

Bias Education with White Children

Louise Derman-Sparks & Patricia G. Ramsey - 5/02

This article is a work in progress. We want to open a dialogue on the issues, goals and practical steps for engaging white children and their families in multicultural/anti-bias activities. In the following discussion, we offer our perspectives as two white women who are always working to come to terms with our roles as multicultural and anti-bias educators in a white dominated society. We believe that, while it is not possible to undo history, it is possible to learn from it and to create new futures. Please join the dialogue by sharing your experiences and your thoughts.

“What if all the kids are white?” This is one of the most frequently asked questions in our workshops and discussions with early childhood teachers over the past two decades. Almost always posed by white teachers, it echoes the persistent confusion about the role of whites in the multicultural movement and, in particular, the engagement of white children and teachers in anti-bias-multicultural activities.

Many teachers in predominantly white programs assume that anti-bias/multicultural education is not relevant to their children, and the question has an undertone of “Why should we bother?” Those teachers who do believe that multicultural anti-bias education IS relevant to white children often do not know what to do.

What Does “Whiteness” Mean and How Does It Affect Us?

Before turning to the question of “how?” we need to clarify what “whiteness” means. People have a range of definitions that reflect their backgrounds and experiences, and teachers must be clear about their ideas and attitudes about whiteness in order to deal with these issues in the classroom.

“Race” is a socially constructed idea, located in economic, political and historic power relationships. Although biologically racial distinctions are meaningless, views about race often reflect an assumption of genetically determined physical and mental characteristics. Throughout history, groups of people have found “racial” reasons to decimate and dominate other groups.

The European exploitation and subjugation of people in the Americas, Asia, Africa and Australia in the 1600s-1900s embodied assumptions of white superiority. It left a legacy of racial privilege and disadvantages that to this day profoundly influences social relationships and life prospects of virtually

2

everyone in the United States and in most parts of the world.

1

For example,

the Children’s Defense Fund’s yearly statistics about the quality of life measures for young children illustrate the continuing inequities and disparities between children of color and white children.

Many white people may see this historical context as distant and far-fetched.

On a personal level, most of us who are white are struggling with our day-to-day lives and do not feel that we are dominating anyone. But the reality is that in the United States and in many parts of the world, we still benefit

from a system in which white people have unearned racial privilege (Barndt, 1991, McIntosh, 1995 Tatum, 1992) and people from other racial groups live with undeserved racial penalty (Barndt, 1991, Howard, 1999,). White dominance also leads to “internalized racial superiority.” (Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997, Kivel, 2002). Members of the dominant group readily assume that their ascendancy is a sign of their innate superiority and/or a product of their hard work. They ignore the systemic inequities of racial discrimination that influence individual life prospects from birth and believe that their experiences are “normal” for everyone.

As with all racial groups, whites are not homogeneous. Against the privileges of whiteness are an array of “white” ethnic groups with unique histories and power relationships with other “white” ethnic groups in the United States. Social class also varies across all white ethnic groups. While European Americans as a whole have fared better in this country, wide discrepancies exist in their economic well-being. Many white families suffer severe poverty (although not in as high proportions as people of color). Despite these differences, virtually all whites benefit to some extent from their racial privilege.

Paradoxically, whites are also hurt by racism. This harm takes several shapes. Economically, the lower wages of people of color are always an available weapon to keep the wages of white workers lower than is just, albeit not as low as people of color. To gain the privileges of racism, many non-English-speaking European ethnic groups gave up their languages and ethnic traditions to become “white” by “melting” into the dominant Anglo culture. (Brodin, 1998, Gossett, 1963, Ignatiev, 1995)

Beliefs of white superiority also have a negative impact on white children’s developing mental and moral health, impairing their ability to function

¹ We want to also acknowledge that, along side the themes and dynamics of domination we describe, opposing themes and dynamics were also set in motion. From early on in USA history, the promise of democracy and of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” underlay on-going movements to extend human and civil rights to all those who were not yet receiving them. (See for example, Aptheker, 1993) These included white women, white working men and women, women and men of color African Americans, and other people of color, people with disabilities, and gay and lesbian people.

effectively in a diverse world. By the preschool years, white children begin to learn the power codes of racism and to develop internalized racial superiority (Feagin, Ramsey, and Tatum). They absorb “do as I say, not as I do” double-messages about people of color from the significant adults in their lives. (Clark, 1955)

Based on the findings of many studies to date, we must assume that very young children notice racial distinctions, are absorbing racially related images and assumptions, and are influenced by racist messages (Aboud, 1988; Ramsey, 1995; Ramsey and Williams, in press; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). They are also constructing their own ideas about the power relationships of racism — not only from what they are directly learning, but also from what they perceive in a highly “racialized” society (Holmes & Stanfield, 1995, Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001).

Children construct their racial ideas and feelings from adults, peers, and the

media. The messages may be overt or contradictory and subtle. In their own centers and classrooms, teachers may send double messages. For example, if the teachers and administrators are all white and the support and maintenance staffs are people of color, children learn about racial hierarchies even if the curriculum espouses messages of equality. As with all early childhood education, effective anti-bias/multicultural curriculum requires solid understanding of what each child brings to the table. Teachers must become intentional and acute observers of their children's ideas and images and the attitudes and information they are being exposed to in their families, communities and in the center or classroom.

Multicultural/Anti-bias Education in All-White or Predominantly White Programs

The goals and strategies we suggest for working with white children flow from our analysis of what it means to grow up "white." White children need to:

1. Develop authentic identities based on their personal abilities and interests, family's culture, and meaningful engagement with the world,
2. Learn that white people have a range of differences and similarities and to respect and value attributes that are unfamiliar to them.
3. Extend their understanding of differences and similarities beyond their immediate family, neighborhood and center/classroom and to challenge the dominant culture assumption that everyone is or should be like him or herself.
4. Build the capacity to recognize, take and empathize with others' perspectives, build their understanding of fairness and to learn how to resolve conflicts equitably.

- 4
5. Acquire the perspective that everyone has the right to a secure, comfortable and sustainable life and that all people share the same planet earth.
6. Develop the ability to identify and challenge stereotypes, prejudice and discriminatory practices among themselves and in their larger communities.
7. Learn about whites that have fought and are fighting for social justice and to develop identities that encompass these ideals and possibilities.

Developing Authentic Identities

The specific challenges to achieving this goal are societal and family messages of white superiority or white-centeredness. To counter a white identity built on a false sense of racial superiority, teachers can nurture children's sense of competency based on what they *do* and *contribute* to the

group — not on how they look, or dress or how many toys they have. In addition, children need to know that others are also competent in their own ways and that everyone contributes to the whole. Instead of learning to see themselves as “special” or “the best,” teachers can encourage children to appreciate their deeper sense of self by encouraging them to explore their multiple identities (e.g., a daughter, a sister, a cousin, a granddaughter) and their specific skills and interests (e.g., read, build, play ball). Despite their racial privilege, many white children grow up in families who live in poverty or do not “fit” the dominant norms

²
in other ways (e.g., being poor, or being Jewish, or being a gay or lesbian headed family, or having a disability). These children may also need support to resist feeling that they are inferior in some way. Teachers can make sure that each child and her/his family is equally reflected in their center/classroom by providing classroom materials such as photographs, books, and puzzles that portray different family constellations and a wide range of jobs (e.g., factory workers and sanitation workers, not just the glamorous professions such as firefighter and doctor).

The capacity to think critically about prejudice and discrimination, and to engage in socially responsible work and activism are other aspects of nurturing white children’s authentic identities and will be discussed in more depth later.

Exploring and Experiencing Differences and Similarities: Part I

White children first need to explore and respect the range of differences and similarities among white people. The challenge here is to counter the message that any differences from the dominant norm are signs of

²
The dominant norms include a family with two, heterosexual parents, middle or upper class, Christian, urban or suburban, private home, able-bodied.

5
inferiority. To heighten children’s awareness of differences in classrooms in relatively homogeneous classrooms, we suggest that teachers begin by exploring the diversity that is in the classroom.

Preschool, kindergarten and primary age children can explore the range of their physical attributes - from hair color to fingerprints to height to freckles. Teachers can highlight the fact that we differ in our physical attributes and our perspectives but share many commonalities (e.g., hair, fingers, skin). These activities can incorporate simple math skills such as counting and graphing. Likewise discussions about children’s preferences for colors, snacks, games, books, music, activities, etc. provide opportunities to point out similarities and differences. Children experience first hand how they might agree on some things and disagree on others, and see that despite different opinions they can still be friends. Children’s descriptions of family activities and classroom visits of family members are opportunities to talk about how families do many similar things (e.g., prepare and eat meals), but in different ways. Teachers should note and address any discomforts with differences, such as when a child laughs at, or makes a negative comment about another child.

Exploring and Experiencing Differences and Similarities: Part II

White children also need to extend their understanding of differences and similarities beyond their immediate family, neighborhood and center/classroom. Three dynamics challenge achievement of this goal. One is the dominant culture assumption that everyone is or should be like white people. Second, the pervasiveness of inaccurate and stereotyped images and messages about people of color is a second key challenge. Third, many white children grow up isolated from information about other groups and develop assumptions that their way of life is both best and/or universal.

6

Exploring and Experiencing Differences and Similarities: Part III

Once children have had opportunities to explore differences and similarities among themselves, it is then time to introduce the idea that there are many other ways of life, languages, and traditions. When choosing materials and learning experiences to use with preschool and kindergarten children, the teacher should pay attention to the diversity that exists within their larger community, city, state, rather than from too far a field. Furthermore, materials and learning experiences should not present a simplistic tourist view of the world. Rather they should portray authentic connections to current people's lives and be woven regularly throughout the daily curriculum. As teachers seek to expand children's ideas of the many different ways people live their lives, they also need to emphasize what people from different racial and cultural groups have in common.

The message that we live in a diverse world can be conveyed with books, photographs, videos, regular visits to the classroom by individuals from different communities, songs, and art projects. The emphasis is on providing children with a wider range of tools, experiences and skills to enhance their daily lives and to build their empathy and comfort with differences. Many teachers have found story telling with "**persona dolls**" to be a very effective tool for exploring differences and similarities beyond the children's immediate experience and for nurturing empathy. These are the teachers' **dolls** to which she has given specific histories and families and then uses the doll to regularly tell stories about that particular doll's life. (See Whitney, 19 for detailed information about ways to use "**persona dolls**"). When talking about unfamiliar groups, teachers must be alert for children's assumptions of superiority and "rightness" in both word and behavior that reflect the dominance paradigm (Ausdale and Feagin). Examples might include children's assumptions (e.g., "Indians shoot bows and arrows at people" or "People with darker skin are dirty"), laughter at other languages, or fears of a classroom visitor because of her race. Teachers can gain information through careful listening during children's informal conversations (e.g. on the playground, at snack time, or during imaginative play). They can also use more direct methods by eliciting children's reactions to books, photographs, and recordings to learn how children view people who are 'racially,' ethnically or linguistically different from themselves. Based on children's reactions, teachers in turn can develop curricula to challenge children's limited and judgmental perspectives.

Taking Others' Perspectives, Understanding Fairness, and Resolving Conflicts

Learning to take others' perspectives is a critical skill for both interpersonal and inter-group relationships. A core challenge to white children is the

7

greater likelihood of growing up thinking that how they look at the world is how everyone looks at or *should* look at the world.

There are several dimensions of perspective taking: affective, visual, and cognitive. First, children need to learn how to empathize, to “read” and respond to others' emotions. This ability develops relatively early. Teachers can foster this development by encouraging children to care for each other both inside and outside the classroom (e.g., sending cards to sick friends). Second, children need to learn that not everyone literally sees the world in the same way. Many activities, such as puppet shows, require that children recognize different visual perspectives. Although they cannot be expected to grasp the significance of how cultural and economic contexts might influence their view of the world, the message that where you stand affects your perspective lays the groundwork for that later development. Third, children need to learn that not everyone knows the same thing. Most games (e.g., card games, hide and seek) work because not everyone has the same information. When children play these games, teachers can draw their attention to the fact that they are trying to figure out what their partner is thinking and that it is difficult, yet necessary, to understand others' thoughts.

Opportunities to learn about others' perspectives abound in an early childhood classrooms. Conflicts over the tricycles or playdough or learning to sit quietly while another child is talking in circle are all perspective-taking moments. Cooperative games, collaborative projects or talking about the perspectives of different characters in a story also draw children's attention to others' perspectives. For some children, especially those who have absorbed a sense of superiority, learning to take others' perspectives may be a particular challenge but also crucial if they are to function in any social context.

Children are very interested in what is fair, but often in a self-serving way. They are most likely to protest, “That's NOT fair!!!” when they do not get their own way. As they learn to take others' perspectives, they are able to understand fairness in a deeper and more equitable way. Creating a culture of multiple perspectives lays the foundation for extending the concept of fairness beyond their immediate group.

Seeing the World as a Shared Environment

Children need to understand that everyone has the right to a secure, comfortable and sustainable life and that all people share the same planet earth. To achieve this goal it is necessary to challenge the assumption that white people have the right to more than others. This message of

‘entitlement’ (Coles, 19) often comes with being a member of the group that has societal privilege.

A curriculum for this goal begins with nurturing preschoolers’ connection to and respect for our earth. Activities such as planting a garden, or indoor plants, caring for animals, recycling are already part of many early childhood programs. By kindergarten, teachers can also introduce images that expand children’s sense of connection with others, such as photographs of people living in and adapting to different bioregions and photographs of the earth taken from outer space. These images may enable children to appreciate both the amazing range of habitats and the fact that we all share the same planet. To extend their sense of responsibility to the planet we all call home, teachers can help children to identify local environmental problems and work to ameliorate them, either by actually doing the work themselves or by publicizing the problem.

These images and discussions can lead to information about the distribution of world resources. Teachers can extend children’s thinking about fairness into issues of societal inequities in concrete ways such as bringing in books and pictures that depict people’s lives and illustrate the vast differences in wealth (e.g., Sierra Club’s book, *Material World*). For five and six –year-olds, the activities might be built on discussing whether or not that it is fair. Older children could find out and discuss some of the figures that show the disparity in resources. They can also collect clothing, food and toys for families who have fewer resources. Teachers need to be sure that this activity is not a single and superficial act of “charity.” Rather, they can use it to encourage children talk and think about the fact that some people have more than others and to make the economic inequities of our society more immediate and real to the children.

Thinking Critically and Challenging Stereotypes and Misinformation

White children need to learn how to identify and challenge stereotypes, prejudice and discriminatory practices among themselves and in their larger communities. The challenge to achieving this goal comes from an unwritten dominant culture “rule” that white people will keep silent about racism. Many white adults can recall incidents in their childhood when they attempted to speak out against what they perceived as racial injustice and were silenced by significant adults in their lives.

Teachers can counteract this pressure by encouraging children to talk about their racial perceptions and questions. Children can learn how to recognize bias and stereotyped information in its many forms: books, pictures, television, video games, and in their own depictions and stories. White children may not readily see stereotypes because they have not felt the

impact of stereotyped images in their own lives as children of color usually have. In all-white classrooms, teachers may want to start by having children notice stereotyped images of gender differences since both boys and girls are usually present. For example, when reading a story that is biased, teachers can read it a second time but substitute boys for girls and

vice versa and see how the children react.

As children become more sophisticated about spotting and critiquing gender stereotypes, then teachers can move on to analyzing other images of people who are less familiar to the children by providing images and books that challenge prevailing stereotypes (e.g., disabled athletes, women scientists, African American ballerinas) and encourage children to express and discuss their reactions. Older children can learn about the prevalence of biased images by counting, graphing and comparing the number of times members of different group members are portrayed in books, catalogues, and magazines and the types of roles that they play.

Children can also learn to challenge their own and others' assumptions. For example, if the girls are saying, "no boys are allowed," teachers can encourage them to explain their reasons and then raise questions to highlight and critique their assumptions. Teachers can help children become more critical of deceptive or biased information (e.g., commercials for toys that have led to disappointment).

Story telling with "**Persona Dolls**" is one effective method for both developing empathy and critical thinking about prejudice and discrimination. (A full discussion of how to use this strategy appears in *Kids like us, 1999*). The teacher creates individual personalities and imagined lives for **dolls** chosen to add diversity to the program. Then, the teacher regularly relates stories with the **dolls** based on real issues of diversity and creates anti-bias theater involving issues and events in the classroom and in the children's community. These stories invite children to explore and invent solutions to challenges a particular doll faces. Young children quickly identify with and feel empathy for the **dolls**. The teacher also then helps the children transfer the issues in a particular doll's story to their own lives.

Learning about White Activists and Developing Identities of Resistance

The primary challenge to this goal is the belief that taking action about injustice is not "developmentally appropriate" to children. However, experiences has shown that when teachers engage children in activism projects based on real incidents or issues in their lives many children do "move from asking questions to solving problems, from indignation to understanding and action... they teach children to act responsibly, consider

10

people's feelings and perspectives and ideas, and notice how their actions might affect other people." (Pelo and Davidson, p.53. 2000). For more discussion of ways to do activism projects with young children see *That's not fair! A teacher's guide to activism with young children* (Pelo & Davidson, 2000).

By listening and observing what is happening in the classroom and in the children's larger community teachers gain important information for structuring activism projects. Anti-bias early childhood educators have created a range of activities. These have included collaboratively establishing and, when necessary, changing classroom rules; redesigning classroom spaces that are not working for all the children, writing a letter

and organizing a petition (when there was no response to their letter) to a calendar company because the pictures were only of white children, sending a letter to a Band-Aid company protesting the use of the term “flesh colored” on the box. (The company sent coupons for transparent Band-Aids.)

Painting over racist slurs found on a wall in the children’s playground and making “tickets” to put on cars of teachers who parked inappropriately in the school’s handicapped parking space, getting involved in local issues such as the closure of a local library or the threatened loss of a favorite meadow to “development”.

White children also need to become familiar with the history and heroes/heroines of white resistance to injustice. A great silence and little material for children exist on this topic. Both children and adults rarely learn anything about the history of white resistance to racism or other forms of injustice. Similarly, the rich histories of African American activists in addition to with Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks, as well as those of Asian American, Latino American, Native American and European American activists rarely make their way into early childhood literature.

Teachers can create their own books about white activists (happily this is much easier done now with both information and photographs available on the web) to fill in these gaps. They can also invite white activists to visit their classrooms and to talk about their childhoods and how they became involved in their current work so that children can see them as real people not as legendary figures. Children can build on these stories and visits by enacting dramas about social justice with puppets and short plays.

Conclusion

Many activities that are part of any good early childhood curriculum can be adapted to deeply engage white children in multicultural issues and goals. Almost any curriculum theme and activity can provide the space and impetus for children to explore and expand their understanding of similarities and

11

differences; their own and others’ identities and perspectives; interpersonal and inter-group collaboration and conflict; the earth as our shared home; biased assumptions and stereotypes; and their roles in creating a just and fair world. However, if we look closely at our classrooms and communities we can find meaningful ways to engage white children in multicultural anti-bias education.

Ultimately, the question of what to do when “all the kids are white” is not only a query about what to do with children in the classroom. Rather it is a long-term commitment to reflect on one’s life and circumstances and to reach beyond self-interest to develop a broader view of the world that embodies more connection with other groups and an acceptance of diminished privilege. It is not possible to be effective unless adults’ face their own identity issues and the life-long messages learned growing up in the United States. Teachers must explore their own cultural backgrounds honestly in order to see how this may influence teaching beliefs, styles, and interactions with children. They must uncover and eliminate previously unexamined fears, prejudices and misunderstandings, understand look

honestly and carefully at the societal structures of power and privilege and look honestly at the impact of these structures on themselves.

Teachers and parents must also face and overcome external challenges to doing work with children. Colleagues, parents and administrators may have conflicts and misgivings about the ultimate goals of anti-bias/multicultural education for white children. Issues may not arise as spontaneously as they might in more diverse classrooms. Likewise, adults may not have a sufficiently broad set of experiences, resources, and perspectives to encourage children to think more broadly. Finally, this work also requires a commitment to action -- to working with others both within one's group and cross-culturally -- to eliminate racism and to build more equitable communities and institutions.

It is vital that people wanting to find answers to the question "what do we do with white children?" connect with each other. We cannot do this work alone. We believe that whites, working with each other and with colleagues from many groups can challenge, diminish, and transform the assumptions of white superiority that underlie discriminatory attitudes and practices. Together, we can help children see themselves as members of a larger more inclusive world and capable of making changes.

References

- Aboud, F.E. (1988). *Children and prejudice*. New York: Blackwell.
Aptheker, H. (1993). *Anti-racism in U.S. history*. Westport. CT: Praeger.

12

- Barndt, J. (1991). *Dismantling racism: the continuing challenge to white America*. Minneapolis: Augsburg.
- Brodin, K. (1998). *How the Jews became white folks & what that says about race in America*. NJ: Rutgers University.
- Clark, K. (1955). *Prejudice and your child*. Boston: Beacon
- Coles, R. (1977). *Privileged ones: The well off and the rich in America*. Vol. V: Children of Crisis. Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press.
- Derman-Sparks, L. & the A.B.C. Task Force (1989). *Anti-bias curriculum: Tools for empowering young children*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Derman-Sparks, L. & Phillips, C. B. (1997). *Teaching/learning anti-racism: A developmental approach*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Gossett, T.F. (1963). *Race: The history of an idea in America*. NY: Schocken Books.
- Holmes, R & J. Stanfield. (1995). *How young children perceive race*. NY: Sage Publications.
- Howard, G.R. (1999). *We can't teach what we don't know*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Ignatiev, N. (1995). *How the Irish became white*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University
- Katz, L. (1998). *Fostering Children's Social Competence: The Teacher's Role*. Washington, DC: NAEYC
- Kivel, P. (2002). *Uprooting racism: How white people can work for racial justice*. (2

Edition). British Columbia, Canada: New Society Publishers
McIntosh, P. (1995). White privilege and male privilege: A personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in women's studies. In M.L. Anderson & P.H. Collins (Eds.), *Race, class, and gender: An anthology* (pp. 76-87). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
Menzel, P. (1994). *Material world: A global family portrait*. San Francisco: Sierra Club.

13

- Pelo and Davidson. (2000). *That's not fair! A teacher's guide to activism with young children*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf.
- Ramsey, P. G. (1987). Young Children's Thinking about Ethnic Differences in J. Phinney and M. J. Rotherman, (Eds.) *Ethnic Socialization of Children* (pp56-72). Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.
- Ramsey, P.G. (1991). Salience of race in young children growing up in an all white community. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 83, 28-34.
- Ramsey, P.G. (1995). Research in Review: Growing Up with the Contradictions of Race and Class. *Young Children*, 50(6), 18-22.
- Ramsey, P.G. (1998). *Teaching and learning in a diverse world: Multicultural education for young children* (2nd Edition). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Ramsey, P.G. & Myers, L. C. (1990). Young Children's Responses to Racial Differences: Relations Among Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioral Dimensions. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 11, 49-67.
- Ramsey, P.G. & Williams, L.R. (in press). *Multicultural education: A resource book*. New York: Garland Press.
- Tatum, B.D. (1992). Talking about race, learning about racism: The application of racial identity development theory in the classroom. *Harvard Educational Review*, 62 (1), 1-24.
- Tatum, B.D. (1997). *"Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?" and other conversations about race*. New York: Basic Books.
- Van Ausdale, D. & Feagin, J.R. (2001). *The first R: How children learn race and racism*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.