

What If **All** the Children in My Class Are White?

Historical and Research Background



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Increased awareness of racism as 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.

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The authors welcome feedback on this article and your stories about working with white children and families on diversity and equity issues. Contact Louise Derman-Sparks by e-mail at rldsparks@aol.com or by writing to her at Pacific Oaks College, 5 Westmoreland Place, Pasadena, CA 91104.

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Rather, white people need to undergo a profound shift, from viewing the world through a lens of dominance to a commitment to equitably shared 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 create strategies that are culturally relevant to the various contexts in which white children grow.

As two white women, we continuously work to come to terms with our roles as anti-bias, antiracist, multicultural educators in a white-dominated society. We believe that, while it is not possible to undo history, it *is* possible to learn from it and to create a new future. As Robert Terry wrote, “The new white committed to justice and working to rid this nation of its racism can be a major force for social justice. The time is right. It is up to us to seize that time to turn our legacy of old white privilege into new white possibility” (1970, 97).

This article provides historical and research background for our November 2005 *Young Children* article, “What If All the Children in My Class Are White? Anti-bias/Multicultural Education with White Children.” Here we first discuss the concept of whiteness and how it has influenced our society. Then we

provide a brief summary of research on young children's awareness and attitudes related to race, building a developmental framework for meaningful curricula. Finally, we recommend additional resources for educators who want to further explore these issues (see "Additional Resources about Racism," p. 5).

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 the term *whiteness*. Race is a socially constructed idea in economic, political, and historic power relationships that rests on scientifically false assumptions of genetically determined physical and mental characteristics. Under this construct, racism is an institutionalized system of power that determines which racial groups are advantaged or disadvantaged economically, politically, and culturally. It is maintained both through institutional 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 fueled by the ideals and institutions of white racial superiority and dominance. This ideology casts whiteness in a positive light and "others" in negative terms (Feagin 2000). The effects of the European conquest of Native peoples in North America, the enslavement and shipping of Africans, and the racial bias in immigration policies still can be felt. Whiteness continues to hold great power over our lives (Kivel 2002).

This picture gets more complicated by ethnic and cultural factors. Against the background of the privileges of whiteness is an array of significant variations in the historical, power, and economic relationships among the different white ethnic groups in the United States. One of the great ironies in U.S. history is the cost of becoming white. 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 (Gossett 1963; Ignatiev 1995; Brodtkin 1998).

Despite the fact that European Americans as a whole fared better than people of color, ethnic differences deeply influenced variations in social-economic class among whites in the growing United States. For example, aristocrats and other upper-class settlers who came from England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries became the most privileged groups, such as Boston Brahmins, New York merchants, and Southern plantation owners, and 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

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prisoners or indentured servants. They often settled in isolated communities in the Appalachian Mountains, and many of their descendants became, and in some cases still are, targets of ridicule (sometimes called “hillbillies” or “rednecks”) and discrimination.

Although the *rate* of poverty is higher in communities of color, the majority of poor people in the United States are white. Moreover, although a myth persists that people needing/using welfare are people of color, the number of white families receiving welfare actually exceeds the number of families of color who receive such assistance.

A legacy of systemic racial advantage for whites and disadvantage for people of color to this day profoundly influences social relationships and life prospects of all Americans as well as people in most parts of the world. Some white people today see this historical context as distant and far-fetched. On a personal level, most of us struggle with our day-to-day lives and do not feel that we are dominating anyone. But the reality is, in the United States and in many parts of the world, whites continue to live with unearned racial privilege (Barndt 1991; McIntosh 1995; Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001) and other racial groups live under racial penalty (Howard 1999).

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

Opposing themes and dynamics also have set many reforms in motion. From early on in the United States, the promise of democracy and of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” has spurred movements to extend human and civil rights (women, people of color, the economically disadvantaged, people with disabilities, and gays and lesbians). The history of white involvement in antiracism predates the Civil War (Aptheker 1993), but that rarely makes its way into mainstream history texts.

White children’s identity and attitudinal development

To effectively counteract the pull and absorption of white privilege beliefs and behaviors, early childhood teachers need to understand how young white children develop racial identity, awareness, and attitudes. 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; Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001; Ramsey & Williams 2003). 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 “racialized” society (Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001). By the preschool years, white children begin to learn the power codes or rules of racism (that is, “white ways are right”), internalizing racial superiority (Ramsey 1987, 1991; Ramsey & Myers 1990; Tatum 1997; Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001).

Paradoxically, from childhood, racism also negatively impacts whites. 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, when the significant adults in their lives mask feelings of prejudice, children often absorb do-as-I-say-not-as-I-do double messages about people of color (Clark 1955). For example, even if the curriculum espouses explicit

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messages of respect and equality, when teachers and administrators are white and support and maintenance staff are people of color, children learn about racial hierarchies.

Research on children's racial awareness and attitudes contains many gaps and contradictions. However, a few themes consistently emerge. First, children are *not* color blind. Researchers have observed that infants as young as six months old react consistently to racial differences (Katz & Kofkin 1997; Katz 2003). Second, young children *do* pay attention to messages of prejudice and power differences. Infants are often wary of people who look different from their familiar caregivers. As they grow older, this fear can be fueled by racial isolation and negative images of unfamiliar groups.

Preschoolers begin using racial terms and beliefs to exclude and demean classmates of color (for example, a white child refuses to let another child hold a white doll and says, "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 &

Feagin 2001, 86). Interestingly, some white preschoolers express stereotypes but still play comfortably with cross-race classmates, especially if they are in an environment in which teachers and family members support and model interracial friendships (Ramsey 2004).

As primary school-age children develop the ability 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.

A child's environment (family, community, media, and peers) plays a critical role—positively or negatively. To

strengthen their identities, some adolescents tend to form more own-race ties, using stereotypes and excluding other groups to consolidate and prove their group loyalties (Tatum 1997). And yet other adolescents experience strong feelings about justice and participate in actions for social change.

Research over the past several decades has shown that across all ages and in many settings, white children are more at risk than children of color for developing cross-race biases and aversions (see, for example, Fox & Jordan 1973; Rosenfield & Stephen 1981; Stabler, Zeig, & Johnson 1982; Newman, Liss, & Sherman 1983; Ramsey & Myers 1990; Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001). This shouldn't come as a surprise, since white children's in-group preferences are generally supported by prevailing social attitudes and images.

In short, white children, even in racially isolated areas (Ramsey 1991), are aware of race and, without guidance and modeling, often develop stereotypes that influence their feelings about and potentially their behaviors toward people of color. While these accumulated research findings may be upsetting, they also provide early childhood educators 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 just society and thrive in an anti-racist, multicultural world.



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Additional Resources about Racism

On the construction of whiteness and institutional racism

- Better, S. 2002. *Institutional racism: A primer on theory and strategies for social change*. Chicago: Burnham.
- Hannaford, I. 1996. *Race: The history of an idea in the West*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Sleeter, C. 2001. *Culture, difference, and power*. CD-ROM. New York: Teachers College Press.

On antiracist identity development in white adults

- Helms, J.E., ed. 1990. *Black and white racial identity: Theory, research, and practice*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Tatum, B.D. 1994. Teaching white students about racism: The search for white allies and the restoration of hope. *Teachers College Record* 95 (4): 462–76.
- Thompson, B., & S. Tyagi, ed. 1996. *Names we call home: Autobiography on racial identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Wise, T. 2005. *White like me: Reflections on race from a privileged son*. Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull.

On white resistance to racism

- Brown, C.S. 2002. *Refusing racism: White allies and the struggle for civil rights*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Chang, H.N.-L., T. Femenella, N. Louie, B. Murdock, & E. Pell. 2000. *Walking the walk: Principles for building community capacity for equity and diversity*. Oakland, CA: California Tomorrow.
- Curry, C., J.C. Browning, D.D. Burlage, P. Patch, T. del Pozzo, S. Thrasher, E.D. Baker, E.S. Adams, & C. Hayden. 2000. *Deep in our hearts: Nine white women in the freedom movement*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Zinn, H. 1995. *A people's history of the United States: 1492–present*. Rev. ed. New York: Perennial/Harper.

Organizations and Web sites

- California Tomorrow** offers resources for working with children and adults on culture and language; action research about equity issues in early childhood programs and primary/secondary schools. www.californiatomorrow.org
- Center for the Study of White American Culture** provides resources and opportunities for discussions about the multifaceted issues of whiteness. www.euroamerican.org
- Children's Book Press** publishes bilingual children's books covering a range of children and families of color. www.childrensbookpress.org
- Cooperative Children's Book Center** offers bibliographies of children's books on a variety of diversity issues. www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc
- Crossroads Ministry** does racial justice work in faith-based organizations. The Web site offers resources and a bibliography for working with adults in all settings. www.crossroadsministry.org
- Educators for Social Responsibility** provides resources on conflict resolution, violence prevention, intergroup relations, and character education. www.esrnational.org
- Gustavus Myers Center for the Study of Bigotry and Human Rights** reviews new books and videos for adults and for children. www.myerscenter.org
- National Association of Multicultural Education** offers an annual conference, current issues, and a Listserv connecting teachers in primary, secondary, and higher education. www.nameorg.org
- Syracuse Cultural Workers** is another place to get tools for change—social justice posters, bumper stickers, and so on. www.syraculturalworkers.com
- Teaching for Change** is an outstanding resource for books, videos, and posters for adults and preschool/primary/secondary students and has excellent links to other social justice Web sites. www.teachingforchange.org

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- Brodin, K. 1998. *How the Jews became White folks and what that says about race in America*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Clark, K. 1955. *Prejudice and your child*. 2nd ed. Boston: Beacon.
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- Feagin, J. 2000. *Racist America: Roots, current realities, and future reparations*. New York: Routledge.
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- Katz, P.A. 2003. Racists or tolerant multiculturalists? How do they begin? *American Psychologist* 58 (11): 897–909.
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