Giving children credit...

Tackling issues of social justice in early childhood

The opinion piece titled, Lessons on racial prejudice from Human Rights Commission ask too much of preschoolers (Susie O’Brien, Herald Sun, November 2016), caused alarm among myself and colleagues.

I left the Early Childhood Australia (ECA) Northern Territory conference energised by the Australian Human Rights Commission’s launch of their Building Belonging toolkit for early childhood spaces. We, as educators, campaign to have such resources developed to enrich our learning spaces. Thus why reading negativity surrounding its use with young children is concerning.

Despite the National Children’s Commissioners’ expertise in recommending children start exploring their rights and responsibilities when young (AHRC, 2016; Mitchell, 2016), it was met with opposition: ‘Let our young kids relax, play and enjoy what they have in common rather than being continually challenged to search for what divides them’ (O’Brien, 2016, para 20). Promoting belonging, however, is not highlighting what divides humanity, but is celebrating our differences. Making each child feel unique and accepted is crucial for a strong sense of identity to be fostered. I struggle to see how there can be detriments in the promotion of belonging within society.

O’Brien’s article is representative of many voices in our communities, as evidenced by the online comments of support. Societal opinions have long been raised pronouncing their resistance to children exploring issues of race and diversity at a young age. It is often felt that it is better to hold off until ‘later’ to engage with such issues (Swindler Boutte, Lopez-Robertson & Powers-Costello, 2011). It is important to rise to the challenge when working with parents and carers who hold such concerns.

I also struggle to accept certain comments, including: ‘As I see it, kindergarten kids don’t see difference in the same way as older children … In their eyes there is no value or judgement that comes from having lighter hair or darker skin. So why should we ram it down their throats?’ (O’Brien, 2016, para 1). I wonder which children are being referred to here. I do not think it is in reference to Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, or Australia’s refugee and asylum seeker children. Many of these children and their families have personally experienced racism and the deep effects of prejudice first hand.

We should not need reminding that we live in the recent aftermath of a stolen generation and rampant segregation. What divided us was how society functioned, and still does to an extent today.
Therefore, we need ways to navigate the residue of policies that still have a bitter aftertaste in our communities. Many children from a very young age grow up hearing harrowing stories from their Elders about forced removal and families being torn apart. They are keenly aware of what the difference of race can mean for a person in this country. Colonial discourses have also permeated our educational spaces. A lot is being done to combat this, but it has been years in the making and will take continued work to make the shift. We need programs like Building Belonging to assist this decolonisation process. Similar discourse is needed in light of the many children in our services who have been held in detention. Detaining children is also a clear revelation that within our country you are treated differently due to your race. On average, families spend 493 days in detention (ChilOut, 2016), and they describe detention as being like a prison, with feelings of injustice commonly experienced (AHRC, 2014).

We need to give children credit for being the keen observers they are. Children innately explore and express their observations of the world around them, including differences physically in themselves and others (AHRC, 2016). This does not mean they are not accepting of others. But, as educators, we need to be equipped with skills to engage in conversations that arise, particularly when answering questions posed to us about racial identity and cultural diversity.

Unfortunately, we live in a world where the media is exposing children, whether directly or indirectly, to jargon such as ‘boat people’, ‘illegals’, ‘dole bludger’, and generally challenging people’s very being (#DefineAboriginal, Marlow, 2016). We must assist children by providing them with tools to navigate and be critically literate when confronted with such information. This is of great significance, as the research reveals there is detriment to colour-blindness (Swindler Boutte et al., 2011). Ignoring cultural and racial differences can, in fact, suppress aspects of one’s ‘identity, history, struggles and legacies’ (Swindler Boutte et al., 2011, p. 341). Aspects of who children are should be celebrated and teachers are urged by Swindler Boutte et al. (2011) to counter colour-blindness by engaging in conversations about race and racism with young children. The early childhood years are highlighted as a key period to interrupt the trajectory of racism (Swindler Boutte et al., 2011).

I also have trouble digesting the statement, ‘it’s not necessarily the role of preschool teachers to address race issues’ (O’Brien, 2016, para 14). How can it not be the role of educators to assist children in navigating this terrain? Critical literacy is a part of our pedagogical training and is vital in all educational spaces, especially in early childhood services. It is often educators that parents come to for advice in regards to navigating such conversations and questions that come from their children. It is a community responsibility to address issues of race and racism, and it needs to be a collective response. I think those who criticise the Building Belonging toolkit should take a careful look at the program, and most importantly, familiarise themselves with the high quality of educators in our services.

We will have to watch and see what impact the Building Belonging toolkit will have in the long term. But, I do wonder, if such a program had already been incorporated into early childhood spaces, would scenes like the Cronulla riots of 2005 have been prevented? I believe such resources are intervention methods for decreasing future racial riots and tension.

Jessica Brown
Educator and Early Childhood Lecturer

References


