discrimination, and what constitutes a thoughtful, appropriate accommodation. How do we “notice” and “accommodate” but not “tokenize” or “exoticize” differences? Giving Abdul a different book to read because we conflate his brown skin with inferior intellect is prejudice; providing Sonya with a book on tape rather than a print version to accommodate her learning style may be appropriate. However, if we have never interrogated our own understanding and beliefs about race or dis/ability, then it will be hard to evaluate our choices. Teachers need on-going opportunities to self-reflect on their own personal experiences with differences and to interrogate their own biases and unconscious assumptions. Teacher education (both pre-service and in-service) must emphasize this kind of awareness in all aspects of pedagogical, curricular, and management decision-making processes.

### **The Challenges of Seeing/Not Seeing and Naming/Remaining Silent**

If colorblindness and invisibility are problematic, then what is the goal? Regarding “race”, various other terms have been suggested to address what are seen as appropriate responses to seeing color, including “color-consciousness”, “color awareness,” race-consciousness,” “color-filled,” and “color-rich.” (e.g., Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Farago, 2016). Valli (1995) says that we must strike a balance between attending to color and then not attending to color; “teachers must both see and not see color” (p. 126).

But what is optimal visibility from an educational standpoint? The opposite of invisibility is *not* “visibility” but rather what is described as *hypervisibility*, a “type of scrutiny based on perceived difference, which is usually (mis) interpreted as deviance” (Ryland, 2013, p. 2222). In an article entitled “*Hypervisibility: How scrutiny and surveillance makes you watched, but not seen*” Ryland (2013) explains that:

There is a world of difference between being seen and being watched. Many people live in the space of this difference, especially those whose very bodies are seen as a threat (...). When you become overly visible, you’re often constantly under the gaze of others. You are being looked at, sure, but you are being watched and judged, so it’s not the kind of visibility that people tend to seek if given a choice. (n.p)

Assuming that we are able to discern the “right” amount to notice and can engage in that behavior without it being read as “surveillance,” then what do we say about what we’ve observed and what language do we use? Pollock (2004) uses the word “colormute” (also a problematic term but commonly understood) to refer to the ways in which we have learned not to talk about race through the purposeful silencing of race words. Castagno (2008) distinguishes between silence and silencing, which is an active behavior, explaining that “silence on the part of teachers leads to silencing of students and the formation of norms of silence around certain topics” (p. 330). Castagno (2008) notes that silencing is motivated by teachers’ desires to avoid conflict, hurt and offend, and that teachers who avoided discussing differences were “either genuinely afraid of explicitly naming and talking about race or did not know how to do this – or both.” (p. 330).

Lack of familiarity with the appropriate (and shifting) terminology about race makes many teachers awkward and self-conscious in their discussions of race (Copenhaver, 2000; Dessel, 2010; Farago, 2016; Husband, 2010, 2012; Kemple, Lee, & Harris, 2016). Similarly, many teachers are also deeply uncomfortable talking about disability. Lifetimes of segregated education have produced teachers who may have little direct experience with people with disabilities and limited belief systems about disability (Yee, 2002) that make them nervous about talking about dis/ability. One witnesses fumbling awkwardness in conversations about disability; “Do I mention the wheelchair?”, “Should I not say the word ‘see’ when speaking to someone who is blind?”, “Should I offer to cut her meat, or would that be demeaning?” If teachers are not comfortable with differences, it will be hard for them to help children to be comfortable (Anti-bias Goal 2). If teachers don’t have appropriate language or struggle with what to say, it will be challenging for them to teach/correct children’s language. Given teachers’ lack of comfort with and confidence in their information and the appropriate terminology to use, it is not surprising

that many teachers do not engage in correction or engagement when they hear students make inappropriate remarks, and their default response is one of either punishment (“Don’t say that”) or generic correction (“Use your kind words” or “Be nice”).

**Teachers’ Responses to Prejudicial Behavior**

It can be argued that generic responses and invocations toward kindness and prosocial behavior, if absent of any discussion of a prejudicial comment or bullying, constitute another form of silencing. Possible responses to “observing something prejudicial happening” can be visualized as such:

1. I DON’T NOTICE (COLORBLINDNESS/INVISIBILITY)	I DO OR SAY NOTHING (INACTION OR SILENCING)
2. I NOTICE SOMETHING (NON-SPECIFIC NOTICING)	I AM ONLY ABLE TO DO AND/OR RECOMMEND A VAGUE RESPONSE (GENERIC RESPONSIVENESS)
3. I NOTICE AND CAN NAME AND CONTEXTUALIZE WHAT I’VE SEEN (ANTI-BIAS EDUCATION)	I CAN NAME AND RAISE AWARENESS ABOUT SPECIFIC FORMS OF OPPRESSION. I HAVE AND CAN TEACH SPECIFIC

Option 1, learning to “not see” (not hear/speak) involves active suppression -- and this is, at the beginning, a conscious act on behalf of the “teacher” or what is “taught” to students. This kind of suppression of response, over time, becomes habitual, until one has genuinely learned “not to see.” Option 2, while it attempts to create a more positive environment, may be too generic to address the relevant issues, and thus, represents another form of suppression. Option 3, in which teachers and parents encourage a more active response that involves children noticing and describing the differences and specific oppressive behavior they see, requires comfort and familiarity with a range of differences (Anti-bias Goal 2 and 3). There is a cognitive requirement for responding specifically to the content of oppressive behavior or comments; one has to understand what the prejudicial behavior may be about.

**Connecting Anti-bullying Efforts to Anti-bias Education**

Bullying has recently attracted huge attention in schools, and there have been a proliferation of anti-bullying curricula and books (e.g., Swearer & Espelage, 2009). Many schools have adopted anti-bullying programs and provided training and materials for teachers, staff, and students. Responding to bullying can be seen as providing a plethora of opportunities for both planned teaching about diversity and teacher responsiveness to unplanned incidents. The success of such programs, however, is mixed at best; some researchers report school-based anti-bullying programs as effective (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011), whereas others have found a lack of significant outcomes on measures of reported victimization and bullying (Ferguson, San Miguel, Kilburn, & Sanchez, 2007; Smith, Schneider, Smith, & Ananiadou, 2004), and one meta-analysis showed that students attending schools with bullying prevention programs were more likely to experience peer victimization compared to those attending schools without such programs (Jeong & Lee, 2013). Bullies may learn to hide their bullying behavior to avoid observation and some bullying programs actually increase bullying by inadvertently teaching new bullying strategies (Jeong & Lee, 2013). Merrell et al. (2008) report that the majority of measured outcomes of bullying, post-intervention, showed no meaningful change; they suggest that anti-bullying programs are more likely to influence knowledge, attitudes, and self-perceptions rather than actual bullying behaviors.

Many anti-bullying programs focus on identifying undesirable interpersonal behavior and providing consequences, or focus on the development of positive cultures and pro-

social behaviors (Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008; Smith et al., 2004; Swearer & Espelage, 2009; Tofi & Farrington, 2011). Directly naming and addressing the content of bullying is often not a feature of programming or curriculum. New York State’s implementation of DASA (The Dignity for All Students Act) provides an excellent example. Passed in 2012, DASA requires that all teachers and staff complete training on harassment and bullying; most of the requirements for DASA center on regulatory procedures: the school must have a DASA Coordinator, a comprehensible and widely-distributed Student Code of Conduct, procedures for reporting bullying and harassment, clear consequences for inappropriate behavior (including suspension and expulsion), etc.

The law also mandates that all schools must conduct training about oppressive behavior based on race, gender, ethnicity, religion, dis/ability, class, language, size/weight, and physical appearance. There is little evidence, however, that most schools have moved beyond the implementation of the regulatory/disciplinary procedures; there is often no one in the school who is qualified or empowered to undertake the “diversity training” which is required to address the root systems of bullying, rather than just deal with the visible, negative behavior.

Payne and Smith (2015) found that New York state schools have focused most of their attention on creating systems for reporting bullying or harassment incidents and on investigation procedures. The findings do not include any meaningful engagement with proactive efforts to develop a positive, inclusive school culture. No interview respondents reported that their DASA professional development focused on pro-actively creating supportive environments, and most educators did not understand what a proactive approach might look like.

The most common approaches to curriculum change were to “teach tolerance” or “teach empathy.” While these are laudable goals, the failure to specifically name the content of the bullying makes such efforts unlikely to fulfill Anti-bias Goal 4, which seeks to create skilled allies and upstanders. Punitive responses (like suspension or expulsion) can also be seen as generic, non-educative responses to prejudice and oppression. They fail to address the content of what happened in a way that could shift the behavior or change the school culture or atmosphere.

### **Colorblindness, Invisibility, and Anti-bias Education**

I would like to connect the discourses of “colorblindness” and “invisibility” with the ways in which teachers respond to bullying, teasing, exclusion, and/or provide models or more formal instruction to students about how to do this themselves. I argue that it is impossible to both make differences invisible and to teach people to engage in complex and nuanced ally behavior. I also argue that being an ally and teaching children to be upstanders in the face of oppression has a cognitive requirement as well as a demand for close observation and courage.

Farago and Swadener (2016) state that “Ideally, there should be a balance between responding to incidents involving gender or race that organically arise in the classroom – as a result of children’s curiosity or even bias – and between planned, non-spontaneous activities.” If we accept that both planned and spontaneous activities should be incorporated into the curriculum, as suggested by the anti-bias framework (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010), then honing teachers’ comfort with and skill at responding to spontaneous “teachable moments” is critical.

Boutte (2008), however, speaks to the complexity of this goal, citing teachers’ lack of a sufficient knowledge base in critical pedagogy and familiarity with available resources and strategies. Boutte, Lopez-Robertson, and Powers-Costello (2011) further affirm that teachers are often silent or inactive because they don’t know what to do. When coupled with teachers’ fears that they will say the wrong thing, or perhaps make things worse, the probability of teachers’ engaging in spontaneous anti-bias education is challenging. A nurse once explained to me that their training involved running *towards* rather than *away* from emergency situations requiring action. What would it mean for us, as educators, to



run towards anti-bias education, rather than to pivot away from such (awkward) teachable moments in the hope that they can be resolved quickly and easily?

Many teachers report that they don't know what to say when students attend to differences, and therefore, they don't want to encourage questions that make them feel uncomfortable or incompetent (Farago, 2016; Vittrup, 2016). One of my students returned from the field, having witnessed the following interaction among children and a first-grade teacher. The children were working drawing in their journals, when one student looked at another and said "You're Puerto Rican!" The teacher responded immediately and harshly, "Don't say that!", and this was the end of the conversation. In fairness, the teacher may have heard something in the child's tone that seemed critical or unkind, however the response virtually ensured that there was no further discussion about what it means to be Puerto Rican, what the child already knew (or thought they knew) about Puerto Rico, and/or why the child chose that moment to mention this identity. The child being named as "Puerto Rican" *was* indeed so, and thus additional messages of shame and silencing were probably received as well; being Puerto Rican is something we shouldn't notice or talk about in this classroom.

Research related to teaching students to challenge racism, sexism, and homophobia has found that explicitly naming the prejudice and teaching specific responses are significantly more effective than more generic encouragement to "be nice" or "be kind." (Hughes, Bigler, & Levy, 2007; Lamb, Bigler, Liben, & Green, 2009; Pahlke, Bigler, & Martin, 2014).

In a study by Hughes et al. (2007), teaching children specifically about racism had positive effects on European American children's racial attitudes. In another study, students who were taught to identify and challenge sexist messages were better able to identify sexism in the media and respond to peers' sexist remarks than students who received instruction aimed at increasing their pro-social skills and decreasing bullying (Lamb et al., 2009). Learning specifically about gender bias (including gender-based teasing and exclusion) and practicing specific responses to sexism is more effective at increasing children's anti-bias (i.e., anti-sexist) responses than learning about "being nice" and practicing generic responses to bullying (Pahlke et al., 2014). GLSEN's (The Gay Lesbian Educator's Network) 2015 National School Climate Survey Executive Summary evidenced that adopting and implementing comprehensive bullying/harassment policies that specifically enumerate sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression were successful in reducing the rate of anti-LGBT violence and abuse.

By extension, students need to be explicitly taught to recognize and respond to stereotypes about disability in order to be effective allies. Given the perspective of intersectionality (that we all possess multiple identities), allies must attend to significant distinctions between how various characteristics are "read" in combination. An energetic, Black boy with autism will likely be responded to in terms of both his racial identity and his disability label.

A contrastive response that encourages teachers to dive in rather than to avoid "troublesome" comments is provided by an activity in the *Welcoming Schools Curriculum* called "Connecting with colleagues: Cultivating conversations about differences"; this curriculum suggests that many conversations in schools about differences based on family diversity, race, gender, and class often center on what *not* to say rather than on what *to* say. They suggest a model for responding to students' comments and misconceptions about differences that involves five steps: (1) acknowledging the difference; (2) asking questions; (3) explaining differences (using concrete examples); (4) removing negative judgment/affirming the positive; and (5) providing a transition ([www.welcomingschools.org](http://www.welcomingschools.org)). For example, if a child said "Matthew talks weird" (about a child with cerebral palsy), then the steps would center around acknowledging differences in how Matthew talks and engaging children in conversation about their own communication skills and how Matthew's communication has the same goals as their own speech.

This model can be contrasted with responding “Don’t say that about Michael. It’s not nice.” Although in the Welcoming School’s model, the teacher may not explicitly label the comment as “ableist,” the responses specifically address the content of the negative comment. For the teacher to enact step #3 (explaining differences), the teacher needs to know enough to do this accurately and thoughtfully.

Teachers sometimes report, in unpacking their silence in the face of teasing or prejudicial behavior, that they worry they may say something wrong or make the situation worse by calling attention to it. They may also fear that they will receive negative feedback when they attempt to “handle it” or that their response will take them into what they perceive as “dangerous terrain.” For example, in the scenario above, teachers might worry that they don’t know enough about cerebral palsy or about how Matthew’s parents characterize his differences to be accurate and sensitive.

There are certainly challenges to acknowledging a child’s difference without reifying it (this can be connected to the concept of disability spread explained earlier). This has been labeled the “diversity education dilemma” by Amoroso, Loyd, and Hoobler (2010), who describe the struggle to introduce diversity content without reproducing status hierarchies and introducing novel prejudicial information as they attempt to “correct it.” This is an issue I have raised concerning children’s books and children’s music that addresses diversity; one runs the risk that a story or song that explains that, “It’s all right to have two moms, even if others think it’s weird” is actually introducing the *critique* of same-sex parents rather than contradicting a belief the child already has (Sapon-Shevin, 1999). Fear of saying something “wrong,” however, can lock teachers into silence and avoidance of discussions of diversity, which serves to preserve existing misinformation and prejudicial ideologies.

In explaining more detailed objectives for Anti-bias Goal 4 (teaching children to respond to prejudicial behavior or language), Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2010) state that the goal is to help “every child learn and practice a variety of ways to act when another child behaves in a biased manner towards her or him or a child behaved in a biased manner toward another child, and to identify unfair situations in the center/classroom or in the child’s immediate community.” (p. 5)

Given children’s multiple identities, our responses to children’s prejudice may need to be nuanced and sophisticated. Consider the following scenario: Nyasa, a young African-American girl who uses a wheelchair, is playing in the dress-up corner and putting on the doctor’s outfit. Another child says, “You can’t be a doctor!” Among the teacher’s possible responses are, “Don’t say that” (silencing), or the more generic “Nyasa can be anything she wants to be.” However, in order for other students to be effective allies for Nyasa, it might be important to unpack whether the student’s comment related to stereotypes associated with Nyasa’s skin color (Black people can’t be doctors), her gender (girls can’t be doctors), or her use of a wheelchair (people in wheelchairs can’t be doctors). A truly anti-bias response would necessitate ways to teach about race, gender, and dis/ability to broaden children’s understandings about difference, prejudice, and becoming allies.

### Conclusion

Discourses of colorblindness and invisibility are both antithetical to the implementation of focused anti-bias education with young children. For teachers and children to become effective allies, they must have complex and nuanced understandings of individual differences *and* what oppressive language and behavior that target those differences look like. We must teach young children to not only be vigilant and hyper-aware of prejudicial behavior and oppression, but to also be well-informed about individual differences so they can craft content-specific responses. If differences are rendered invisible --- or we are encouraged not to name them --- then we cannot teach our students to become attentive to oppression based on specific differences such as disability, size, gender, or race, and to develop targeted ways of challenging prejudice and discrimination.

RESPONSE	RACE	DIS/ABILITY
Invisibility	Failure to be culturally responsive; failure to notice and name racism and oppression	Failure to make appropriate modifications and accommodations; failure to notice and name ableism and disability oppression
Hypervisibility	Tokenism; perpetuation of stereotypes (“Carlos is our Puerto-Rican student”)	“Disability spread” --- person is eclipsed by disability label; perpetuation of stereotypes (“Amanda is a student with special needs”).
Inappropriate or inaccurate assumptions based on identity marker	Low expectations; limitations of experiences; exclusion	→
Appropriate and accurate recognition of identity markers	Rich, diverse curriculum and pedagogy	→
Strategies that focus on making the “undesirable behavior” end; stopping/ending discrimination or prejudice	Models of silencing and punishment (“Don’t say that”); goal of homogenization (We’re all the same”)	→
Focus on educative, anti-bias responses	Knowledgeable teachers and students, and development of skilled allies; acknowledgement of diversity as “normal”	→

Although racism and disability oppression are not identical, this chart illustrates the commonalities of the consequences of how we respond or educate relative to these identities.

To enact quality anti-bias education and create fully inclusive and welcoming early childhood environments, we must get smarter, become more courageous, and sharpen our skills in identifying and responding to oppressive behavior. This may include the need for teachers to interrogate their own histories of being silenced and silencing others with the goal of developing courage in having hard conversations. While it may be tempting to believe that we can’t err if we don’t say anything, discourses (and non-discourses) of “Don’t ask, don’t tell” are inextricably linked to shame and secrecy. Silence is collusion, and to those marginalized and oppressed, silence in the face of their mistreatment is read as assent.

We must speak, and we must do it well. Professional development must focus on helping us all improve our willingness and agility with such important conversations. We must expand Anti-bias Goal 4, “Each child will demonstrate empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions” (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 3-6) and encourage these same skills for adults (see introduction to special issue). Social justice can only be realized when we dive into, rather than run away from, discussions of inequality and oppression, and we have a moral obligation as early childhood educators to work towards that possibility.

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