

EDUC6164: Perspectives on Diversity and Equity
“Diversity and Equity Work: Lessons Learned”
Program Transcript

NARRATOR: What are some of the key lessons that early childhood professionals learn working for equity and social justice in a diverse world? What makes this work professionally and personally so rewarding? In this program, the three early childhood professionals you met in week two reunite to discuss lessons learned from their diversity work. As you view the video, listen to their insights and suggestions for ways in which early childhood professionals can engage in, learn from and work toward greater equity and social justice.

LOUISE DERMAN-SPARKS: Okay, so you know what, I was thinking that among the three of us we've got, what, maybe 75 years of experience doing diversity and equity work. So, I thought it would be kind of fun to think a little bit about what we've learned, you know? What have been the challenges? What are some of the important lessons to us from these years of work?

NADIYAH TAYLOR: Oh, let's see. Some things that I've learned are to not take everything so seriously. I think when I first started learning about anti-bias education and diversity work, I really felt like I had to solve it all right away, and I had to know all the answers right away, and I had to understand every type of bias and know every family's culture in a really deep way, and I learned that that's a really quick way for burn out. And so I had to learn how to take things in measured ways, you know? So I think that was really important. I discovered that lack of support can be really, really hard, and so to surround myself or at least find those key people that I can call and ask questions to and say I don't understand or I feel bad that I didn't get this right, or, you know, having support was really important for me and is still 100% is still important for me. I've learned that it's important to be really open to my own growth in this process, that for me, I think, my understanding about any of these issues is--comes in a spiral format, right? So I get something, I understand it, and I work with it for a few years, and then I discover four years later, I'm at the same point asking the same question with a different level of understanding and then off on another journey to understanding. And so when I see it as a journey, as a progress, that feels better than, like, oh, my gosh, I still don't understand. So having some compassion for myself and really seeing the progress that I've made, and that it's a lifelong journey, I think.

LOUISE DERMAN-SPARKS: Julie?

JULIE BENAVIDES: I concur with Nadiyah. It's just a very complex process where it's always changing, and you're thrown into an influx of certainty of

knowing and then feeling secure about it and feeling insecure about it and trying to figure out what that work means. And I've learned that I don't have all the answers. We're not born to have all the answers. And it's been a journey of getting to know and appreciate other cultures, getting to understand institutions and how they impact children, and asking questions, constantly doing the work of studying, and not only studying but talking and dialoguing with others. It's so critical is that we have to have that shared communities of studying together and understanding what our construction of knowledge is in order to help support children. And in this work, I think, one of the biggest challenges that I've had to face is really looking at my limitations, what my skills are, what my dispositions are, what I need to change, and having what I call the or, being open and being really appreciating others and then also being respectful. I say respect, but at times, do we really engage in respect? And I think that this diversity work and anti-bias work, it's also having to do with working with other adults in our institutions.

NADIYAH TAYLOR: I think I found a voice by engaging in this work. For a lot of years, I felt like I was sort of just on the outs. You know, I wasn't white. I wasn't male. I, you know, was poor and wore glasses, right? I thought, like, I had nothing going on. And I felt, actually, really shy a lot of times, and I don't like conflicts, and it makes me nervous. And I found that by thinking about how to stand up for children and thinking about having--taking in information and being in collegial relationships with people that I found a voice. I found an ability to say, you know, that's not fair and that hurts, and that that's been really important to me. I still don't like conflict, but I've also found ways to have that voice without necessarily having to engage in conflict. And, I think, because I see the power of me feeling like I found a voice that I really want children to be able to have that too.

JULIE BENAVIDES: What you said about conflict, I--it makes me think about I like conflict now. I like conflict because it just produces more opportunities for change and more growth, so conflict is really good. It's not just in the words that we're saying, it really has brought such an in-depth change in me, thinking that how can I change myself before I change someone else.

NADIYAH TAYLOR: Totally.

JULIE BENAVIDES: And going from working from young children and families and working in an institution, at a college, I'm dealing with a lot of personalities and a lot of issues and a lot of different aims and goals that we want to create. And so I have found that I have to learn how to maneuver through that conflict. And so now I enjoy it. But for a while, I didn't know how to go through it. I felt like I--if I was becoming that passive person, that passive voice, but I had to renew myself coming from an early education background in the community to go into

an institution and stepping forward and saying, no, this is what we need for our educators. This is what we need for a peer professional. This is what we need for our community.

LOUISE DERMAN-SPARKS: And I don't think conflict has ever been difficult for me. I'm kind of like what you are. But I think where I had to really struggle with and learn was that I didn't have to resolve everything, because I think that doing diversity and equity work has a lot of contradictions in it, and that it comes with the territory. It isn't just because I'm inadequate or I don't have the skills, you know, that sometimes there's a conflict between a person's particular cultural belief and a value of equity and of fairness, and you can't always completely find the perfect solution to all of these things. So, you know, it's like compromise, often, is seen as kind of a nasty word, and it was for me, I think, that compromise meant that I wasn't doing my job, but to take a more developmental position. And I just think to accept that things weren't going to always be totally nice and clean. I think the other big lesson for me was learning to ask for help, and I guess that is another dominant culture thing, and partly, you know, growing up in the fifties and wanting to be a strong woman and not feel like I was passive and dependent, I had to do it myself. But to be able to call someone and say, you know, I really don't get this, or I think I bombed, or I think I said something really stupid or hurtful. Can you help me? Or will you read this, when I'm writing something. But when I first started writing, I didn't want anyone to look at it, you know, because I had to have it, like, perfect before I could even let it out, and learning that. In fact, the way to make it better was to let people see it at different stages of development. And in fact, people being willing to give me constructive feedback and say that this doesn't work as a sign of respect. It isn't just liking what you do, but it's a sign of caring about you and of wanting to engage with you in growth.

NADIYAH TAYLOR: I sort of felt like I might be perceived as lacking, because here I am a black woman who's talking about these things and so if I make a mistake, oh, my gosh, I've made a mistake and I've ruined the reputation of my whole community, or I'm falling into a stereotype. People will think, oh, well, see there you go again, someone who's not educated, who doesn't know what they're doing. And so, for me, actually, a big piece of growth has been to step into myself and to trust myself and to say asking for help isn't a sign of weakness, nor is it a sign that I am somehow less than other people. And to trust that if I have a question, it's probably a good question and there's a reason for it and then I'll learn something from the process. And I just--I think that the ability to look for support and get support in the way you need it, I cannot stress, I think it's just really important to doing diversity work.

LOUISE DERMAN-SPARKS: And, I think that, you know, it's interesting to think that sort of in converse as a white person. When I made mistakes, I thought that meant that I was being a bad person, and it just showed how racist I really was,

and sort of, you know, oh, there I did it again. And I'm never gonna be this clean, not racist person. And that, in fact, instead, understanding that, you know, as you too, that this is a journey that we're all on, and that we were all helping each other, and nobody expects us to be perfect in all this. In fact, they know that you're not gonna be perfect, you know? It's like you don't have to pretend. And that to be able to be honest about where your limitations are as well as where your--and honor your strengths as well. I used to sometimes think that I couldn't do that either because that was also, you know, trying to be superior, but to accept ourselves as human beings while we're also recognizing that we have to be on a journey together. Because we all have been deeply hurt by the, you know, the different isms in our society, the different prejudices that have undermined our identity, our voice have taught us not to feel comfortable with people who are different. So we're all in the same boat, and we need each other to do this work.

JULIE BENAVIDES: And those are key words that we keep hearing in the field is trust, respect, and I think it goes back to honoring what you're saying that word honor is honoring the work that our--you're working with students, you've worked with students, I'm working with students in higher education is that they have a lot of capability and a lot of knowledge that they're bringing to the classroom. And I still find myself I am learning an awful lot from them.

LOUISE DERMAN-SPARKS: Well, I think passion is good. I think that this work generates passion, and I think it's passion that helps to keep us going. I think the question is what's the line between passion and trying to force our ideas and beliefs on other people? When I think of trust in doing diversity and equity work across cultural and other kinds of identity lines, it is constructed. It's co-constructed in the process of helping each other grow. It isn't automatically given.

NADIYAH TAYLOR: Absolutely.

LOUISE DERMAN-SPARKS: And it can't be--and we can't expect that it's automatically gonna come to us. I think we walk in a long shadow of history, and that affects our relationships with each other. And certainly as a white woman with the two of you as women of color, there's a long history that I wasn't born yet when it all happened, but I still I carry it, and you carry the history of the groups that you're part of. So that it is--the respect, I think, comes in, in honoring each other's willingness and believing in each other's willingness to grow and maybe giving each other the, you know, the right to grow and to help each other grow. So trust and respect comes out, I think, of conflict, of struggling with each other about ideas.

JULIE BENAVIDES: Co-constructing knowledge as you meant--

LOUISE DERMAN-SPARKS: Co-constructing knowledge.

JULIE BENAVIDES: Right.

LOUISE DERMAN-SPARKS: It doesn't just come out of agreeing with each other, but I think we can support each other and disagree with each other at the same time. And, again, it's getting away from that either/or relationship.

JULIE BENAVIDES: Absolutely. That's why, you know--you've said it perfectly, it's looking at the passion, and what I see with passion is really the optimism. I guess I must love "O" words. Optimism, you won't have it if you don't have that joy, you won't continue that drive of wanting to continue the work, because sometimes you wonder, what is the work? The work can be so abstract. And it takes a lot of work within yourself and then to work with others. We want to envision society where everyone gets along and respects one another, and I think that's our image. Everyone is, like I mentioned, is a good citizen, so we have to have that optimism that it's gonna get better. And sometimes the "O" would be in overwhelming. Is that right?

LOUISE DERMAN-SPARKS: Absolutely.

NADIYAH TAYLOR: Absolutely.

LOUISE DERMAN-SPARKS: Well, I think the idea of vision, as you were talking, I was thinking of that, that we have to hold the vision, and it's the passion comes from the vision, I think for me, that the positive passion, you know? There's also anger that comes when I see people being hurt and kids especially, when kids are hurt. But the vision that it is possible to create a society where all people can be nurtured and have access to what they need for a quality life, you know? We certainly have the wealth and the possibilities and the technology for that to happen and holding that vision as a possibility. And, you know, some days it's hard to hold it, but without it, I don't think we are willing to engage in the kind of work that--especially the self-work that we've talked about.

JULIE BENAVIDES: We might have the wealth but we need the riches of the diversity that's why we're doing the work.

LOUISE DERMAN-SPARKS: Yes. Exactly. And I was thinking that, you know, I've been doing this work now for what, maybe 35 years, and that, in some ways, it's easier because there are many more opportunities for growth. I think there are many more organizations and conferences and resources. There are books for adults. There are books for kids. There are networks of people, so I--you know, in our professional organizations, in our communities. So I think that continuing to learn is very possible. We can't blame, well, there's no materials.

There are ways of finding materials and people, and using, you know--websites are useful, because it means even if there aren't people right in our immediate neighborhood or community, there are people and bookstores and so on that have the resources that we need to keep growing.

JULIE BENAVIDES: It's changed. I mean, 30 years ago, when I started when I was, what, 10? No. 30 years ago, look what's happened. We started with hardly anything. We were working with peer empowerment programs, and now there's an acronym for every single entity that's involved. The resources are out there, but the biggest resource is each person that's engaged in this work and in working with social justice, is that we're the biggest resource. It's figuring out how we can help in whatever way we can contribute to make that change.

LOUISE DERMAN-SPARKS: Being connected with other people is like a really critical part of what keeps us going.

JULIE BENAVIDES: I think change in action, just seeing that we have made inroads, you know? Look at our institutions, they've changed. And I think with that internal joy that I feel when I see that--not only is there change, but I see that there's a group of students who want to learn, who want to grow, and I'm still feeling that passion. I still feel that there's--it's just an abundance of all possibilities.

NADIYAH TAYLOR: That's funny. I think I have just the opposite reason for keeping going because I think that there's been a lot of change and not enough, right? And so I feel like I see my son struggle through some of the same stuff. I feel like we have an abundance of resources and people don't use them. I feel like institutional bias is really insidious. And I think that things morph and change to make it harder because it's not as like in your face, right? And so, then, it feels to me like sand, right? And so I really feel like I'm motivated because things are changing, and there's still so much more to change. And I feel really passionate about that. I want my child and other people's children to have, like, a better chance at feeling whole and for things to continue to move forward.

LOUISE DERMAN-SPARKS: I think that persistence, that, you know, I've wondered what keeps me going all these years in addition to the passion and so on. I just think there's some kind of underlying stubbornness that says to me, I do still believe that the vision of change is possible. And, yes, I think we have made small changes. And I agree with both of you because I think we've also gone backwards in some things, and some things never change. But I--you know, the fact is that there have been some really key changes. I think we have to pay attention to the little victories at the same time that we see where we go next. I have very high expectations for ultimately, but my expectations in the immediate are much smaller. It's kind of like those, you know, that folk song, "Inch by inch,

row by row, I'm gonna make my garden grow." What are some of the other personal characteristics you think you have that keep you going?

NADIYAH TAYLOR: You said to me once that I believe that everyone can change. Sometimes just people die before they do. And I think of that because I get--sometimes I think, okay, I can change, other people can change, and I just have to have that sense of persistence. I think in terms of sort of personality traits, things like that for me, I want things to be balanced. I like to see both sides of the issue, and that serves me really well in doing diversity work. And I tend to go towards self-reflection, and I think that that serves me well in this work. And I want--because I don't like conflict, I work really hard to resolve it, and I think that that actually works for me very much in this work.

JULIE BENAVIDES: You know, what you just said is really critical. See how you don't like conflict, I like conflict, and how we can work together, and I think that's part of this, looking at the camaraderie that we're building in the field. And how we're--you know, our ultimate vision is to create new leadership. And you're--what you've gone through and what I've gone through, I think it is that persistence. It's that active engagement. It's what we're modeling for children and for students is to be actually involved.

LOUISE DERMAN-SPARKS: Yeah. And I think that, you know, the advocacy piece or the activism piece has also been really important in my life, and--because it--that I think that the work that we do in early child education around diversity and equity is a piece of a much larger social justice movement. And for me to feel part of a larger piece helps me realize that I don't have to do everything, that I have my contribution to make. And I think that a lot of the knowledge we've learned from the work in early childhood education around diversity and equity issues, particularly sort of the developmental issues--art can also be useful to people in other aspects of social justice work. So I think feeling connected to a large group, both in this country and internationally, because there are people working on diversity and equity issues all over the world. And they're an incredible group of people. And I agree with you about the camaraderie. I mean, there is something about it's a very special group of people in my mind. So I think advocacy is necessary because we want to be able to create really quality programs for young children. We also have to change a lot of things in our communities and in the larger nation in terms of resources and policies for children, and, you know, how people are trained to work with kids and so on, and that all requires activism advocacy work. But I think underneath it all is always that drive of I do not want children and families and, you know, people destroyed because of who they are.

JULIE BENAVIDES: I think with our own personal experiences, we've gone through different adversity. And I think that from the adversity it's challenging

ourselves to become the better person and a better advocate for children and families definitely is at the heart of it. I also feel that it's, again, being optimistic that we are gonna create a different society and a different life in whatever way we can do it. In whatever--whether it's practitioners or whether it's professionals, families, community, higher education institutions, I think, we're on our way. It's a struggle but we've come a long way.

LOUISE DERMAN-SPARKS: So it's challenging and hard work...

NADIYAH TAYLOR: It's definitely challenging.

LOUISE DERMAN-SPARKS: ...and also rewarding.

NADIYAH TAYLOR: Yes.

JULIE BENAVIDES: And it could be, again, overwhelming. But again, it's just the joy of--you get over it. And it's that persistence you have when you fail, there's so much joy that you can do in creating and innovating programs.

NADIYAH TAYLOR: Right. And just, I think recognizing change in myself is fabulous. I mean, that's a great thing. And even more than that for me is seeing children. You know, I walked into a classroom recently and a child said, "Oh, my gosh. My skin is brown just like yours." I said, "Yeah, it is. Let's compare colors." And she was really excited about her skin color, and she didn't know me. And so, for me, that's exciting for someone who could potentially be marginalized to celebrate who they are at a really young age and hopefully be able to carry that forward into their lives. I think that that's--it is, for me, really, really worth it.

LOUISE DERMAN-SPARKS: You know I was thinking of the CNN commissioned a study of, you know, where kids were at in terms of their ideas about African Americans and white children, with African American and white children from 4 to 10, and two of the kids said things which gave me also great hope. One was a white child who, when they were shown five different photographs of--well, they're actually kind of stick figures of--from very light to dark, and one of the questions was which kids would you say are smart, which kids would say is bad--are bad. And this white girl says to the researcher, she says, "Well, I don't know. I don't know them. I couldn't say until I know them." And then there was an African American boy also around eight who said, "Well, are you asking me my opinion or what other people will say?" And the researcher, luckily, said, "Well, both." So he said, "Well, what's your opinion?" And he said, "Well, my opinion is that I couldn't tell you, you know, because I have to know them." What do you think other people might say? Other people might say that the white child is smarter and that--that black child is not as smart. But I thought that is what we're talking about, that if kids can develop those--that way of thinking, that we are

taking, you know--making some very important steps towards the vision of a more just society for everybody.

NADIYAH TAYLOR: Absolutely.

LOUISE DERMAN-SPARKS: Well, I'd like to wrap us up by reading a quote from a children's--wonderful children's singer named Raffi, and it's from his Covenant for Honoring Children. And it says, "We find these joys to be self evident that all children are created whole, endowed with innate intelligence, with dignity and wonder and worthy of respect, the embodiment of life, liberty and happiness. Every girl and boy is entitled to love, to dream and belong to a loving village and to pursue a life of purpose."