



Alicia Flack-Konè

Early Childhood Teacher, Northside Community Services,
Yurauna Centre, Canberra Institute of Technology (ACT)



I have been in the EC profession since 1990 as a volunteer, untrained assistant, diploma-qualified educator, and EC teacher. Currently I work in an EC environment at Northside Community Services, through Yurauna Centre, Canberra Institute of Technology, ACT in a mixed age group with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

I don't remember when I first engaged in EC advocacy as it is something that has evolved over time. I do remember experiencing first hand gender discrimination when I was a child, then in my teens and on into my adult life. At first, as an educator my vision was 'to show girls they can too!' In my practice I would remind girls they were strong and could do anything they wanted. I would share visuals of women leaders around the world from various countries, and this was all with infants and toddlers. I would translate songs to empower girls or at least include them in songs.

Over time I noticed that inequities were much bigger than just gender-based, and addressing them wasn't as simple as having conversations in the classroom. A broader context and engagement with children about religion, 'race', class, abilities, sexuality and culture was needed. I wanted to empower children to think critically and have the tools to stand up to what is unfair. I continued to read and found *Anti-bias curriculum: Tools for empowering young children* by Louise Derman-Sparks (Derman-Sparks, Staff, A.T.F., & the A B C Task Force, 1989) helped develop my thinking and give advocacy-based teaching practices 'a go'. I also talked to my colleagues to try to find ways to share and honour the voices of children and people not heard, who were marginalised within the community at local, national and international level.

Through these resources and conversations I started to 'take risks' by introducing conversations, visuals and literature into my practice that aimed to challenge stereotypes, biases and injustice. I became intentional about what books I read to children. For example, I began to use books like *The Rabbits* by John Marsden and Shaun Tan (Marsden & Tan, 2010), *This is Our House* by Michael Rosen (Rosen, 2007), *The Smallest Samurai* by Fiona French (French, 2008) and *The Rainbow Cubby House* by Brenna and Vicki Harding (Harding & Harding, 2006) in my curriculum. Books like these encouraged children to think differently about the world. I also used annual events to introduce or continue on conversations. For example, Sorry Day gave me permission to talk about children who were taken from their parents, while Easter provided an opportunity to talk about other religious celebrations. Another strategy I developed was to sing social justice songs to children at rest time, such as *Streets of London* by Ralph McTell (McTell, 1969) and *She's got Her Ticket* by Tracey Chapman (Chapman, 1988). Two parents and grandparents asked me about *Streets of London* and later looked up the song on YouTube at home. They were so appreciative that I was 'teaching' their son about social justice.

During this time I realised that I needed to actively engage with EC peers who critically examined their practice or similarly grappled with addressing inequity and injustice in their practice. I couldn't do this work in isolation. I joined the Social Justice In Early Childhood group where I heard first hand stories of lived experiences. This gave me further insight into the injustices that occurred in our community and an opportunity to come together with other educators in solidarity. It was a great forum to hear and see how EC teachers were grappling with issues of social injustice.

What drives me to do this advocacy work? It is important to me that children feel proud of who they are and comfortable with their identity. I also want children to be able to stand up for what is fair and just, and to have the words to be able to communicate this. I have believed this for a long time and continue to practise this

every day, within the classroom, the curriculum, the community and internationally. I remember in the late 1990s when I was a team leader in a preschool room in the inner city of Sydney and autism was not yet well known as a common diagnosis in the community. I was informed by the director that we would be having a family with a child who had autism. I didn't know anything about it so one lunchtime and after work I sat at the computer and researched what I could to find out about autism. I wanted to ensure that the child starting at our centre would be supported for who they are, and would know that we welcomed them into the space and would accommodate and be flexible where needed.

I believe it is my responsibility, our responsibility, to do what we can to ensure that children feel empowered and positive about themselves; for children to belong and care about others no matter who they are or where they are from; and to have the skills to act with others or alone against injustices. My vision for a fair and just classroom, community, and world continues every day and has never stopped.