



## Is Your Anti-Racism, Equity, Inclusion, & Diversity Work Happening in Your Surroundings or Only in Posts Online?

By Educator Barnes – June 30, 2020

Recently, I wrote that the revolution must take place in the places where we are located. This means anti-racist, diversity, equity, and inclusion work should be happening because you are present. If it is not, real change will not come. A true revolution turns everything, everywhere,

on its head. How do you actually do this type of work? What does it really mean? Here is how I have done this work with [The STEM Connection](#).

During the summer of 2015, my husband, sons, and I attended an open house for St. Monica's Catholic School. We had enrolled our twin sons in preschool and attended the open house to learn more about the school and activities that were offered. Then, a lady with a warm smile asked us to stop at the table. I would later learn that she was Vera Vander Kooy, the executive director and founder of The STEM Connection. She had an activity that my boys enjoyed. Next, she launched into a pitch about a STEM Challenge Club she was offering at the school. The problem was the club started at kindergarten. I explained my sons would be entering preschool. She paused and then stated that she thought they should still participate since they showed interest at the table.

My husband and I wondered if the STEM Challenge Club would be too hard since they were just enrolling in PreK-4. We decided to let them give it a try and if it was too hard, we would pull them. It wasn't too hard, and my sons loved it! They loved it so much that I wanted to find out how I could get a STEM Challenge Club at my school. At the time, I was an elementary literacy coach. I was able to bring in a STEM Challenge Club for K-2 students. This was the beginning of how I built a relationship with Vander Kooy and became interested in how STEM access could spread through Indianapolis, in particular, for girls and students of color.

It is easy to say you want to target girls and students of color, but it is much harder to make sure you have policies, procedures, and structures to ensure your learning environment is a safe place where students can learn and thrive. First, I helped by observing activities and giving feedback. Some of that feedback included diversifying the books used and being intentional about making students feel connected to each other and to the lessons.

Later, I joined the board, and I provided some professional development for the staff. Last year, I led a session called "A Conversation about Cultural Responsiveness." Recently, in response to worldwide protests after the death of George Floyd, while he was being taken into custody by the police, people have become more engaged in anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion work. I was proud to say that we were already doing the work, and it would be a continuation. The reason why this particular work became necessary to address at the staff level was that, as a board member, I made a suggestion, that was accepted, to add a cultural responsiveness component to the executive director's evaluation. It is easy to say you

are implementing the work, but if you are not evaluating it, how do you really know it is happening and happening well?

Last week, I led a follow-up session to the one I gave last year. I asked the participants to share what impacted them the most from my last session. Many people said it was my opening activity. During that activity, I had asked participants to identify how many people in their circle looked like them. I had a list of people for the staff to consider such as: spouse, best friend, hairstylist, pastor, etc. With this activity, many times, people discover their circles are not diverse. People know this, but it is another level to think about it, question it, and consider how that impacts how you operate in the world.

This work can't be a one time deal. You have to continually work on yourself. That includes me. I am not an expert in all aspects of this work. I, too, must be a life-long learner. The other part is to sit with the discomfort and work through it.

I hate professional development where the session was informative, you feel good when it is over, but then you can't implement it. I spent the last half of my session troubleshooting real situations The STEM Connection had faced and could face, and we worked through them. One conversation was about Black hair. The Eagle Creek Reservoir runs through part of the property. We discussed why some Black children might fear the creek, getting their hair wet, and how to respond when this occurs. This was a real situation that had occurred. If your professional development or training does not address real issues at your school or organization, then, what was the point?

This may seem simple, but it is hard. There will be times you will feel guilty because you have failed. Sitting in that guilt and getting paralyzed in that guilt does not help move the work forward.

Today is my last day on serving on the executive board of The STEM Connection. I'm currently in a doctoral program, and I have to give up some responsibilities. Even in my exit, I thought about how could a diverse perspective be added to the board to replace me. I connected the organization with a couple of diverse candidates. Every organization should have a plan to continue having diversity represented in all levels of the organization and a plan to continue anti-racist, diversity, equity, and inclusion work long-term.

I still plan to support by leading more sessions including another one later this summer. My sons, five years, later are still involved in activities at The STEM Connection. For their sake, I

want to ensure this work continues. If your presence does not make an impact, if it doesn't challenge systems, if it does not move the work forward, then what have you really done?

I will miss being a member of the board, but I share this story so my readers will understand that we have to do more than post quotes online. We have to do more than state that we are in solidarity with movements. We have to actually make improvements in the places we enter if we are ever going to move towards a more equal, fair, and just society.