

## RESEARCH

# Exploring Anti-racism in Early Childhood Education Teacher Identity and Classroom Practices

by Kerry-Ann Escayg

Considerable research in the Canadian and American context has revealed that children as young as 3 discern racial characteristics including differences in skin tone and hair texture. Studies have also shown that white children self-identify more accurately, prefer their own group, and rate their own group more positively than other racial groups. These findings have led to the emergence of anti-bias, multicultural and anti-racist education in early childhood education. An anti-bias curriculum typically focuses on addressing a diverse range of identities, including race; in contrast, anti-racist education recognizes the saliency of race in relation to other social identities—and the need to foreground race in social analyses, critiques and pedagogical activities.

Anti-racism early childhood education requires questioning and addressing multiple factors, including how the early childhood field privileges Eurocentric knowledge and developmental paradigms, and how white privilege and power undergird institutional and administrative practices. In short, anti-racist early childhood education focuses on institutional and individual mechanisms that reify whiteness, limit critical discussions on race and racism, and silence diverse knowledges and experiences.

Early childhood educators can apply anti-racism to their professional practice in many ways, but the first critical step in developing an anti-racism pedagogy is to engage in ongoing self-reflection. Most teachers in the Canadian and American context are white, middle-class women; they must confront, interrogate and analyze their assumptions, knowledge and experiences surrounding race and racism. For example, in my graduate anti-racism course at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, I guide students through the process of deconstructing race by asking questions such as, “What is race?” “Is race a biological concept?” “What are the social effects of race?” These questions are a starting point for students to explore how the concept of race has evolved, using readings and group discussions. They learn to inter-

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rogate the biological concept of race (i.e., the idea that distinct biological racial categories exist). This provides them with a theoretical foundation from which to explore race as a social construct, the historical and social processes inherent in the creation of racial categories, and how these are intimately linked to and reproduce systemic inequities.

Recognition of race as a social construct must also be paired with ongoing, deliberate and thoughtful reflections on one's childhood experiences with race. This process helps white teachers begin to connect their personal experiences with systems, institutions and cultural practices that maintain racism as well as white privilege. For example, most white teachers were raised in predominantly white neighborhoods, and as my white students have indicated, rarely interrogate the historical reasons and institutional practices that have led to all-white or majority white environments. After students in my graduate course have deconstructed race, we discuss the definition of systemic racism, isolate specific institutions (e.g., education, healthcare, employment, neighborhood residence), and then identify contemporary racial inequities within these, based on a comprehensive analysis of historical policies and practices. The goal is for students to understand the historical roots of contemporary systemic inequities, and also to bridge personal experiences with the macro-structures that inform their daily lives.

Another problem related to being raised in a predominantly white space is the lack of counter-images/stories. The media disseminate a barrage of stereotypical images of racial groups, and teachers may consciously or subconsciously apply these in their everyday social and or professional interactions with young children and their families. Feagin (2010) referred to this as the white "racial frame." Thus, an integral component of anti-racism is to explore how this racial frame affects how teachers perceive students and classroom practice, and also to unveil the factors contributing to the frame. Teachers need to engage in self-reflection to understand how home and school socialization practices shaped their racial beliefs and attitudes. For example, they can critique their early socialization experiences by asking:

- What did my parents teach me about race?
- How did growing up in this neighborhood affect how I view my white identity and other racialized identities?
- How did growing up in this neighborhood affect how I conceptualize racism?
- What stereotypes were I exposed to while growing up? Were these ever critiqued or analyzed? By whom?
- When and how did I become aware of my racial identity?

- What does it mean to be white? How did I come to such an understanding?

- What is racism?

Another technique is for teachers to "write a racial/cultural autobiography, in which they describe their background or identity and any features that they thought were particularly influential in their own development, experience and outlook on life" (Kailin, 2002, p. 127).

It is worth noting that self-reflection is an ongoing process. Teachers should not be discouraged by the first phase of their exploration; they should use what they have discovered (including uncomfortable memories) to engage in a more honest, focused, richer and deeper examination of their identity, experiences and racial knowledge. Self-reflection geared toward an anti-racist goal requires courage and humility.

Teacher identity, and in particular an anti-racist identity, is central to identifying and implementing transformative teaching practices (Utt & Tochluk, 2016). Pedagogical approaches in the early childhood classroom may include providing diverse materials and engaging in critical discussions that use an intersectional lens to name and critique racism, inequalities, white privilege, and racial, gender and class stereotypes. Instead of simply naming a stereotype as untrue, anti-racist educators must explain how power relations underpin racialized representations and how these serve to maintain racism.

The provision of diverse learning materials alone, such as dolls, while commendable, cannot disrupt children's racialized perceptions and attitudes. Teachers also need to engage children in focused discussions on race and racism, using concrete examples that they can relate to—this process can reveal misconceptions as well as racial preferences among children. For example, teachers can ask questions such as, "What do you think the word race means?" "What does power mean?" Teachers can also use a stimuli set of images representing white and racialized children to ask open-ended questions like, "Tell me something about the person in this picture." "Is this someone you would like to play with? Why?" Another technique is for teachers to observe play interactions to determine whether children exclude/include peers based on race.

It has been suggested that play-based early learning environments can also be quite useful in teaching children about racial privilege and oppression. For example, drama centers can be designed to represent specific institutional contexts (such as the government or media) with the aim of demonstrating the low representation of non-whites. This can serve as an entry

point to discussions of power, racial privilege and the concomitant outcomes of race-based socio-economic disadvantages.

Anti-racist teaching practices go beyond just providing young children with an “appreciation for difference.” Transformative, anti-racist teaching requires teachers’ own process of self-reflection if they are to inspire critical thinking, lay bare the mechanisms of racism, and encourage children to question and critique systems and social practices. Thus, by incorporating anti-racism techniques into early childhood education, teachers can engage children’s agency by actively supporting positive racial identities among racialized children, and helping cultivate anti-racist identities among white children. These processes are central to an anti-racism pedagogy and as a result, promote ongoing institutional and social change.

## References

Feagin, J. R. (2010). *The White racial frame: Centuries of racial framing and counter-framing*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Kailin, J. (2002). *Anti-racist education: From theory to practice*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Utt, J., & Tochluk, S. (2016). White teacher, know thyself: Improving anti-racist praxis through racial identity development. *Urban Education*, 1–28. Retrieved from doi: [10.1177/0042085916648741](https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085916648741)

## SUGGESTED RESOURCES

“Leading Anti-bias Early Childhood Programs: A Guide for Change,” by Debbie LeeKeenan, John Nimmo and Louise Derman-Sparks



“Bias Isn’t Just A Police Problem, It’s A Preschool Problem,” NPR podcast about Walter Gilliam’s research on teacher implicit bias. <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2016/09/28/495488716/bias-isnt-just-a-police-problem-its-a-preschool-problem>



**Project Implicit** is a non-profit organization and international collaboration between researchers who are interested in implicit social cognition and thoughts and feelings outside of conscious awareness and control. The goal of the organization is to educate the public about hidden biases and to provide a “virtual laboratory” for collecting data on the Internet.

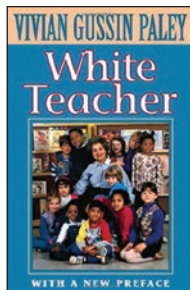
The link below will take you to an approximately 10-minute test to help you learn about your own implicit bias. <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>

“Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom,” by Lee Warren and Derek Bok Center

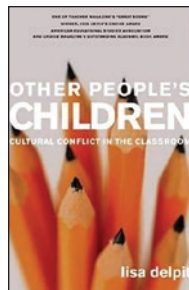
<https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/resources/Teaching/CourseDesign/InstructionalStrategies/HotMomentsClassroom.pdf>



## RECOMMENDED BOOKS



“White Teacher,”  
by Vivian Gussin Paley



“Other People’s Children: Cultural  
Conflict in the Classroom,”  
by Lisa Delpit



“The Hate You Give,”  
by Angie Thomas



“Sing, Unburied, Sing,”  
by Jesmyn Ward