“Anti-bias/Multicultural Education with White Children.”

Louise Derman-Sparks & Patty Ramsey

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“What if all the kids are white?” has been 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 purposes of anti-bias/multicultural education for white children and, in particular, the misconception that ethnic and cultural diversity is only about people who are “different than” whites. Even when teachers believe in the value of anti-bias/multicultural education they wonder how to incorporate it meaningfully when their children have no apparent racial, ethnic, or cultural diversity. This article examines what white children need to develop the identity, attitudes and skills necessary for thriving in an increasingly diverse society and interconnected world.

For website: Historic background and children’s identity and attitude development research

Increased awareness that racism is a systemic, institutionalized force that advantages people defined as ‘white’ and disadvantages people defined as “not white,” opens up new avenues for defining the role of anti-bias/multicultural education for white children and adults. We now understand that it is not enough for white people to “accept” and “respect” people of color. Rather, whites need to undergo a profound shift from viewing the world through a lens of dominance to a commitment to equitably share power and resources. This key paradigm shift calls on educators and families to nurture white children's early identity and social-emotional development in new ways. Anti-bias-multicultural education

needs to incorporate a systemic perspective and to create strategies that are culturally relevant to the various contexts in which white children grow.

What Does 'Whiteness' Mean and How Does It Affect Our Society?

Before exploring the question of "how" to work with white children and families, we need to clarify what "whiteness" means. 'Race' is a socially constructed idea, located in economic, political and historic power relationships and resting on scientifically false assumptions of genetically determined physical and mental characteristics. Racism is an institutionalized system of power that is based on this socially constructed concept of race that determines which "racial" groups are advantaged economically, politically and culturally, and which groups are disadvantaged. It is maintained through institutionalized policies, structures, ideology and behaviors and through individual bigotry, prejudice and discrimination.

Throughout history and in many parts of the world, groups of people have found "racial" reasons to dominate and decimate other groups. The European exploitation, colonization and subjugation of people in the Americas, Asia, Africa and Australia, which began in the 1500s, was built on the ideals and institutionalization of white racial superiority and dominance. Thus racial ideology included both positive images of whiteness as well as negative images of the racial "others" (Feagin 2000). In the United States the effects of the European conquest of the Native People and parts of Mexico, the enslavement of Africans, and the racial bias in immigration policies are still shaping our lives. The ideology of 'whiteness" continues to hold great power over our lives (Kivel 2002).

However, this picture gets more complicated by ethnic and cultural factors. Against the background of the privileges of whiteness are an array

of significant variations in the histories, power and economic relationships among the different white ethnic groups in the United States. One of the great ironies in United States history is the cost of becoming "white" to many European "white-skinned" ethnic groups. To gain the privileges of racism, many non-English-speaking European ethnic groups gave up their languages and ethnic traditions by "melting" into the dominant Anglo culture and absorbing the prevalent racist beliefs (Brodkin 1998; Gossett 1963, Ignatiev 1995).

As the United States grew, ethnic differences also deeply influenced variations in social-economic class among whites, despite the fact that European Americans as a whole have fared better than people of color. For example, aristocratic and other upper-class settlers who came from England in the 17th and 18th centuries became the most privileged groups -- the 'Boston Brahmins', New York merchants and Southern plantation owners -- dominated the early cultural and political history of the United States and still hold sway in many institutions today. In contrast, poor Irish, Scottish, and English families (many of whom arrived at the same time as their wealthier neighbors) frequently came as prisoners or indentured servants and/or settled in isolated communities in the Appalachian Mountains. Many of their descendants became and, in some cases, still are targets of ridicule and discrimination (e.g., called hillbillies or rednecks). Although the rate of poverty is higher in communities of color, the majority of poor people are white. Moreover, although a myth persists that people needing/using welfare are all people of color, white people using welfare actually outnumber people of color.

Historical events left a legacy of systemic racial advantage for whites and disadvantage for people of color that to this day profoundly influences social relationships and life prospects of all Americans as well as people in most parts of the world. Many white people today, however, may see this

historical context as distant and far-fetched. On a personal level, most of us 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, white people continue to have unearned racial privilege (Barndt 1991, McIntosh 1995;,Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001) and people from other 'racial' groups live with under-served racial penalty (Howard 1999).

These economic disparities generate and are supported by a culture of white dominance and "internalized racial superiority" (Derman-Sparks & Phillips 1997, Kivel 2002, Tatum 1992). 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 deny or ignore the systemic inequities of racial discrimination that provide them with advantages in their individual life prospects and choices from birth. This assumption of superiority justifies the continued economic exploitation of people of color within the United States and in other countries and the cycle of inequity and white dominance continues.

On a positive side, alongside the themes and dynamics of white domination, opposing themes and dynamics were also set in motion. From early on, the promise of democracy and of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" underlay movements to extend human and civil rights to all those who were not yet receiving them. (e.g., women, poor people, people of color, people with disabilities, and gay and lesbian people). There is a long history of white involvement in anti-racism that predates the Civil War (Aptheker 1993) that rarely makes its way into mainstream history texts.

White Children's Identity and Attitudinal Development

To effectively counteract the pull towards and absorption of white superiority beliefs and behaviors, teachers need to understand how young white children develop their racial identity, awareness and attitudes. Based on the findings of many studies to date, we know that very young children notice racial distinctions, absorb racially related images and assumptions, and begin to learn and express racist ideologies (Aboud 1988, Ramsey 1995, Ramsey & Williams 2003, 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 "radicalized" society (Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001). By the preschool years, white children begin to learn the power codes or rules of racism (e.g., "white ways are right") and to develop internalized racial superiority (Ramsey 1987, 1990, 1991, Tatum 1997, Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001).

Paradoxically, whites are also hurt from childhood by the negative psychological impact of racism. Beliefs of white superiority adversely affect white children's social and emotional development and impair their ability to function effectively in a diverse world. Moreover, because the significant adults in their lives may mask their prejudiced feelings, children often absorb "do as I say, not as I do" double-messages about people of color (Clark 1955). For example, if the teachers and administrators are white, and the support and maintenance staffs are people of color, children learn about racial hierarchies even if the curriculum espouses explicit messages of respect and equality.

Research on children's racial awareness and attitudes contains many gaps and contradictions. However, a few themes have emerged fairly consistently. First, children are <u>not</u> color blind. Researchers have observed that infants as young as 6 months old react consistently to racial differences (Katz & Kofkin 1997). Second, young children <u>do</u> pay

attention to messages of prejudice and power differences. Initially infants may be wary of people who look different from their familiar caregivers. As they grow older, this fear is often fuelled by racial isolation and negative images of unfamiliar groups. Preschoolers begin using racial terms and beliefs to exclude and demean their classmates of color (e.g., a white child refuses to let her African American classmate hold a white doll because "I don't want an African taking care of her. I want an American. You're not an American, anybody can see that" (Van Ausdale and Feagin 2001, p. 86)). Interestingly, some white preschoolers express stereotypes but still play comfortably with cross-race classmates, especially if they are in an environment where teachers and family members support and model inter-racial friendships (Ramsey 1998).

As primary school-age children develop their abilities to be aware of others' perspectives, they potentially become more accepting of differences and able to see members of other groups as individuals (Aboud, 1988). However, this growing cognitive capacity does not automatically result in more open attitudes and behaviors. What children learn from their environment (e.g., community, media, and peers) plays a critical role--positively or negatively. Adolescents tend to form more own-race ties to strengthen their own identities and may use stereotypes and exclude other groups in order to consolidate and prove their in-group loyalties (Tatum, 1997). At the same time, we know that adolescents are also capable of experiencing strong feelings about justice and participate in actions for social change. Across all ages and in many settings, white children are more at-risk than children of color for developing cross-race biases and aversions. This discrepancy is not surprising because white children's in-group preferences are generally supported by the prevailing social attitudes of white superiority in families and communities and in media images.

In short, white children, even in racially isolated areas (Ramsey 1991) are aware of race and often develop stereotypes that influence their feelings and potentially their behaviors toward people of color. While these accumulated research findings may be upsetting, they also provide us with a starting place for change. We invite you to join with us in the much-needed conversation about how to "grow" white children who will strive for a society without racism and thrive in an anti-racist multicultural world.

For Journal: Strategies For Working with Children

Getting Started

To prepare to engage white children in anti-bias/multicultural explorations and activities, you need to learn about yourself and the children and their families and explore values and views through reflections and conversations. Specific ideas and actions include:

- Become an intentional and acute observer of children's ideas and images related to race and culture. When adults observe unobtrusively they hear children express many racial ideas and stereotypes among themselves (Van Ausdale and Feagin 2001). So. pay close attention to subtle actions, conversations, and dramatic play e.g., Do children laugh at pictures of people who look different from them? Avoid playing with dolls of color?. In addition, intentionally create opportunities for conversations to occur. Provide books and pictures and also use persona doll stories to encourage children to talk about differences and issues of prejudice and discrimination, using books, pictures and persona doll stories. See Whitney 1999 for detailed instructions

- Listen, really listen, to children and raise questions that encourage them explore their ideas and feelings about differences. Take note of misinformation and early signs of discomfort or prejudice related to any

group. At the same time, avoid ‘pouncing’ on every ‘pre-prejudiced’ or potentially racist remark. This reaction can drive children’s conversations underground or imbue them with the allure of ‘forbidden fruit.’ Instead see these comments as insights into children’s thinking, which, in turn, can help you to develop effective curriculum to challenge particular misconceptions.

- Write in a journal and talk with friends and colleagues to reflect on your own history and current circumstances and the messages about your own and other groups you learned growing up. Uncover and challenge previously unexamined fears, prejudices and misunderstandings; examine the impact of the societal structures of power and privilege on your identity and life choices.

- Build mutually supportive relationships among colleagues and families to open the way for honest conversations and collaborative partnerships to challenge the racism and inequities that frame all children’s lives. Listen openly to family members to learn about children’s experiences with different groups of people, as well as families’ attitudes and priorities for their children. Try to hear and respond to the fears that often underlie resistance to change. While these conversations can sometimes be difficult, they are important opportunities to share beliefs and to carefully and patiently examine and challenge those that are racist.

- In discussions with colleagues and family members, identify all the ways that whiteness is the invisible “norm” in your classroom and in the school (e.g., are all or most of the teachers white? Who is and is not depicted in stories, dolls, or posters? Are all children expected to conform to the European American norms of individual achievement and competitiveness?) Then work together to create a more diverse program.

- Think of your ‘self-work’ and conversations with families and colleagues as ongoing learning opportunities. Racism is a chronic condition that continuously influences personal and institutional reactions and decisions in persistent yet subtle ways. However, we can learn how to resist and participate in dismantling racism at both personal and institutional levels.

IDEAS FOR YOUR CLASSROOM

Addressing racial, ethnic and cultural diversity with white children in all or predominately white settings is a vital component of anti-bias/multicultural education work (e.g., Derman-Sparks and the ABC Task Force 1989; Ramsey, 2004) **.** However, it is not a substitute for, nor should it detract from, programs and curricula that support children and families of color. The learning themes we propose are extensions of the four anti-bias education goals (Derman-Sparks et al. 1989). These themes and related activities are not necessarily new to early childhood teachers; rather we highlight their role in fostering anti-bias identities and behaviors among white children. We encourage you to use the suggested activities to develop ones that meet the needs of the particular group of children and families with whom you work.

Develop authentic identities based on personal abilities and interests, family history and culture, rather than on white superiority.

Racism feeds on the idea that skin color and facial features are related to one’s value to society. In the case of white children, racism often leads to a sense of superiority and entitlement. An anti-bias approach can provide more authentic ways to build identity and self-worth.

- Support each child’s sense of self, ensuring that all children’s daily lives extended families, homes, neighborhoods are equally visible in classroom displays, materials and activities and that your interactions are responsive to different cultural styles and individual needs. In particular, be sure that

you do not convey the assumption that all children come from white middle- or upper-class Christian families, with two heterosexual and able-bodied parents, who live in a single-family home in suburban communities or affluent urban neighborhoods.

- Encourage children to appreciate their multiple identities e.g., daughter, sister, cousin, granddaughter, friend, Irish American and skills and interests e.g., paint, build, play ball and their capacity to care for others.

- Nurture children's sense of competence based on what they *do* and *contribute* to the group. Help children grow in their ability to support each other and see each others' contributions. Counteract the barrage of media commercials that equate possessions with personal value. Help children experience how relating to and caring for others is more satisfying than buying new toys.

- Encourage children and their families to regularly share stories about their lives: family history, household members, traditions, languages, work, recreation, and ways that they contribute to the community.

Know, respect and value the range of the diversity of physical and social attributes among white people.

The activities related to this theme are an initial step to diffusing children's tendencies to see people in different groups as polar opposites. The also challenge messages that equate differences with superiority and inferiority.

- Compare physical similarities and differences among children in the your program e.g. hair and eye colors, skin color variations, height variations and similarities and differences in children's preferences for

colors, snacks, games, books, music, and recreational activities. Document these by making books and charts.

- Talk about how every family in your group does similar ‘family’ things in different ways (e.g., prepare and eat meals, work inside and outside their home, enjoy bedtime stories and favorite music and songs, participate in recreational activities, while also living in a range of family structures).

- Read children’s books that depict a wide range of white people e.g., people of different sizes and shapes, with/without disabilities, who live in different circumstances e.g., urban, rural; working class, middle class, homeless; single-parent, two-parent, extended family households and work in different kinds of jobs e.g., manual, professional, artistic.

- Foster children’s awareness of the many ways to be a girl or boy, a woman or man both in your program and in the larger world. Support children’s exploration of a range of behaviors in the classroom.

- Expand children’s awareness of the many ways people work and the contributions each job makes to our lives. Equally honor all forms of work, including housework and raising children.

- Develop activities that support reciprocal play and interactions between typically developing children and their peers with disabilities. Read books that depict children and adults with disabilities as active, contributing individuals and invite people with disabilities to come and do activities with the children <u>not</u> just ones oriented to disabilities.

- As you do these activities and observe children in the classroom, note tensions or discomforts that may arise around differences e.g., when a child laughs at or makes a negative comment about another child. Help

children explore the source of their discomfort and see beyond their initial reactions and find ways to connect with a broader range of their classmates.

Build the capacity for caring, cooperative and equitable interactions with others.

Many white children are raised to value individual achievement and competition over community and cooperation. However, developing the capacity to value different ways of being in the world requires that children feel connected and responsible to others.

- Encourage children to empathize -- to ‘read’ others’ emotions and respond by caring for each other e.g., bringing a favorite toy to a crying toddler, helping classmates zip up jackets, sending cards to sick friends.

- Provide experiences that help children understand that people have different information and ideas. Document children’s dialogue during dramatic play e.g., different ideas about how to play specific roles and share these observations with the children. Use persona doll stories to highlight different reactions to commonly experienced situations (Whitney 1999).
- Set up small group collaborative projects that require children to pay attention to others’ perspectives, use their communicative skills, and coordinate ideas, materials, and actions. Support children who organize cooperative play. Read books depicting the value of working together.

- Encourage children to find ways to share resources rather than simply demand more. Set up situations that require children to share and negotiate the use of materials.

- Engage children in discussions and decisions about establishing and/or changing classroom rules and routines and use of space. For example, instead of placing teacher-determined limits on the number of children who can play in an area at one time, engage children in figuring out how to use the space together. These practices encourage children to think about everyone's needs, as well as their own.

Understand, appreciate, and respect differences and similarities beyond the immediate family, neighborhood and center/classroom and racial group

This theme builds on children's previous explorations of differences and similarities among themselves. The goal is to counteract inaccurate and stereotyped images of people of color and to challenge assumptions that everyone is or should be like white middle-class people.

- Explore the racial, ethnic and cultural commonalities and differences that exist within the children's larger community. Depending on children's ages and their experiences, your range can be anywhere from the immediate neighborhood to different regions of the world and everywhere in between. Incorporate learning about the current, daily, real lives of unfamiliar people as an ongoing part of your program, not as an add-on.

- Invite individuals from different racial/ethnic groups in your community to do activities with the children on a regular basis. On-going face-to-face contact is the best way to break down barriers, recognize similarities, and see differences as enriching rather than as uncomfortable or strange. Avoid one-time field trips or visits that may only reinforce children's stereotypes about different groups.

- Use story-telling e.g., persona doll stories to engage children in exploring differences and similarities beyond their immediate experiences in meaningful ways. Make sure the stories are authentic by getting help from people from that group.

- Be alert to children's behaviours and statements that reflect superiority or negative stereotypes about other groups (e.g., "Only white children can play here", "Muslims kill people."). When children express discomfort about differences (e.g., "That's a funny name!"), follow up with exploratory questions to help you gain a deeper understanding of their thoughts and feelings.

- When you notice children have a particular stereotype, provide materials and experiences to challenge it, and include helping children to identify what they have in common with people in the group under discussion.

Commit to the ideal that all people have the right to a secure, healthy, comfortable and sustainable life and that everyone must equitably share the resources of the earth and collaboratively care for them.

Many white children in the United States grow up with a message of "entitlement" -- that individuals have the right to consume as many resources as they can, regardless of the impact on other people or on the natural environment. Challenging these assumptions involves learning about and respecting the needs of others and the natural environment.

- Encourage children to care for and share classroom resources and to notice and challenge wasteful practices. Create a classroom culture that counteracts our culture's material competitiveness (e.g. discourage

parents from having ever fancier birthday parties; redirect children who are boasting about new purchases or expensive vacations).

- Nurture young children's connection to and respect for the earth by involving them in activities such as planting a garden, caring for classroom plants and animals, recycling materials and trash, identifying and working on local environmental problems and projects (e.g., picking up litter, working in a neighborhood garden, meeting with local environmental activists, writing letters to the local newspaper about a particular environmental problem).

- Foster older children's sense of connection with others by exploring how people from a range of racial/ethnic backgrounds meet similar needs in different ways, depending on the climate and resources where they live. To draw attention to the unequal distribution of world resources, share books and pictures that depict people's lives and illustrate the vast differences in wealth including poor white people. Make sure the materials you use accurately and respectfully depict people's lives.

- Organize and participate in toy and clothing exchanges at your school including among wealthier families in order to encourage children to both share and use resources wisely, rather than always consuming new ones. You might want to participate in community efforts to provide material goods to people who are poor (e.g., food and clothing drives), but this project must be done in the context of a long-term relationship with an organization and group of people so that it is not simply a one time charitable act that might enhance rather than challenge a sense of superiority and entitlement.

Learn to identify and challenge stereotypes, prejudice, and discriminatory practices among themselves and in the immediate environment

*W*e can challenge the unwritten 'rule' that white people should keep silent about racism by helping children as well as ourselves to become more critically aware of the assumptions they are learning and hearing from people around them.

- First, help children recognize biased and stereotyped information in its many forms: books, pictures, television, video games, and in their own depictions and stories. Start by having children notice stereotyped images that directly affect them, (e.g., gender, abilities/disabilities, different occupations).

- Then, foster children's critical awareness of stereotypes about various groups of color. Provide images and books that challenge stereotypes that children have expressed and/or are common in their communities. Encourage children to identify the differences between accurate and inaccurate information.

- **Create persona doll stories, in which a doll experiences discrimination in a way that is meaningful to the children in your group , such as peer exclusion, lack of stories about people who look like the doll. As you tell the story, involve children in exploring and empathizing with what it feels like to be the target of discrimination. Then, ask children to help you figure out what they would do to stop the discrimination described in the story.**

- **Encourage children to take an active role in criticizing deceptive or biased information. Engage them in critiquing books and other learning materials and suggesting ways to make them fairer by eliminating stereotypical images and fixing omissions, such as having**

girls as the main, active characters, more stories about working class people. Invite children to dictate or write letters to authors and educational supply companies about what they like and do not like in their stories and toys and ways to make the materials more inclusive of many kinds of diversity.

Build identities that embody anti-bias ideals and possibilities and acquire skills and confidence to work together for social justice in their own classrooms and communities and in the larger society.

Experience has shown that teachers can effectively engage children as young as four-years-old in meaningful activism projects if these emerge from real incidents or issues in their lives; are simple and direct; have a clear, tangible focus; and are about fostering children's dispositions to be change-makers (Pelo and Davidson 2000).

- Listen to and observe what is happening in your classroom and community to gather ideas for possible projects. Then, raise these with the children and provide opportunities for them to learn more, and explore their ideas and feelings about what should be done. For example, an action project began in one child care center when, at circle time, a child pointed out that a new calendar wasn't fair because all the pictures were of white children. Other activism issues have included the need to make the center more accessible for people in wheel chairs; cleaning up racial slurs that had been written on the walls of a neighborhood playground; responding to the closing of a branch of the library located in a poor neighborhood.

- Assess children's interest and the possibilities for action that are appropriate to their ages and skills. Invite community activists involved in these issues to come talk to your class. Then, work together to design

actions that fit children's interests and skills – ones that are safe and workable from your perspective. For example, children and teachers have written letters, organized petitions when there was no response to the letter to the calendar company, painted over racist slurs, talked to the school director about wheel chair accessibility, written letters to the local newspaper about how the closure of library branch was affecting their lives.

- Invite local activists from a wide range of backgrounds including family members of the children and the staff to talk about how they became involved in their current work to help children see activists as real people. Be sure that the message is not about 'rescuing' others but rather about how people working together within their own communities or as allies with people in other communities have the power to make things better.

- Familiarize kindergarten and school-age children with the history of resistance to injustice in our country and its heroes and sheros of all backgrounds. Include white anti-racism activists who rarely make their way into children's literature, (e.g., Anne Braden, Howard Zinn, Virginia Foster Durr). Emphasize the collective nature of activism and the importance of ordinary people's involvement as well as the role of leaders. You may have to do your own research in books and the Internet to fill in the many gaps in the material that is published for children. Advocate that publishers expand the available children's literature about social justice activists including white anti-racists.

If we are to have any hope of creating a more equitable and just world, whites must find the courage to act in the many settings where they live and work. No one can do this work alone. It requires a commitment to action and solidarity with other whites and with people of color to eliminate racism and all forms of institutionalized advantages and

disadvantages and to build more equitable communities and institutions. We believe that whites have much to gain from such changes because more equitably sharing resources nurtures the humanity of all. Together, we can encourage children and adults including ourselves to participate as change agents in a larger and more inclusive world.

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