

Don't look away: Embracing anti-bias classrooms

Negar Khodarahmi

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Book Review

Don't look away: Embracing anti-bias classrooms

By Iruka, I., Curenton, S., Durden, T., & Escayg, K.-A.

Lewisville, NC: Gryphon House, 2020, 144 pages

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Reviewed by:

Negar Khodarahmi, PhD Candidate, University of British Columbia

Don't look away: Embracing anti-bias classrooms is a resource that can serve current practitioners in early childhood education (ECE) to expand on their knowledge of anti-bias education, anti-racism, culturally responsive teaching with tools that can enhance their practice of culturally responsive, anti-bias pedagogies. Practitioners that strive to confront their unconscious biases and seek to teach more equitably would benefit from engaging with this book either as a personal exercise or with their community of practice.

The book consists of eight chapters that explore and explain the historical, societal, and cultural context that make anti-bias education a necessary part of an ECE's practice. A ninth chapter is dedicated to the references and recommended readings in which the authors discuss the seminal research they draw from. Overall, in each chapter the authors encourage the reader to confront their own beliefs regarding race, bias, and equity while recognizing the impact they have in their classrooms to mitigate the harms caused by negative biases to young children's development and learning.

In their introduction, the authors primarily drawing on the history of children's education and policy in the United States to lay the foundation of work that led anti-bias education. They begin by confronting implicit bias and its significant impacts on Black children's education, e.g. the higher-than-average suspension rates of Black children when compared to their White peers. Next, they speak to the conception and

implementation of Head Start programs to combat these inequities, while recognizing the role that socio-economic status plays in this inequity. Through this context, they establish that racism is a persistent part of our reality, in our classrooms, that can harm children's educational and emotional development.

In the following chapters, the authors use plain, direct language to further address bias, institutional racism, segregation, white privilege, low expectations, childhood trauma, childhood poverty, and the intersectionality of these factors that impact Black and children of colour's development. Each chapter includes reflection questions throughout that encourage readers to recognize their own identity and role. Chapters 1 through 5 set the stage for calls to action that encourage practitioners to advocate for themselves and their students to provide their students with high-quality classroom environments. Chapters 6 and 7 provide research and evidence-based tools that can be aid in self-critique, reflection, and practice. In doing this, Iruka et al., stress the importance of research done by educators themselves in understanding their students' realities.

The terms and concepts that are introduced throughout the book are clearly explained and reflect the most recent work and understanding of race and racial identities. The authors make sure to explicitly use terms used in current anti-racism literature and draw on current events to illustrate the ideas presented. Moreover, Iruka et al. believe in children as competent, capable observers, learners, collaborators that share the world with adults as active participants. Recognizing the harm that can be caused for their development, Iruka et al. do not underestimate nor negate children's own lived experiences and their abilities to hold attitudes about race and power. For this reason, the authors do not shy away from addressing anti-blackness, white privilege, critical race theory, and uncovering children's racial attitudes in the classroom, despite political attacks that have antagonized this work in recent years.

While a large part of the book is devoted to setting the historical context of the decades-old research and policies employed in the U.S., the historical context presented has direct relevance to the ECE classrooms of Canada, as it was this past work that led to the ever-increasing calls for culturally responsive anti-bias education today. Recognizing that policy can look vastly different in the U.S. than our own in Canada, we cannot deny that our two societies are inevitably linked and often reflect each other socially and institutionally. In fact, authors of this book have engaged and applied the same concepts presented here in their research in Canadian contexts as well as further aboard,

demonstrating the far-reaching impacts of the euro-centric views that uphold institutional racism across borders.

Lastly, Iruka et al. make sure to support each of their claims and with a vast range of sources. While some of the sources presented may seem dated, it is a direct reflection of this under-funded, under-researched field. The authors do cite their own and colleagues' recent and relevant research, offering some hope for the future of this much-needed literature in ECE. Moreover, it demonstrates how the four authors of this book are some of the leading experts on these topics. Due to the lack of an introduction chapter that would otherwise have presented each of the author's biography, I encourage those readers interested in the applications of this research to look up each authors' web-pages and work individually, to see the efforts currently being made in the field of ECE in anti-bias, anti-racist education. It is likely the authors chose not to include this section as this book is not an academy-oriented publication and the intended audience of this book are not fellow researchers, however, I believe this section is sorely missed.

Iruka et al. believe that to ensure that ECE educators are engaging in culturally responsive anti-bias education, they must identify and eliminate their biases while doing the constant self-reflection required in anti-bias practice. In this book, they provide the context, questions and tools needed to confront one's beliefs, conceptions, and their role in the upholding of institutional racism and white supremacy without underestimating their readers nor their young students. This book is useful to ECE practitioners, course instructors to utilize in their ECE teacher education courses, and as staff professional development. The most fruitful outcomes would come from engaging with the discussion and reflection questions of the book as a community of practicing ECE and implementing some of tools presented in ECE settings with students and families.