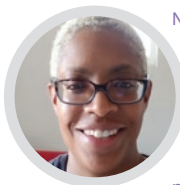


# Centering Blackness in Early Education

by Nadiyah Taylor

*Centering Blackness is an act of love.*

Throughout my life, I have either consciously or unconsciously tried to de-center my Blackness so that the world would perceive me as “normal” and “palatable” and “likeable.” This does not mean that I am ashamed of being Black. I am not. However, in adaptation to a hostile, racialized environment I internalized a message that showcasing or highlighting my Blackness could be dangerous at most or unwelcome at least. The notion of Centering Blackness in my work as an early care and education professional is a reclaiming of the wholeness of myself and an acknowledgement that my Blackness is centered by society anyway. To power structures we are “other” and the distinctions don’t matter. My response has been to shrink to make others comfortable while I live in discomfort. Centering Blackness means that I claim what is rightfully mine, with joy and acceptance.



Nadiyah Taylor has been in the early care and education field since 1994, in a variety of roles including preschool teacher, parent educator, and diversity consultant. She is the chair of the early care and education program at Las Positas College in Livermore, California. Her consulting work, *The Ripple Effect*, focuses on the continuing need for the inclusion of anti-bias principles in early childhood settings and childrearing. Educational equity and social justice are key themes of her work.

Recently, a colleague and I have shared thoughts on the concept of Centering Blackness. We come from two different professions, but share the same passion to support and include the lives of our students in our teaching. Our conversation focused on what Centering Blackness looks like for us in academia. Here are some of her powerful thoughts.

“What do you do when your academic community does not look like your community-community? There is so much racially coded behavior modeled and expected of our children in schools—how to properly act, speak, write, emote—these are all ways that we restrict Black children and begin the process of degrading their sense of self. This contributes to why some Black children see school as a white space, and why Black children who excel in school are often considered by their community to be “Oreos”—Black on the outside but white on the inside. At all levels, beginning with our youngest, we mold children into the image of the dominant culture.”

She goes on to say, “It ... helps me to be unapologetically Black when I question, ‘Why am I changing to be accepted by the academy ... and is that change just? Am I changing for a good and just reason?’ That call to change is

really a racist call. It is defeating your Blackness. You are asked to diminish that, and amplify this, and it is because Black is not considered in the academic space. Either that, or we do not know what a Black academic space looks like. We have not seen enough of that model. It is very narrow. I wish that I could go into a classroom and say “Y’all” and use my hip-hop jargon



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and still be taken seriously. I do not want my students to lose their voice, that is the saddest thing. I lost my voice—it got me the grades, but it was not me. I feel like it stymied me in a lot of creative ways, and I do not want that for my students, particularly for students who speak any other English, an English that is seen as less intelligent, or however it is criticized” (Kisha Quesada Turner, 2020).

How do we take these compelling invitations from Kisha to preserve our children’s authentic voices and bring Blackness into the academic space? How can we make sure our classrooms and learning environments are safe spaces, not sources of more racial trauma for children, employees and families? How can you reflect on your own Blackness as an educator and create space for Blackness in your learning environments?

## Centering Blackness in ECE: What it Is, What it Is Not

Centering Blackness is not reverse racism. It is not focusing on Blackness at the cost of other people of color. It is not excluding the interests of others. Centering Blackness is about opening, not closing.

Centering Blackness in early care and education is an invitation, not an exclusion. It is an invitation to build upon the experiences of Black children, families, teachers, site supervisors, directors and administrators in the many settings where we are present. It is an invitation to look deeply at why there are not Black people in any of the spaces where we are missing. It is an invitation to step back and listen to the everyday lived experiences of a community. It is an invitation to see each Black story as an individual experience unique to that person, while also listening for common gifts, ideas, needs, desires

and pain. It is an invitation to build trust. It is an invitation to move beyond “celebrating culture” to breaking down institutionalized oppression in its many forms.

Author Tim Wise recently said that when we look at our systems and wonder how to fix them and why they are broken, we are making a fundamental attribution error (Tim Wise, 2020). The question we need to ask is, “Was early care and education intended to create equity among the races?” At its inception, who were the leaders of early education as we know it today? What did those pioneers look like? Whose interests did they represent? As a field, we highlight the Abecedarian and Perry Preschool projects because they are some of the few times when our profession did work to intentionally use early education to create more racial equity—and there are great outcomes to show for it. But we must remember that even then, the majority of those teachers, planners and decision makers were white people acting on behalf of Black communities.

Centering Blackness is an invitation to acknowledge that our field, like many others, is pushed ahead and buoyed by the work of Black and brown people. Who are the people bringing much needed linguistic diversity into our classrooms? Who are the people primarily providing much needed infant and toddler care in home-based settings? Who are the aides and assistants that make our classrooms run, and yet so often have little authority to make changes?

As in many other fields, this work is underappreciated and undercompensated. In terms of Black workers, many structures focus solely on “what” they bring instead of “who” they are. The worker goes unnoticed for their uniqueness and “who” they bring to every encounter. Centering Black-

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ness is about all learning environments seeking out and then using the wisdom of Black people, in order to put equity into action. We must commit to continuing to learn, grow, and change not just ourselves, but our communities.

My offering is not intended to solve a problem; I posed more questions than answers. The work of Centering Blackness and creating academic equity happens in the process of creating the answers that make sense in your community. There is no recipe to make this happen. Reflective action is required. A reimagining of our work is required.

