

Rethinking Holidays From an Anti-Bias Perspective

By Julie Bisson

The “holiday question” is a big one among teachers who teach preschool on up to high school. Uncertainty about how to handle holidays in classrooms has skyrocketed in recent years. It used to be easier for teachers. It used to be that many classroom teachers did the same thing every year without worrying about who was in their class and whether or not the activities they had planned offended or reflected the children and families. When Halloween came around they got down their Halloween curriculum boxes and began putting pumpkins, witches, ghosts and goblins on the walls. As Thanksgiving drew near, they took down their Thanksgiving box or “Native American” box and taught units on how the pilgrims and Indians worked together to create a great harvest celebration and had much discussion about Indians *as a whole*, who they *were* and how they *lived*. On December 1st, teachers took down the Christmas box and planned the usual art activities using patterns for making Christmas trees, wreaths, Santa, ornaments, presents, and a driedel. Similar practices took place for Valentine’s Day, Easter, and many others. Of course the truth is that even though teachers may not have fretted over what to do with holidays then, their activities and discussions did often offend and exclude children and their families.

Today teachers are becoming more aware of the vast diversity amongst the children and families they serve and many have become sensitive to individual needs and wishes of families. They want more than anything to be respectful of those values, beliefs, and wishes and don’t want to offend. Add to that the very strong feelings that teachers, administrators, and families often have about holidays and how they are handled in the classroom and you have a recipe for confusion and frustration.

Certain basic misconceptions and misuses of holidays further cloud the issue. These misconceptions and misuses play out in at least seven different approaches to holidays in the classroom. The first misuse of holidays is one of the most common,

used widely in classrooms all over the country for the last few decades. That approach is the “Non-Thinking Use” of holidays and is the exact approach depicted earlier in this article about teachers doing the same holiday curriculum every year, pulling down that dusty Christmas, St. Patrick’s Day or Easter curriculum box off of the shelf and doing the same activities as the year before and the year before that. The problem with this approach is that it doesn’t take into consideration the needs and experiences of the children in the classroom. It’s not a culturally relevant approach by any means. It doesn’t reflect or even consider what children celebrate and how.

A second misuse of holidays is “Holiday-Based Curriculum”. Many educators enter the field in a trial by fire sort of way. They are hired without much support, mentoring, or orientation and popped into a classroom and expected to pull together a curriculum. Because teachers are resourceful, they often turn to packaged curriculum guides that organize the year from month to month by holidays. When using these guides, teachers can literally plan 10 or 12 months of activities stringing them from holiday to holiday to holiday. The limitations of this approach are that, like the approach mentioned above, it doesn’t reflect children’s lives and it doesn’t allow for emergent or other important and meaningful activities.

A misconception that many teachers hold is that “An Anti-Bias Approach Dictates that Holidays be Eliminated from the Curriculum”. This misconception is prevalent among teachers who are working hard to implement an anti-bias approach. It stems from thinking that there is no way to celebrate or represent holidays in a classroom nowadays given the diversity of the children served. It assumes that no matter what activity is planned or what discussion takes place, children and families will be offended, misrepresented, or alienated. It is worth mentioning here that Louise Derman-Sparks, the author along with the ABC Task Force of *Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children*, speaks regularly about the fallacy of this misconception referring to a chapter in her book devoted to a discussion about holidays. Instead, Derman-Sparks encourages teachers to rethink

and make changes as necessary in their current holiday practices, not eliminate them.

A second misconception of holidays is the flip side of the first. It is the notion that in order to incorporate an authentic anti-bias approach; "If you Celebrate one Holiday, you Have to Celebrate them all". This idea stems from misunderstanding of what an anti-bias approach looks like; it isn't "ethnic" or "cultural studies". The goals of an anti-bias approach are to support children in developing a positive self and group identity within a cultural context, for children to develop skills for interacting with people who are different from them, to think critically about bias, and take action against unfairness. It's not necessary to teach about every culture in the world, or every language, or every religion, or to celebrate every holiday. Not only would this method not be useful, it would be impossible!

One of the most widely used of all approaches is "Using Holidays to Teach about Culture". Teachers know that it's important and valuable to celebrate cultural diversity in the classroom, and they seek out available resources for ideas about how to do that. Much of what they find are curriculum books that tout themselves as multicultural resources or diversity curriculum and focus on celebrating the holidays of various cultures. This misguided approach in many ways seems logical, especially when holidays already play an important role in the curriculum. However, when holidays become the main or sole way to teach about cultural diversity, teachers do a grave injustice to children's education. Culture is a complex set of rules that influence behavior. It is not something that can be understood only through a holiday, or a dish of food, or a traditional dance for that matter. People learn about others' cultures over time, by getting to know the people of that culture and how they live their daily lives. Since holidays are unique times during the year when business as usual comes to a halt, children cannot learn about the usual, everyday routines of a cultural group in this way. Louise Derman-Sparks calls this approach a "tourist approach" because children visit a culture, participate in a few isolated activities as one might do on vacation in another country, then return home to "regular" classroom life. Often times any images of the people who

celebrate the holiday are absent from the classroom until the next year, when the holiday rolls around again. Incorporating holiday activities as one strategy for respecting and learning about human diversity is appropriate. However, using holidays exclusively to teach about diversity or any one ethnic or cultural group does become “tourist” curriculum.

Two last misuses of holidays seen more and more in classrooms around the country are “Establishing a NO HOLIDAY Policy” and “Minimizing Dominant Culture or National Holidays”. The “No Holiday Policy” is cropping up more and more in classrooms from preschoolers through high school. It stems from a belief that there are so many challenges and difficulties to including holidays in a way that represents everyone and offends no one that schools are better off avoiding them all together. This is very unfortunate for teachers, children and their families. It deprives children and families of an opportunity to share more of themselves in the classroom and learn about the ways that their celebrations are similar to and different from those of others –a basic anti-bias principle. It also robs staff and families of the stretching and growing conversations that come with rethinking policy and considering the varied needs, beliefs, and values of all people in the community. Furthermore, this is not the way teachers handle problem solving with children, so why would we do it with adults? For example, if two children are arguing over the same toy, a skilled teacher carefully and skillfully acknowledges that there is a problem, supports both children in telling the story of what happened from their perspective, and then coaches the children through a process of coming to a solution that works for both of them. We don’t on the other hand, just take the toy the children are in conflict over and put it on a shelf saying, “You can’t agree, so we’ll just put this away.”

The last approach to mention is “Minimizing Dominant Culture or National Holidays”. This is often initiated by well-meaning teachers concerned with the dominance of the national holidays and the little room that is left in their shadow to recognize very important cultural holidays of the many people who are often left out and underrepresented. The way this plays out in the classroom is that

Thanksgiving, Christmas, Valentine's Day, Easter and other dominant culture holidays are minimized at best or avoided all together. This makes space for celebrations of and conversations about holidays like Rosh Hashanah, Diwali, El Dia De Los Muertos, Solstice, Kwanzaa, Chinese New Year, Ramadan, and many others. While the concern that national holidays overshadow many, many other holidays that are important to thousands of people in the U.S. is valid, there are two major problems with this approach. One is that it usually doesn't take into consideration what is celebrated by the children and families in the classroom, rather the holidays that are emphasized are often primarily chosen by the teachers and their interests. Therefore, this approach may not be culturally relevant or reflective of many of the children. The other concern is it isn't fair or appropriate to tell a young child, either directly or indirectly, that because their holidays are validated out in the community, they won't be represented in the classroom, where they spend many of their waking hours. Often children learn more by what is not said than what is said. Here is an example. In a large urban child care program the teachers in the toddler room are very concerned about the materialism and commercialism that accompanies Christmas and many other holidays. Although there is not much discussion about holidays in general in this classroom, the teachers do sometimes make reference to what they celebrate in simple ways. One day two two-year-olds sleeping on mats next to each other were waking up from naptime. One opened her eyes and lay still on her nap. The other one stirred and, before he was fully awake, muttered something about "Christmas", a holiday he and his family celebrate each year. The first toddler startled and said decidedly, "Shhhhh. We don't have Christmas at our school; we have Solstice!"

If there are significant problems with many of the current approaches to holidays, what characterizes a good holiday curriculum? **Cultural Relevancy** is one essential characteristic of effective holiday practices. When children walk through the classroom door every day, they should find elements of the room that look, smell, and feel familiar to them. This standard holds true for all components of the curriculum, including holiday activities. That means activities must reflect what is

celebrated at home and how it is done. When this is accomplished, holiday activities are connecting, empowering, and validating for children.

An effective approach to holidays also **advocates anti-bias goals**, including helping children feel good about themselves, and teaching about and valuing similarities and differences. Holiday activities can be one more way that teachers help children feel valued for who they are and what they do at home with their families. In addition, participating in activities and discussions about holidays that other children celebrate is one more way that children can learn about the similarities and differences between themselves and others. Discussions about fairness and changing things that hurt people, two other anti-bias goals, can also emerge from holiday discussions in the classroom. Because some holiday stories, messages, and decorations negatively impact children's self-esteem and their growing ideas about who others are, involving children in activities that address the stereotypes and bias in holidays is necessary and appropriate.

Developmental appropriateness is a must. Teachers who create effective holiday programs are meticulous about considering children's developmental stages and daily experiences when planning activities. It is essential to keep in mind each individual child and her or his development before deciding to include a holiday in the curriculum, when determining how much and what kind of information to give children, when planning specific activities, and while answering children's questions.

Formulating a holiday policy, a plan about how a program or classroom handles holidays, is a very useful tool. A holiday policy is a guide for staff, children, and families to help them choose, implement, and evaluate holiday activities. The policy must be clear, detailed, and flexible. Developing a policy takes time and commitment. For some, creating a policy in stages, as the pages of the calendar turn and holidays come and go, works best. That way new approaches to holidays can be tried out and evaluated at the same time, giving more clarity to components of the new holiday policy.

There are a couple of things to keep in mind when embarking on the creation of a new holiday policy. The first is to include everyone in the process who wants to be. All teachers, assistants, supervisors, and families who will be affected by the policy should be invited to participate. Not only does this make for richer and more meaningful discussions, but also when some aren't included, programs run the risk of not having buy-in. When this happens, teachers, directors, supervisors, or family members involved may initially say that they agree with the policy, but when it's time to put the guidelines into practice at holiday time, they may withhold their support and cooperation because they really aren't fully on board. Though it may seem harder to have so many voices and perspectives in the mix when creating a new policy, these opportunities to share views and values are essential to a program committed to an inclusive, anti-bias approach. They provide avenues for people to get to know one another, hear each other's points of views, practice respectful listening, and learn about different values and practices.

Another consideration is the importance of being very clear about what decisions can be made by those participating and what will be decided by a person or governing body in charge of curriculum decisions. It can be very frustrating for people to think they are going to have an impact on policy, to put in effort and time, and then find out that someone else really makes the decisions. The person or group in charge must be clear about what their bottom lines are before asking for input. If there are certain things that absolutely will be in the policy, that should be said at the beginning. For example, if violent or stereotypical costumes or decorations at Halloween will not be allowed, that should be stated up front. If religious activities in the program are not allowed due to funding sources or other policy, everyone should be aware of this before talking about activities for Easter, Rosh Hashanah, Ramadan, Christmas or many other holidays.

There will be many components to any holiday policy. Each one answers a question about how holidays will be handled in an individual program or classroom. Here are some thoughts to consider when deciding what to include in a policy.

➤ **What are the goals and functions of holidays in this setting?**

Determining what teachers and families want to accomplish with holiday activities is essential. Considering how these goals relate to overall program goals and anti-bias goals is important as well. When firm goals are in place and can be referred to easily and often, then teachers are better able to keep holiday activities in check. This way they always meet their intended purposes, as well as the needs of all children and families.

➤ **How much significance and time will be given to holiday curriculum?**

Deciding the emphasis that holidays will have in the curriculum is important. If the program is a religious one, then religious holidays may play a central role in curriculum activities. In other programs, holidays may be just one small part of an overall approach to cultural relevancy and anti-bias practices. Making a plan about how many days before an actual holiday activities will commence and decorations will be put up is also important. In other words, will Christmas decorations be put up and activities commence two weeks before the holiday or two days before? For some programs, putting parameters on how many holidays will be considered each month is a useful tool. Some teachers say that two holidays per month is plenty.

➤ **How will decisions be made about which holidays to include in the curriculum?**

Determining who will make decisions about which holidays to include is a key beginning step. Even if teachers take the lead, it is important to decide how families will also be involved in the decision making process. Gathering information from families about what and how they celebrate specific holidays is essential. Family meetings, questionnaires, home visits, phone calls, and conversations before and after school are all effective ways to

gather that information, depending on the preferred communication style of each family.

➤ **How will holidays be implemented?**

It's important to define holiday activities because the words "holiday" and "celebration" mean different things to different people. For some programs, holiday activities will be as simple as reading a book about a holiday or having a group discussion about a holiday and how a family in the class celebrates it. Other programs may set up open-ended developmentally appropriate activities for children that relate to a holiday. Still others may have parties to celebrate holidays. The following questions must also be addressed in the holiday policy:

- How will families be involved in activities
- How will teachers get the information they need to accurately portray a holiday?
- What's the plan for ensuring that holiday activities and discussions are connected to children's own experiences?

➤ **How will the religious aspects of holidays be handled?**

Since most holidays do have a religious or spiritual story at their core, deciding up front if religious aspects of holidays will be included in discussions and activities is of utmost importance. If there is a plan to omit religious components from discussions, teachers and families will have to plan carefully so as not to end up with only the surface, or commercial aspects of a holiday.

➤ **In what ways will commercialism and stereotypical messages and images be addressed?**

Many of the national holidays contain stereotypical images and messages, or present history from only one perspective. Others are heavily influenced by commercial interests, which equate celebrating with buying and buying with happiness. Young children are heavily influenced by these images and messages. As part of a commitment to help children develop to their fullest potential, teachers, along with families, have a responsibility to help them recognize and reject these unfair images and messages. Putting a plan in place to accomplish this is essential.

➤ **What is the plan for working with children and families who don't celebrate a particular holiday or all holidays?**

It is not unusual to have children whose families don't celebrate any holidays, due to religious or other reasons. Many teachers find this challenging, but a commitment to fairness, respect, and inclusion means finding viable ways to meet the needs of every child and family. Depending on individual situations, solutions can range from modifying activities so that families are comfortable with them, to eliminating certain aspects of a holiday or even an entire holiday from the program. Oftentimes, a minor change in implementation or words or materials used helps all to feel comfortable and included. To determine the best way to approach any specific child's needs, it is necessary to discuss the issue with her or his family. Under no circumstances should a teacher exclude a child from school because she or he is unable to participate in a particular activity or discussion.

➤ **How will the effectiveness of holiday activities be evaluated?**

In order for any aspect of a culturally relevant, anti-bias approach to be successful, families must be involved on a regular basis. A holiday policy is no exception. Finding ways to evaluate an existing policy once it is in place will be essential. As teachers give input on what is working and what is not, families must also be included in this discussion, since they will know best what is working or not working for their child and family.

A holiday policy is a unique reflection of the philosophy, values, and needs of a particular program community. No two policies will look the same. Nor should they. There is no one “right way” for effective holiday practices; what is “right” in a particular setting can only be decided collaboratively by everyone involved. With a holiday policy in place, the true value of including holidays in the classroom can be realized. Holiday activities will promote connections among children, families, and staff, building connections between home and school and among children and teachers. Holidays that are important to children and families will be reflected in accurate and validating ways.

Holiday activities and discussions will give children a sense of security and comfort, reaffirming the connection to their cultural roots and reminding them of who they and their families are. Children will stretch their awareness of and empathy for people who celebrate differently from themselves, further developing the understanding that there are many ways that as humans we are both alike and different. This will help teach children who celebrate only the dominant culture holidays that what and how they celebrate is only one way to experience holidays. Children will also learn to examine and think critically about holiday images and messages that include gender, race, culture, class, and historical biases. Finally, by discussing social justice holidays such as Passover, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Birthday, and Mexican Independence Day, children will learn about what real people struggled over in the past to create a better life for themselves and others. With

proper support and encouragement, this will lead to discussion about people who are working for justice today.

Developing a holiday policy is challenging work. When the work gets too hard, people disagree, or the process stalls, it's important to remember that we can't give up. If we are to truly meet the needs of children and families, we must work together to create a meaningful, responsive holiday curriculum. This work takes courage, strength, and commitment to creating the best possible learning environment for children, and it is within our reach!