

# BU WHEELLOCK

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**Stephanie Curenton  
leads antibias  
initiatives for early  
childhood educators**

## **EMPOWERING BLACK CHILDREN TO SUCCEED**

- + ADVICE FOR BUILDING COMMUNITY
- + THE SCIENCE OF EXCELLENCE
- + TEACHING DIVERSE LITERATURE

**BOSTON  
UNIVERSITY**



# EMPOWERING BLACK CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

**Stephanie Curenton** leads antibias education initiatives  
at the Center on the Ecology of Early Development

BY MARA SASSOON / PHOTO BY CIARA CROCKER





**E**ven before the murder of George Floyd and the debates over how to teach race in the classroom, Stephanie M. Curenton and her colleagues were on a mission to promote antibias education.

Now, as Florida, Arkansas, Idaho, Oklahoma, and other states are passing legislation limiting what their public schools can teach about race, racism, and so-called “divisive concepts,” the team’s work has taken on added urgency, says Curenton, an associate professor of education leadership and policy studies and applied human development.

Curenton is executive director of BU Wheelock’s Center on the Ecology of Early Development (CEED), a research hub launched in fall 2020 that is dedicated to studying ways early childhood educators can empower and advocate for Black children and their families. This includes providing training and professional development plans centered around equity and antiracist practices in both community settings and classrooms. They also offer guidance that informs policies and programs aimed at the success of racially and ethnically diverse learners.

Antibias teaching—using a diverse, inclusive curriculum that addresses and draws attention to the negative impact of stereotypes and biases—begins with our youngest students, says Curenton.

“In the wake of these ‘twin pandemics’—of COVID and racism—I think that many people have been sort of ripped open and are seeing that they do not want to live like this any longer,” she says. “They are even more open to thinking about how we can change as adults, but also how we can change for future generations as well. That has also re-emphasized the importance of early childhood education in general.”

She says CEED is one of the key players at the forefront of antibias and antiracist work in the early childhood education field: “And there is a lot of work to be done.”

### MAKING THE WORK ACCESSIBLE

At CEED, Curenton is promoting research that has a far-reaching impact on policies that affect Black children’s lives. Along with Iheoma Iruka, a CEED advisory board member and research professor of public policy at University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, she created the Researchers Investigating Sociocultural Equity and Race (RISER) Network, a group of scholars who study Black children’s positive development. In February 2021, Iruka, Curenton, and the research group published a report, “Black Parent Voices: Resilience in the Face of the Two Pandemics—COVID-19 and Racism,” which explores how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected Black families, including their experiences with discrimination, mental health, and childcare and education options. The report includes several policy recommendations, such as calling for extended paid sick and personal leave, as well as more flexible schedules for parents who are the sole providers for their children.

“People really understand now more than ever how important childcare is,” Curenton says. The report also recommends that telehealth and other alternative models of healthcare services use “antiracist and culturally appropriate strategies that promote radical healing,” including using a faith-based approach in certain cases.

The “Black Parent Voices” report is available for free on CEED’s website (bu-ceed.org); after it was published, Curenton and Iruka hosted a webinar for organizations, educators, and other researchers to go over its key findings. Curenton wants to make much of CEED’s work accessible to a broad audience. “We’re trying to lead in the academic and scholarly space, but we’re also trying to lead in this policy, practice, public-facing space as well around these issues of racial equity.”

### “CHANGING THE FUTURE”

Curenton is trying to reach early childhood educators in other ways. As the COVID-19 pandemic began to further spread across the United

States in April 2020, she published the book *Don’t Look Away: Embracing Anti-Bias Classrooms* (Gryphon House) with Iruka and scholars from Georgia State University and the University of Nebraska at Omaha. “Early childhood educators have a pivotal role in changing the future, because the early years of life, birth to age eight, are the most critical time period in our human development,” the coauthors write in the introduction. They draw on the work of Louise Derman-Sparks, a key scholar of antibias education, describing strategies for early childhood educators to recognize and minimize bias in classrooms and schools, incorporate culturally responsive experiences for students, and ultimately create an equitable setting for learning.

They advise teachers to reflect on their own biases and bring that awareness into the classroom. Curenton and her coauthors also encourage educators to consider the lived experiences of their students and base classroom lessons, activities, and conversations in these experiences. To support this kind of teaching method, they should create a classroom environment that incorporates imagery portraying diverse people, including people with disabilities. The authors also recommend books in the classroom showcase diversity.

“**I REALIZED THAT WE DIDN’T REALLY HAVE A MEASURE OF CLASSROOM DISCOURSE THAT TOOK INTO CONSIDERATION THE DEVELOPMENTAL EXPERIENCES AND SKILLS OF CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE LEARNERS.**”

Curenton is working with CEED researchers to help schools assess their reading lists. They have created a series of racially affirming book lists, including one for Black children and one for Asian American and Pacific Islander children, with recommendations from infancy to grade 6. Curenton is creating a list for Latinx children, as well. “I believe books can be part of this racial healing,” she says, and she is working on an intervention model that can guide educators, clinicians, and parents on how to use books to do this (you can also find advice on selecting diverse books for the classroom on page 6).

Curenton has found that in order to improve Black children’s education experiences, more research needs to be conducted on two fronts: how to best implement antiracist professional development for educators and practitioners, and how nontraditional education models are related to their school success. A key component to promoting inclusive and supportive teaching practices, she says, has



Curenton coauthored *Don’t Look Away: Embracing Anti-Bias Classrooms* (Gryphon House, 2020), which describes strategies for early childhood educators to recognize and minimize bias in classrooms and create equitable settings for learning.

been developing practical tools and resources that teachers can use in their own classrooms. Curenton, who has focused part of her own research on the social and language development of low-income and minority children, has built a tool, the Conversation Compass Communication Screener-Revised, to help teachers analyze their students’ communication skills and facilitate high-quality conversation in the classroom. The screener, used for students on an individual basis, consists of more than three dozen assessment items—such as “understands that drawings, letters, or icons have meaning” and “can describe the thoughts or feelings of a story character”—that teachers rate on a scale of “hardly ever,” “most times,” or “always.” Together, the ratings provide a picture of their students’ communication skills.

“I realized that we didn’t really have a measure of classroom discourse that took into consideration the developmental experiences and skills of culturally and linguistically diverse learners,” says Curenton. “It’s important to have one because our conversation skills are pretty much the foundation of all of our learning.”

She’s also developed another measure to promote equitable classroom instruction. The Assessing Classroom Sociocultural Equity Scale, an observation tool for early childhood teachers to measure equitable sociocultural interactions in their classrooms, fills a gap in early childhood education, Curenton says. “We didn’t have a tool to look at classroom quality from a racial equity standpoint. Other measures were considered to be race neutral, but those measures did not take into consideration how an experience for children of color in the classroom might be different from an experience of a white student. It’s crucial that we don’t overlook that anymore.”



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