



Louise Derman-Sparks is an activist, speaker, consultant, author, and co-author most notably of the groundbreaking Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves, NAEYC, 2010. (First published in 1989. Now with new title for the revised edition with Julie Olsen Edwards). I met Louise when I was a student at Pacific Oaks in the eighties. She was in the midst of her work with the ABC Task force and the upcoming publication of her anti-bias book. She was my professor for several courses and we began a friendship that has spanned the years.

Last spring we met together for lunch and this interview.

Me: “Over the years there has been a connection between members of P.E.A.C.E. and those who use your anti-bias education approach. Tell me about this connection.”

Louise: “Well, it actually goes back to my childhood!”

As a child in the fifties, Louise attended the Higley Hill Camp in Wilmington Vermont. Higley Hill was a summer camp for the children of left-leaning activists. These children became known as the “red diaper babies” whose parents were members, or former members, of the U.S. Communist Party or nonmembers involved in social justice activities. Louise attended this camp and remembers meeting our founder, Peggy Schirmer, there!

“I was 13 or 14 years old. Peg’s kids, who were younger than I, were there too. She was a cook and perhaps a counselor at the camp.” Louise remembers Peg as a strong woman with a gentle spirit who attended to the children with great kindness. “I was drawn to her, I admired her.”

Although they lost touch soon after that, her first impression of Peggy stayed alive in her memories. It was another 30 years before they met again. Remarkably, it was through

P.E.A.C.E. (then CEASE) that they reconnected as early childhood education professionals attending an NAEYC Conference where both Louise and Peggy were presenting.

Me: “How is it that you began your work with young children?”

Louise: “I got started because of my own upbringing. I was raised in a family of activists who were deeply committed to the idea that we have a responsibility to eliminate injustice. That we must be active in addressing all of the different ways it harms people.” Louise’s commitment to this philosophy manifested itself through teaching and advocating for young children.

“In the early years of my career, I adopted my son (now in his 40s). He is a child of black and white parentage.” It was her son and his early musings that really brought the issues surrounding race, racial identity and prejudice to the forefront of her work.

“At two and three years old my son was making comments indicating that he noticed skin color. At three and four years old he was aware of racial prejudice. I was surprised. It was so early in his development. I didn’t know how to handle it, so I looked into early childhood research to see what had been written about it.”

“There was important research done by Kenneth Clark and Mamie Phipps Clark, but I noticed that there was no mention at all of this research in the professional field of early childhood education. No one knew what to do. I realized that I needed to do a study. I started by gathering data about what kids think and say, and thus began a lifetime of anti-bias work”

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