
'I'm Not White': anti-racist teacher education for white early childhood educators

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ABSTRACT Conceptualising and implementing early childhood teacher education for racial and cultural diversity is a complex task that involves learning about social stratification and race, acknowledging the privileges associated with whiteness, and finding ways to create positive racial teaching identities. This article discusses three ways that teacher educators might prepare white early childhood education students for anti-racist work in their classrooms.

Introduction

Two years ago, in one of my teacher education classes on racism in Canadian schools, I decided to place my students into racially segregated discussion groups. I wanted to know if their conversations about experiences of racism would change if they had the opportunity to talk within racial groups rather than across them. If their conversations were indeed different, we could analyse why and begin a discussion of the challenge racially diverse classrooms present in terms of students' sense of safety, comfort and belonging.

As it turned out, watching my students divide themselves into segregated racial groups was even more interesting than the ensuing discussion. One white woman came up to the front of the room where I was standing and declared, 'I'm not white, I'm Jewish. I don't want to sit with white people'. Another white student told me that she was confused, and didn't know whom to sit with. One of the white men started calling out, 'All Italians, over here, we'll sit over here'. This provoked the white student who was confused to call out, 'Any Celtics here? Anyone with Celtic ancestry?' The four black women students in the class immediately found each other and began working on the discussion assignment. The male student with both black and white heritages stood at the side of the room for a long time, watching the other students separate themselves. He finally made a choice about which group to join when

a darker-skinned white man with Greek ancestry asked him to sit with him. Two other white Jewish women joined the two men. Like the first Jewish woman, these two women did not see themselves as white. The last student to join this mixed group was a white woman who had left the classroom to go to the bathroom because the activity had made her so angry. Upon returning, she saw that a mixed group of students had formed and immediately joined that group. We had some educators from Japan visiting our classroom that day and I had suggested that each of them join one group and participate in the discussion. When the Japanese professor sitting with the mixed group asked the last white woman why she was joining the group when she should be placing herself in a white group, the young woman became extremely angry. Holding up a piece of white paper from her loose-leaf binder, she told the Japanese professor, 'I'm not white. See. This paper is white. Look at my skin. It's not white like this paper. I am not white'.

When we came back as a whole group to debrief what had happened in the small groups, many of the white students started describing how difficult it was for them to even form a white group. No one had ever asked them to place themselves in a group on the basis of whiteness. No one had ever asked them to name themselves as white. Upon hearing this, one of the black students told us that she was amazed that the white students did not know where to place themselves. She told us that although she was from Jamaica, she did not go looking for other students from Jamaica. She looked for other black students. Being seen as black was as familiar to her as being seen as white was unfamiliar to the white students.

Most white teachers have not been taught to see themselves as white. Nor have we been taught to think of whiteness as being important to our work in racially diverse classrooms. In fact, we have been taught the opposite. We have been taught that colour-blindness – not seeing colour or racial difference at all – is the best way to work in a racially diverse classroom. Many of my white students tell me, 'I don't see colour in my classroom, I see people'. 'There's only one race in my classroom, the human race'. In holding up this colour-blind perspective, my students believe that they are not participating in racism if they ignore colour.

This article is about the need for early childhood teacher educators to help their white students learn to see whiteness. It argues that conceptualising and implementing early childhood teacher education for racial and cultural diversity is a complex task. It is a task that involves more than celebrating 'heroes and holidays' (Lee et al, 1999). It is a task that involves more than replacing negative attitudes about race with positive attitudes and acquiring a knowledge base about race and various racial groups (Sleeter, 1999 [1996]). It is a task that involves:

- teaching white early childhood educators about social stratification and race (Sleeter, 1999);
- providing them with opportunities to learn about and acknowledge the advantages or privileges associated with whiteness and the ways that these

privileges implicate them in the practice of racism in their communities (McIntosh, 1999; Olson, 1999); and

- helping them find ways to create positive racial identities as white early childhood educators (Lawrence & Tatum, 1999).

Racism, Race and Whiteness

Before moving on to a discussion of how teacher educators might prepare white early childhood education students for anti-racist work, I want briefly to discuss how I understand the concepts of racism, race and whiteness. Following anti-racist educator Enid Lee, I understand racism as ‘any act or idea which limits, denies or grants opportunities, services, resources, rights or respect to a person on the basis of skin colour’ (Lee, 1993, p. 103). This definition is particularly helpful for discussion of racism and anti-racism in early childhood education. Everyday life in day care centres and nursery schools is very much about opportunities, services, resources, rights and respect.

Writers and theorists have written about race in a variety of ways. Definitions of race have emerged from both biological and social construction theory (e.g. Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; Fine et al, 1997). Once again, I draw from Enid Lee’s work or writing about race. Lee (1985) works with social construction theory and defines race as:

A social category used to classify humankind according to common ancestry or descent and reliant upon differentiation by general physical characteristics such as colour of skin and eyes, hair type, stature, and facial features. (p. 12)

Race has also been examined in terms of economics and advantage and disadvantage, a perspective that will taken up in this article through the work of Sleeter (1999) and McIntosh (1999).

Critical race theorists Richard Delgado & Jean Stefancic (1997) write that race, to a large extent, seems to be relational. Whiteness, acknowledged or not, has been a norm against which other races are judged (p. 1). This idea of whiteness being a norm for judging others can be related to Lee’s (1985) definition of racism: it is an idea that has led to the granting of opportunities and resources to whites and at the same time it has limited or denied them to non-whites. Working with these understandings of racism, race and whiteness, I now explore three ways that teacher educators might prepare white early childhood education students for anti-racist work in their classrooms.

Learning about Social Stratification and Race

In an article about her own experiences as a white anti-racist teacher educator in the USA, Sleeter (1999) tells us that because white teachers are members of the dominant racial group, most of them have never been victims of racism. Nor have they experienced racial minority communities in the same way

Americans of colour have. Sleeter (1999) quotes sociologist David Wellman, who writes:

Given the racial and class organisation of American society there is only so much people can 'see'. The positions they occupy in these structures limit the range of their thinking. The situation places borders on their imaginations and restricts the possibilities of their vision. (p. 36)

Drawing on their own experience to understand inequality, then, white teachers usually believe that people rise or fall by their merit or effort. They assume the opportunity structure works the same for all Americans (Sleeter, 1999).

To support her argument, Sleeter refers to a set of interviews she conducted with 23 teachers about their parents' occupations. Four of the teachers' fathers had held jobs that normally required college education, two had owned small businesses, and the fathers of the other 17 had worked as labourers. While some of the teachers had experienced the stigma of being poor, they had been able to raise their own social class standing by earning college degrees and becoming teachers. In their own lives, education had served them as an effective vehicle of upward mobility. Interestingly, several of the teachers in Sleeter's study also talked about their European ethnic backgrounds (or those of their spouses). These teachers' parents or grandparents had come to the USA very poor and had worked hard, and gradually, the family had moved up the social ladder. These life experiences taught the white teachers that the social system was open to those who were willing to work hard regardless of ethnicity. In holding this view, the teachers equated white ethnicity to race and ignored the importance of skin colour in perpetuating racial discrimination. Sleeter worked to challenge white teachers' views of equal opportunity by helping them understand that beliefs of equal opportunity – while often valid for whites – were not necessarily valid for people of colour. This allowed her to talk about institutional racism and the importance of visible racial differences among people when discussing access to opportunities.

Institutions, writes Enid Lee (1985), have great power to reward and penalise. They reward by providing career opportunities for some people and foreclosing them to others. They also reward by the way social goods are distributed – by deciding who receives training and skills, medical care, formal education, political influence, moral support and self-respect, productive employment, fair treatment by the law, decent housing, self-confidence, and the promise of a secure future for self and children (p. 12). Thinking and talking about the way social goods might be unequally distributed in early childhood (and other) educational settings is a complex task. Autobiographies, memoirs, and reflections on teaching and learning by white teachers are key resources for this work.

For example, at the centre of Sleeter's work was a reading of an American autobiography called *The Education of a WASP* (Stalvey, 1988). The

book focuses on institutional racism and tells the story of how a white, middle-class Protestant woman relearns the ways in which race works for African-Americans. Sleeter found the book provoked a strong emotional reaction from most of the white readers in her classroom and provided them with a very different template for thinking about race than their European ethnic experience did (for a fuller description of this work see Sleeter, 1999).

Thinking back to the white Jewish students in my classroom who did not see themselves as white for the purposes of a segregated discussion on experiences of racism, I believe that they were thinking of incidents of discrimination that they had experienced as Jews. This is what happened when I was first asked to acknowledge my whiteness in an anti-racist workshop. In remembering personal experiences of anti-Semitism, I likened them to experiences of racism. Like my students, I thought that I should be placed in a non-white group for a discussion on racism because of my experiences of anti-Semitism. This is another template for thinking about race. However, while my white Jewish students and I had experienced discrimination on the basis of our ethnicity, culture or religion, we did not experience discrimination on the basis of race. Our white racial identities had provided us with access to opportunities that people of colour do not always have.

In an essay on blacks, Jews and gender, Letty Cottin Pogrebin (1991) talks about her experience in a black and Jewish women's group that discussed anything that related to race and gender. Each meeting focused on a particular subject, for example, how it felt to grow up black or Jewish or how group members dealt with the sexism that was prevalent in their own communities. At one of the sessions, a Jewish woman arrived complaining that a black cab driver had called her a 'kike' when he thought her tip was inadequate. A black woman responded by saying that usually she could not get a cab to pick her up at all. Discussing such an exchange can help teachers tease out the ways individual and institutional experiences of racism differ from and are similar to other forms of discrimination, like anti-Semitism. It provides white teachers with a different template for thinking about institutional racism.

Kindergarten teacher Rita Tenorio (1994) has written an essay that focuses on the work of early childhood educators. Tenorio writes that contrary to what adults often believe, young children are not colour blind. Instead, they have unstated but sophisticated understandings of issues of race and power. In her essay, Tenorio tells and reflects on the following story of Angela and Matt:

When Angela came to talk to me, she was to tears. With a sympathetic 'witness' on each side, she said, 'Matt called me a name I don't like it.'

Matt was summoned for a quiet conference. 'What did he call you?' I asked Angela. 'Browski,' she said. 'He's making fun of me.' Matt came to his own defense. 'Well, I was just teasing,' he said. 'I wasn't talking about her color or anything.'

Unfortunately, blond, blue-eyed Matt was talking about Angela's skin color. When he didn't get his way with the puzzle they were sharing, he used this seemingly innocent word as a put-down. He knew he'd get a reaction from Angela and counted on the power of his light skin to win the argument. He hadn't counted on Angela speaking out ...

... In this instance I encouraged Angela to tell Matt why she was angry. I also reminded Matt of our classroom rules and our prohibition against name-calling and put-downs. Matt apologised, both seemed satisfied, and they went back to their puzzle. (p. 24)

Tenorio's description and reflection on this incident (she asks all kinds of important questions, such as, would Matt react differently the next time he wanted his way, had Angela become more assertive in responding to insults, what should be my next step?) can open up a dialogue about how racism manifests itself in early childhood educational settings. It can also open up a discussion on how educators might intervene in racist incidents to ensure that children of colour in their care have access to such social goods as moral support, confidence and self-respect.

Acknowledging White Privilege

Unlike the black woman in Pogrebin's (1991) discussion group, I have never had trouble getting an available cab driver to pick me up. It is one of the unearned 'privileges' I have been granted because of my white racial identity (McIntosh, 1999; Olson, 1999). There are many others. In her now 'classic' article on white privilege, anti-racist educator Peggy McIntosh (1999) lists 26 privileges that are attached to her white racial identity. They include (1) being able to rent or purchase housing in an area which she can afford and in which she would want to live; (2) being able to turn on the television or go to the front page of the newspaper and see people of her race widely represented; (3) being able to swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty or the illiteracy of her race; (4) being able to ask for 'the person in charge' and find herself facing a person of her own race; and (5) being sure that if she needs legal or medical help, her race will not work against her. One of the important implications of this naming of white privilege is that it asks white teachers to recognise that racism is not only something that puts other people at a disadvantage. It is something that puts our white students and us at an advantage. McIntosh (1999) describes white privilege as an:

invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks. (p. 79)

Learning about white privilege makes white teachers newly accountable. Having heard it described, we must ask what will we do to lessen or end it? Even more powerful than reading about white privilege is describing it ourselves. Lee et al (1999) suggest that for one week, teachers keep a diary of the ways whites are privileged in their own school and community settings and then share it with colleagues. Drawing from the essay written by Rita Tenorio, here is a small list of the way white children may be privileged in day care and nursery schools:

- White children are not told by their classmates, ‘You can’t be the queen; there are no black queens’.
- White children are not told that they do not exist because cowboys killed all the Indians.
- White children who speak English as a first language do not have to worry that one of their classmates will not want to sit next to them because they ‘talk funny’.
- White children are not told that they are ‘too white’ and that their classmates are glad they are darker than them because being darker is better.

Because our own experiences of schooling have not given white teachers any training in seeing ourselves as unfairly advantaged, such an exercise can be painful. In a reflective assignment about powerful moments in our equity in education course last semester, one of my white students wrote this:

Our work around white privilege and institutional racism was the hardest part of the course for me because it made me question my life in new ways ... There were several phrases and ideas in [McIntosh’s] article that resonated with me. First, the part where McIntosh says that ‘whiteness protected me’ from many of the distresses that people of colour face every day. For me, this meant that the things I had achieved were all scarred because they were not wholly earned on merit or ability, but rather in part because of the colour of my skin. This was a difficult realisation for me because I have always been proud of the things I have achieved and consider myself lucky for having been able to achieve them. I now know that this is the essence of white privilege. To be white was to be one of the lucky ones.

Although acknowledging white privilege can be painful because it means giving up the myth of meritocracy, it is a key component of anti-racist education. As McIntosh (1999) says, it is the silences and denials surrounding privilege that keep thinking about equality or equity incomplete. Unearned advantage and conferred dominance are protected when they are taboo subjects.

Creating Positive Identities as White Teachers

If white teachers are to respond to our learning about white privilege in a constructive way, teacher educators need information about white anti-racist educators and activists who have found ways of creating positive – rather than

guilty, angry, or sad – white identities (Lawrence & Tatum, 1999). Such educators, who have reached the ‘autonomy’ status in their own white racial identity development (Helms, 1990, 1995), can show us what it means to live out a commitment to anti-racist activity. They can also show us how to engage in ongoing self-examination and how we might increase our interpersonal effectiveness in multiracial settings.

In her model of white racial identity development, Janet Helms (1990, 1995) describes six identity statuses (formerly called stages) that characterise a white individual’s pattern of responding to racial situations in his or her environment. The six statuses are Contact, Disintegration, Reintegration, Pseudoindependence, Immersion/Emersion, and Autonomy. Individuals may operate from more than one status at a time, and predominance of any one status may vary with particular situations. While I write about the autonomy status here, as Lawrence & Tatum (1999) point out, an understanding of all six identity statuses is extremely helpful in developing effective anti-racist teacher education programming for white teachers. In their teacher education work, Lawrence & Tatum (1999) reported that white teachers were able to deal with the uncomfortable feelings associated with learning about white privilege when they began to challenge the racism they witnessed in their lives. To further facilitate the teachers’ work in this direction, Lawrence & Tatum required the class members to design an ‘action plan’ to address racism within their own spheres of influence. Returning to the first item on the list of the ways white children may be privileged in day care and nursery schools, an action plan for early childhood educators might be look like this. Once again, I draw from Rita Tenorio’s (1994) work.

- I need to tell the white child who tells her classmate, ‘there are no black queens’ that her remark is incorrect and that she has insulted her friend. Next, I need to help the child see that the real issue is that she herself wanted to wear the rhinestone crown and sequin dress.
- Beyond this momentary work, I need to find out about and talk about the queens through African history in my classroom.
- Possible materials are *Mufaro’s Beautiful Daughters* by John Steptoe (1987) and *Ashanti to Zulu* by Margaret Musgrove (1976).

In order to develop robust action plans to challenge racism and privilege in their classrooms, early childhood education students need access to a range of anti-racist education resources. In addition to the resources already mentioned, Louise Derman-Sparks and the ABC Task Force’s (1989) work on an anti-bias curriculum is invaluable.

This article has talked about the importance of teaching about whiteness and white privilege in early childhood teacher education programmes. It has also discussed several readings, resources and activities that can be used for interrogating whiteness and challenging racism in early childhood teacher education. As mentioned earlier, such interrogation can be difficult for white teachers and teacher educators. In reflecting about our own work, Don

(pseudonym), the high school teacher who wrote about white privilege earlier, revealed that there were times when he felt 'vulnerable, unsure, confused, insecure and amazed'. But realising that the very things that make our lives comfortable and 'easy' are the same things that make other people's lives uncomfortable and difficult is an inevitable first step towards challenging our legacy of institutionalised racism in education.

Like Lawrence & Tatum (1999), I have found that one of the most effective ways to help students deal with the strong feelings that arise as a result of naming white privilege is to have them think through the ways they might respond to the racism they witness in their classrooms. My students finish their coursework with a final assignment that requires them to write a letter to me about the difference they want to make as teachers working in schools that are still characterised by racism and other forms of discrimination. Don wrote the following in his letter to me:

I cannot change the colour of my skin or my background, and therefore it's not easy for me alone to change the way the world treats me. However, this course has allowed me to realise that I can work towards making a difference by changing the way I look at the world and the way I treat others in it. I feel that because I have been protected, it is my responsibility now to explore issues around racism and do what I can to affect the way our society deals with difference. Being a teacher will allow me to combat institutional racism from the bottom up through the use of inclusive materials and curricula, progressive and appropriate language and discussion, and morals that reflect an equitable, non-discriminatory way of life ... I also understand that I am a work in progress and am therefore committed to continuing my own examination of my life and how it affects those around me.

Don began to live out this commitment by joining an internship placement in an anti-racist leadership camp for teachers and high school students. This experience allowed him to continue his own unlearning of racism. It also provided him with anti-racist role models and allies in the school system. The institutional or 'partnership' work that goes into making such internship placements available for pre-service teachers is, in turn, part of the anti-racist educational commitment that my colleagues and I can make in our own educational institution. By actually participating in anti-racist leadership camps, we, too, can continue unlearning racism.

Anti-racist leadership camps or conferences that bring together both parents and early childhood educators to discuss some issues raised in this article provide another way forward. Rita Tenorio (1994) believes that keeping open to the experiences of children and their families is key in challenging racism and privilege. Derman-Sparks (1989) believes this as well and includes an entire chapter on working with parents in her book on the anti-bias curriculum. I conclude with the words from one of the black parents Vivian Paley (1989) writes about in her book, *White Teacher*. In this part of the memoir, Mrs Hawkins, the black parent, is telling Paley about a teacher in her

children's previous school who had said, 'There is no color difference in my classroom. All my children look alike to me' (p. 12):

'What rot,' said Mrs. Hawkins. 'My children are black. They don't look like your children. They know they're black, and we want it recognised. It's a positive difference, an interesting difference. At least it could be, if you teachers learned to value differences more. What you value, you talk about.' (Paley, 1989, p. 12)

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