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The Impact of Race and White Fragility on Our Lives as Educators

by Jamie Bonczyk and Hannah Riddle de Rojas

In September of 2018, the National Association for the Education of Young Children released the first public draft of a document entitled “Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators.” The document calls upon everyone in the field to confront their personal biases in the interest of supporting all children and families. Self-awareness is essential for behavioral and institutional change.

Data from the Build Initiative states that 45 percent of young children in the United States are children of color (birth through age 4). The diversity of young children continues

to grow and our current education systems continue to perpetuate an unequal distribution of privileges, resources and power. These differences between white families and families of color widen the opportunity gap and further disparity at an increasingly alarming rate.

As experienced leaders, we believe it is imperative that we respond to this call to action and confront our personal biases—by explicitly calling attention to the topic of whiteness. In this article, we address three fundamental questions that have influenced our personal and professional development:

- How can white (caucasian) early childhood educators build self-awareness of what it means to be white in a racially diverse society?
- How can we manage our capacity for discomfort to confront what it means to be white?
- How can early childhood educators become closer allies, collaborators and agents for change?

As white educators we have an ethical obligation to transform educational systems. To do this we must collaboratively look inward, build self-awareness and identify the origins of our beliefs and values. In “Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves” by Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olson-Edwards, educators are asked the following questions:

- When did you first begin to think about yourself as having a racial identity? What name did you put on it?
- How did you first feel about your racial identity?
- What is a memory you have of realizing that some people receive hurtful treatment because of their racial identity?



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Development system. For self care, Bonczyk is a student and performer of improvised theater and storytelling. She primarily uses these skills to parent her 5 1/2-year-old daughter, Sylvie.



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White Racial Frame: *The frame whites have used for centuries to justify the oppression of non-whites. Seen comprehensively, all the mental images, prejudiced attitudes, stereotypes, sincere fictions, emotions, racist explanations, and rationalizations that link to systemic racism make up a white racial frame.*

The White Racial Frame is embedded deeply in the dominant U.S. culture and all institutions; it sees whites as superior and people of color as inferior. (Feagin, Joe, (2014). 3rd Ed. Racist America, p. 95)

Structural Racism: *The normalization and legitimization of an array of dynamics—historical, cultural, institutional and interpersonal—that routinely advantage whites while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of color. Structural racism encompasses the entire system of white domination, diffused and infused in all aspects of society including its history, culture, politics, economics and entire social fabric. Structural racism is more difficult to locate in a particular institution because it involves the reinforcing effects of multiple institutions and cultural norms, past and present, continually reproducing old and producing new forms of racism. Structural racism is the most profound and pervasive form of racism—all other forms of racism emerge from structural racism.*

<https://www.racialequitytools.org/glossary#structural-racism>

For guided reflection check out these powerful tools:

Project Implicit provides a self-assessment in a “virtual laboratory” with the goal to educate the public about hidden biases.

<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>

“The Me And White Supremacy Workbook” is a personal anti-racism tool for people holding white privilege to begin to examine and dismantle their complicity in an oppressive system.

www.meandwhitesupremacybook.com

In the early stages of building awareness about race it can be enticing to find other culprits to blame for the results of racism. Our identities are complex and often can be competing sources of privilege and prejudice. In our experience, as girls from low-income divorced families, we both found it was tempting to focus on sexism and classism rather than confront the more salient factor of our culture: racism, which filters all disparities through its toxicity.

It was not until we were in college that we were encouraged to question systems of privilege and oppression. It was a humbling experience for both of us to realize that by the very nature of being white we had privileges that were not

afforded to many of our friends and colleagues, despite sharing other elements of our identities.

Consistent self-reflection and analysis are key for starting and continuing social justice work. Everyone is encouraged to reflect on their experiences and pay attention to their thoughts. There are a variety of reflection tools and resources available, similar to the questions above, which encourage critical thinking about the experiences we have in our lives, both professional and personal. In addition, we can personally commit to engaging in lifelong self-reflective practices and find “accountability partners” to monitor disrupting personal and societal narratives that color our perspective.

NAEYC went on to ask how our programs and communities can identify ways that systems of privilege and oppression are manifesting in early childhood programs. In our experience, one of the most salient systems of privilege and oppression is that of whiteness.

We believe it is the responsibility of white people to help other white people understand and act on topics of racial justice. As such, this article takes an informative tone, incorporating our stories as white women, which we hope will resonate with our white peers and inspire further progress and discussion.

In our own childhoods, we were not challenged to see whiteness for what it is, and this appears to be true for the majority of white people living in the United States. The process of learning about whiteness and its consequences was uncomfortable and continues to be so on occasion. That said, it is imperative to consistently embrace discomfort and create space for the host of potentially unpleasant emotions that accompany work in social justice. Recognizing and addressing our own discomfort can help us broaden our perspective, increase compassion and motivate us to become allies for change.

White Fragility: *The state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. Racial stress results from an interruption to what is racially familiar. White fragility makes it very difficult to discuss racism and perpetuates White Supremacy (DiAngelo, 2018).*

White fragility finds its support in and is a function of white privilege. Fragility and privilege result in responses that function to restore what is lost when whites are challenged about racism.

Building our capacity for discomfort means cultivating openness to new experiences and knowledge that challenges and/or changes our beliefs and behaviors. It also means learning to recognize the tone and content of our thoughts and cultivating a sense of curiosity instead of judgement.

Questions to facilitate this process:

- What am I feeling? What might be causing this response?
- What life experiences are coloring my perception?
- What is true? What story might I be creating about these events?

*You are growing into consciousness,
and my wish for you is that you feel
no need to constrict yourself
to make other people comfortable.*

Ta-Nehisi Coates

One of the most common impediments to confronting whiteness is the impact of white fragility. White fragility is the defense response triggered when racial topics are discussed and tension ensues. In our practice we have experienced and seen how white fragility impedes progress. Common phrases that we have heard multiple times illustrate this concept.

White fragility sounds like:

- “Just because I’m white doesn’t mean that I’ve had an easy life. I’ve worked hard to be where I am.”
- “Anyone can be successful in America, you just have to work hard.”
- “I’m colorblind, I don’t see race.”

Perhaps you can think of times that you have used these phrases. We know that we can. Part of our journey as agents for change is to dissect these statements and understand how they serve as defense mechanisms—allowing us to look past the real issues and avoid addressing race. When we discuss issues of race we are not talking about how hard people work or what they have accomplished, we are talking about the ways in which people’s skin color impacts their lives.

Barack Obama once said, “Change will not come if we wait for some other person, or if we wait for some other time. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.” As early childhood professionals, it is important that we be aware of how our thoughts, our habits and our actions/inactions impact the quality of education for the children entrusted to us. Part of this awareness is acknowledging our power as educators and recognizing how our everyday actions and words either further the status quo or offer opportunities for change—with our colleagues and children alike.

A book that provided many concrete ideas on how to accomplish this is “Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work For Racial Justice.”

Important guidelines include:

- Assume racism is everywhere, every day.
- Notice who is the center of attention and who is the center of power.
- Notice how racism is denied, minimized, and justified.
- Understand and learn from the history of whiteness and racism.
- Support the leadership of people of color.

- Learn something about the history of white people who have worked for racial justice.
- Don’t do it alone. You will not end racism by yourself.
- Talk with your children and other young people about racism.

Ally: *Someone who makes the commitment and effort to recognize their privilege (based on gender, class, race, sexual identity, etc.) and work in solidarity with oppressed groups in the struggle for justice. Allies understand that it is in their own interest to end all forms of oppression, even those from which they may benefit in concrete ways.*

Allies commit to reducing their own complicity or collusion in oppression of those groups and invest in strengthening their own knowledge and awareness of oppression.

<https://www.racialequitytools.org/glossary#ally>

These changes will not happen overnight. They require diligent and thoughtful attention as individuals, communities, and within institutions. “Relationship moves at the speed of trust, social change moves at the speed of relationship.” David Brooks



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Books, podcasts and films that have helped us raise our awareness and create topics of conversation:

Zinn Education Project (<https://www.zinnedproject.org/>) We believe that through taking a more engaging and more honest look at the past, we can help equip students—and all of us—with the analytical tools to make sense of and improve the world today. Our website offers free, downloadable lessons and articles organized by theme, time period, and grade level.

Teaching Tolerance (<https://www.tolerance.org/>) Our program emphasizes social justice and anti-bias. The anti-bias approach encourages children and young people to challenge prejudice and learn how to be agents of change in their own lives. Our social justice standards show how anti-bias education works through the four domains of identity, diversity, justice and action.

MPR News (https://www.mprnews.org/story/2019/05/09/talking_about_racism) Dr. Anne Hallward: How to talk about race and racism

Seeing White (<http://www.sceneonradio.org/seeing-white/>) A podcast from Scene on Radio from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, which unpacks where the notion of “whiteness” came from? What does it mean? And what is whiteness for?

In My Skin (<https://www.racepride.pitt.edu/teachers-corner/>) A podcast speaker series from the office of child development at the University of Pittsburg that investigates positive racial identity development in early education.

25 Mini-Films for Exploring Race, Bias and Identity With Students (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/15/learning/lesson-plans/25-mini-films-for-exploring-race-bias-and-identity-with-students.html>) These films come from four different series published on www.nytimes.com from 2015 to 2017.

We have connected with people attempting to grow out of racism in the following places:

The mission of the **Diversity and Equity Education for Adults Interest Forum** is to provide a place where people can come together for mutual education, self-reflection, networking and strategic planning for both our individual and our collective work. (<https://www.facebook.com/earlyedequity/>)

White Privilege Conference is a conference designed to examine issues of privilege beyond skin color. WPC is open to everyone and invites diverse perspectives to provide a comprehensive look at issues of privilege including: race, gender, sexuality, class, disability, etc. (<https://www.whiteprivilegeconference.com/>)