

Embedding and Embracing a Focus on Social Justice and Anti -Racist Pedagogy in Early Childhood Teacher Education

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This article makes the case for the importance of exploring dimensions of race and racism within early childhood teacher education courses. Early childhood educators must be prepared to effectively reach and teach all children. In order to develop these essential teaching practices, preservice teachers must engage in the difficult “self-work” of exploring their own biases, while they are actively learning about the role of race and oppression within the educational system. These processes must co-exist within teacher preparation in order to empower preservice teachers toward a pedagogy of equity and social justice.

Teacher education has been immersed in an era of considerable educational reform, rooted in measurement, accountability and frameworks that seem at times complex and overwhelming. The desire to be an agent of change and seek justice and social action must remain at the core of teaching, but for many in the profession this has become a far cry from the daily tasks that govern and control the profession. bell hooks (2003) said that education is always a vocation rooted in hopefulness. As teachers we believe that learning is possible, that nothing can keep an open mind from seeking after knowledge and finding a way to know. It is this sentiment that propels the many “players” involved in teacher education (i.e., teacher candidate, faculty member, students, families, community members) to continue to press forward and engage in the important work of social justice education. This article presents a case for the importance of actively teaching, through coursework and field experiences, about social justice education and anti-racist pedagogy. In addition, the article will explore the offerings in

traditional early childhood education programs, and provide an explanation for the importance of explicitly naming an exploring anti-racist pedagogy and social justice education as it applies to early childhood teacher candidates. Exposing teacher candidates to the theoretical underpinnings of these practices, as well as the practical knowledge of how they can become social justice educators in early childhood classrooms, provides the necessary link that is often missing in early childhood teacher preparation programs. Finally, this article explores the trajectory of what early childhood teacher candidates are learning within their early childhood education courses, and how they are applying this to their pedagogical practices with young children and families.

Research that supports culturally responsive teaching and social justice education is abounding in academic journals and rhetoric on college campuses. Those same venues also describe the urgency to conform to state and national tests, and maintain rigorously high standards, which are narrowly defined. This focus has dominated the conversation in many teacher education programs, replacing the time and space for conversations, dialogue and meaningful planning related to raising the critical consciousness of our teacher candidates. Instead of examining our students' multicultural dispositions, we are simply concerned with how they perform on a test. Instead of requiring them to grapple with the often unspoken conversations about race, class and issues of equity and social justice, we are comfortable with promoting "tolerance" and assuming that these constructs will just be embedded in our discussion when they are never named, called out and properly discussed.

Supported by research and recent public outcry, it is evident that our nation's schools are failing to adequately reach and teach our most marginalized populations.

Teacher preparation is increasingly being conceptualized as a training and testing problem to ensure that all teachers have basic subject matter knowledge and the technical skills to work in schools devoted to bringing pupil's test scores to minimum thresholds (Cochran-Smith, 2004). Our urban schools and community based programs often retreat within, closing their doors to new partnerships and innovative ideas in an attempt to focus solely on test scores and literally keeping their doors open to serve the community. As a result of impending state and federal pressures, our most vulnerable children slip through the cracks, trying to grasp at the dream of an education as gripping forces of poverty and inequality pull them under.

In our public school classrooms sit children whose basic needs for food, medicine and shelter have been ill-met, children raised within a variety of family structures, children from families with unconventional religious or political beliefs and ideologies, recent immigrants just starting to learn English who may or may not have literacy in their native language/s, children living in the midst of chronic illness (their own or their families), children who punch and kick others, who cry all day, or who may be too anxious to talk, children who have learned not to trust adults; children who do not make eye contact or use other conventional social cues, and children who have documented disabilities that can interfere with their learning (Oyler, p. 147, 2011). Within these complex and ever present dynamics exists the sociopolitical context of race and ethnicity, which creates other structures of power and privilege between the teacher, the students and the community.

Teacher preparation often times mirrors the structure of the public school system, with its heavy emphasis on testing, rigorous standards and uniform means of assessment.

While high standards and quality are essential, so too is the development of teachers who are grounded, rooted and active in the quest for equity. We are doing grave disservice to prospective and practicing teachers if we provide little or no substantive attention to sociocultural and sociopolitical issues that mediate teaching and learning in an increasingly diverse world (Freire, 1999; Nieto, 2003).

While we recognize the importance of standards to ensure quality within our teacher education programs, it is the responsibility of teacher preparation programs to ensure that our teacher education students understand themselves and their students and the stories that shape who each person is and will become through the relationship. Teachers who operate from a social justice perspective understand that these working set of ideas must permeate every element of teaching and learning in a classroom and community. From this perspective, a “teaching tolerance” or “appreciating diversity,” liberal-humanist stance is insufficient. Preservice teachers must graduate from their programs with knowledge about how racism, sexism, ableism, heterosexism, nationalism, linguistic privilege, religious intolerance, and class bias operates in school and society (Oyler, 2011, p. 148). This knowledge must not be mere theoretical rhetoric that is distant from pedagogical practices. It must be woven and connected to all elements of teacher preparation.

Underlying premises of a social justice perspective include the idea that “classrooms are sites of cultural and social reproduction and therefore cultural and social hierarchies must be carefully examined for the ways inequality and injustice are produced and perpetuated within the curriculum, the classroom and the school” (Oyler, 2011, p. 148). Although race and race related issues permeate and influence every social

institution, white teachers, who comprise the majority of the teaching field, currently have had little exposure to a type of education in which the impact of race on classroom practice and student development was systematically examined (Sleeter, 1992; Zeichner, 1993).

Establishing a framework for social justice in teacher education is increasingly important as we prepare teachers for not only “tolerating” differences, but embracing these dimensions in their classrooms, and understanding their own role in the process. Providing students with the knowledge base to engage in critical discourse alongside the practical experiences in urban classrooms will allow them to gain a more holistic understand of their own racial identity and its salient impact on their beliefs and practices for children, families and communities. These learning opportunities that bridge theory and practice will empower early childhood teacher candidates to understand and eventually embrace those whose schools, communities and life trajectories have been left out, overlooked and underserved.

Making the Case

America has always been a multilingual, multicultural, multiethnic, and multiracial society (Garcia, 2005; Irvine, 2003; Jones & Black, 1995; Ray, 2000). But currently the U. S. is undergoing profound racial, cultural, generational, and linguistic changes. According to census data from 2010, African American, Hispanic and Multiracial children make up 48% of the total population (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010). The growing diversity of America’s public school enrollment makes it essential that all teachers be prepared for teaching students from diverse backgrounds. These

national numbers mirror the demographics of New York State, which has an increasingly diverse population.

The demographics of the teaching profession in the United States remain largely the same, with white women comprising 84% of the teaching profession, followed by 7% Black, 6% Hispanic and 4% other (Feistritzer, 2011). There is a need for increased opportunities to expose early childhood educators to urban schools and communities, and also to provide meaningful coursework that accompanies these field-based experiences to provide a connected learning experience. Unless teachers have an effective multicultural component in their preservice education, the profound differences between teachers and students will result in cultural conflicts and minimal student academic achievement (Rudney & Marxen, 1999). Cultural dissonance will continue to take hold unless teacher candidates can begin to connect theory and practice, and begin to deconstruct and rebuild their definitions of identity regarding both self and other. This process is complex, and requires meaningful and intentional planning so that early childhood teacher candidates are confident in pedagogical techniques, while acknowledging the importance of socio-political knowledge that recognizes race and its role in teaching all students.

Critical Social Justice Education

The origins of critical social justice education have often been framed within the conversation on multicultural education. Multicultural education can be traced historically to the Civil Rights Movement, when African American scholars and educators worked in conjunction with the movement to achieve social change (Sleeter & McLaren, 2009). The term “culture” rather than “racism” was adopted mainly so that audiences of white educators would listen. Schools of education training predominantly

white middle class teacher candidates have avoided intentional dialogue on issues of race and equity and instead talked about “diversity” of families or how teachers can help young children to “tolerate” visible differences that children observe and wonder about in the classroom. “Social justice” discourse within teacher education programs has become the latest phrase—from course titles and education conferences heading “social justice” as the topic to be shared, written about and analyzed. Some of the topics included in the theory and practice of social justice include: building classroom communities of dialogue across and within differences (Sapon-Shevin, 1999); critical multicultural and anti-bias education (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006; Shcniedewind & Davidson, 2006; Sleeter, 2005); culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994), culturally responsive and competent teachers (Irvine, 2003; Irvine and Armento, 2001), anti-racist teaching (Berlak & Moyenda, 2001), and equity pedagogy (Banks & Banks, 1995) among many others. The current literature related to social justice education continues to contribute to this body of knowledge. There continue to be considerable questions about how to most effectively prepare teachers for understanding issues of race, and actively teaching an anti-racist curriculum in the classroom.

Many practicing teachers and teacher educators alike strongly believe that early childhood is a time of carefree ideals, and an opportunity for children to see “beyond” race and just embrace the child or adult. As a result many early childhood educators feel they shouldn’t impose their thoughts about complex subjects such as race in the lives of young children, but should instead practice an approach which looks at all children as the same. Researchers have asserted that a colorblind or color-mute approach causes teachers to overlook, or fail to discuss important differences, and not adapt their actions within the

classroom (Morris, 2005; Sleeter, 1996). These issues have an increasingly important role within early childhood classrooms, where young children are forming their own ideas about themselves and others, and the broader context of difference that may or may not permeate their daily experiences.

Effectively translating these constructs into practical classroom based knowledge and strategies should be the goal of teacher education programs. It is also the ongoing challenge, as content that isn't "testable" or tied to academic matter seems to be seen as secondary. Just as early childhood educators must prepare children for the world of academic testing, so then must teacher preparation programs. Faculty who continue to infuse principles of social justice education and anti-racist pedagogy into course content are often questioned by students, colleagues and the institution overall. Teacher educators embracing the framework of equity and social justice seek daily to infuse ideas of advocacy, activism and challenging structures of power and privilege in education classes—in which this content may or may not be typically taught or valued.

Exploring Social Justice Education

In an Early Childhood Teacher Education Course

As a faculty member in an early childhood education program, I am faced with an onslaught of early childhood teacher candidates who question the use of articles, books, speakers and films that address issues of inequity. Often they wonder why these discussions are relevant for the work with and for young children and families. They believe that this content would be better suited in a "diversity course," and not in a course with a title that is focused on methodology or assessment.

There is significant value in embedding concepts of teaching for equity and social justice across a variety of education courses offered to teacher candidates. By actively engaging difficult discussions on a regular basis, teacher candidates have an opportunity to reflect and re-engage content as their knowledge of the literature grows. and as they continue to have meaningful field experiences that provide a context for many of the theoretical constructs they are reading about. With a review of the literature, it becomes evident that many teacher education programs value the importance of connecting urban field experiences with methods courses, and other related courses, to help students “practice” what they are learning in the classroom, and apply the knowledge in a direct manner. While this is important and should be incorporated, having students take courses or engage in discussions around issues of race, equity, school funding, and segregation while they are experiencing many of these dimensions within the classroom and broader community is not often written about.

Noblit (2007) examined the “unusual places” where social foundations content can be embedded within an undergraduate teacher education program. Both the author of this study and I teach critical social justice concepts within an Assessment course. Traditional content within this course often doesn’t address the contextual factors that have a pervasive impact on the daily elements of teaching, including assessment of students. The author asserts: “Teaching social foundations in the unusual place of assessment might be a promising contribution of social foundations in the counter project of framing accountability as “both racist and anti-child” (p. 341). Determining meaningful ways to achieve dialogue within the framework of testing and measurement helps teacher candidates achieve a more holistic understanding of how to approach

understanding the whole child within the framework of school and community, and within broader structures that may contribute to perpetual inequalities.

Many Schools and Colleges of Education may have courses separate from pedagogy that emphasize social foundations of education. Students may feel that this one course is all they need in order to understand both the historical aspects of educational inequality, and also their own social identities as they relate to their teaching. In addition, most teacher education programs require only one course that actively discusses issues of race, class, gender and the intersection of these issues with education. Some programs may not require a social justice course, and explain their decision by claiming that these ideas are embedded into many courses. These types of survey courses often provide an overview of cultural groups or “norms” associated with these groups. They may discuss family cultural practices, childrearing practices in different countries or educational “norms” in different parts of the world. This information is important, however it doesn’t truly uncover and interrogate the power of race and racism in education. The diversity-inclusivity model offers several advantages over past methods for examining diversity in the curriculum. First, it moves researchers and practitioners away from trying to make simple determinations about what is and what is not a diversity course. Instead, it offers multiple avenues for determining the diversity inclusivity of any course (Nelson Laird, 2010). Thus a multitude of education courses not traditionally recognized as focusing solely on multiculturalism and diversity provide important spaces and places for this necessary dialogue.

In my experience working with early childhood teachers and programs throughout the country, there is a common theme that diversity means teaching children how we’re

all the same. Many teachers will respond to a question regarding how multicultural education relates to early childhood education by describing their recent “heritage” month, where they hung up a quote by Dr. Martin Luther King or painted shamrocks for St. Patrick’s Day. Children still bring home the story of Columbus each October where Columbus is explained to be the hero who saved the savages. Classrooms may cite a specific holiday or remembrance of a “hero” who exemplifies a common and widely known safe figure. Often these prominent figures such as Rosa Parks or Cesar Chavez aren’t even characterized in the correct way, or essential details about their struggle and work are left out of the conversations or activities within the classroom. Teacher educators and early childhood educators alike cling to the notion of “colorblindness” in children, and teaching children that they are all the same. Any talk of differences is minimized, so as to not upset children or the delicate balance that exists in the classroom.

In relation to early childhood classrooms, Derman-Sparks (1989) identified the dangers of accepting such definitions of multicultural education. When using only superficial features such as holidays, food, and clothing to discover the value of various cultures, one risks defaulting to what Derman-Sparks called “tourism curriculum.” This notion of curriculum is often patronizing and may emphasize only “exotic” differences between cultures, while undermining some of the complex real-life daily problems and experiences that people have. Children “visit” non-White cultures and then go “home” to the daily classroom, which reflects only the dominant culture (p.7). Woven within these conversations may be a discussion about poverty, but these discussions often take place separate from any teaching experiences where the teacher candidate is connected to a community context that represents the theory discussed. Course readings and

presentations, often facilitated by an individual from the dominant culture may talk about “embracing diversity” and celebrating cultures, but any discussion that names the many “isms” (i.e., racism, sexism etc.) may be silenced for fear of making students uncomfortable, or due to a lack of knowledge on behalf of the faculty member in facilitating such a dialogue.

Another common reality within teacher education courses is the notion of the “white savior” who will teach in an urban classroom and save the black and brown children who are suffering and in need. This common mentality is dangerous. It does a great disservice to the children and families with whom these future teachers will interact. A teacher educator speaks of her experience in working with preservice teachers who are preparing for high needs, urban communities. “I help my teachers develop something I call ‘consideration without pity.’ You can help them navigate their circumstances but also hold them accountable” (Franklin, 2007, p.2). Holding high expectations, while also being sensitive to the complex lives many children and families face, must be recognized and discussed within teacher education programs.

Early Childhood: The Time to Begin the Dialogue

The past decade has seen a surge of research and public policy related to the importance of the early years. Topics such as brain development, early trauma and mental health have made their way into public media outlets, as well as academic course offerings for teacher educators. Schools of Education now know a great deal more about the importance of early learning. With this growing awareness of how young children learn and what they need to succeed in school, states and communities are rapidly shifting their attention towards investments in higher-quality early education and

preschool programs, especially for those children living in poverty (Whitebrook, Bell, Lee, & Sakai, 2005). From a developmental perspective, we know that children are constantly taking in messages and social cues, and building their frameworks on the world through the people and places around them. As we embrace the importance of intervening early and preparing culturally inclusive educators who are committed to teaching all children, we must be aware of the gripping data which paints a picture of inequality for children that begins at birth. Institutions preparing early childhood educators must be aware of not only issues of poverty, but also how to promote social justice education in the classroom. But, the failure to adequately prepare teachers who can effectively educate children with special needs, children of color, and children who are low-income, immigrants, second language learners, second dialect speakers, and children from many cultures and ethnicities has been identified as evidence of pedagogical, instructional and conceptual problems in teacher preparation (Dieter, Voltz, & Epanchin, 2000; Irvine, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Ray, 2000; Voltz, 1998).

Early childhood is the time in our lives when we develop our core dispositions — the habits of thinking that shape how we live; our work as early childhood educators is to nurture dispositions in young children towards empathy, ecological consciousness, engaged inquiry, and collaboration. These dispositions undergird just and equitable communities; they are at the heart of activism and in the hearts of activists. (Pelo, 2008, Para.4)

In a study conducted in Chicago, in which teachers explored their own competence in teaching culturally and linguistically diverse children, the majority felt they had learned how to work with culturally different children and families from other teachers and through their own hard-won knowledge—not from their teacher training experience or professional development workshops on diversity (Ray & Bowman, 2003). This learning begins with preservice teachers examining their own biases and

understanding their own privilege and place. As early childhood educators, we are nurturing our youngest members of society, and implanting a message of equity and justice. These critical messages often left out of a discourse for early childhood educators must be present within our coursework and reflected in field experiences that challenge teacher candidates' realities.

How Young Children Make Sense of Race in the Classroom

Teacher education that is truly transformative, understanding the importance of teaching for social change and responsibility, must help teacher candidates gain new awareness and skills, and also help them determine ways to engage the children and families that they are working with in a responsive manner. As teacher candidates begin their own journey towards understanding identity and privilege, they must also determine ways to support the young children they are working with in figuring out these same questions. How we prepare teacher candidates to understand the dynamics of race, ethnicity, social class, and gender that exist through the eyes of young children?

Social justice education must start early. This education is not so much about imparting information or equipping students with analytical skills, although that's important too. It's about practicing justice from the earliest years. Social justice teaching helps children articulate what is fair and unfair, and encourages action in the face of unfairness (Pelo, 2008, para. 5). The imperative of starting early resides in the fact that infants as young as six months of age begin to notice color differences in people; and two- year-old children are aware of physical aspects of identity including skin color and gender. By age five, children begin to recognize group ethnic identity as part of their developing sense of self (Hofheimer, Betman, & Stern-LaRosa, 2000). Many early

childhood educators and parents alike recognize this developmental period as a time of “colorblindness” in children. An overwhelming majority of early childhood educators opt to employ “color blind” approaches to discussion of racial identity and racial oppression (Banks, 1985; 1995).

Throughout my experiences working in diverse and homogenous early childhood programs, I have heard many parents proudly assert that their preschooler or kindergartner sees all people as the same. In a preschool classroom in a White, rural setting, a young White child was surprised to see an African American baby doll added to the dramatic play area and she commented that she didn’t know babies could be Black. The teacher just smiled and responded saying “Yes they can” (student journals, 3/12/13). The lack of critical engagement on the part of this early childhood teacher provided the young child with no new information through which to make sense of the world around her.

Young children utilize the environment around them to construct their reality. Without the guidance of adults who are prepared to help children through this journey, and without a classroom space that promotes equity on a daily basis, children will have little understanding of how race intersects their daily lives. Thinking that young children are unaware of racial constructs and the impact that they have in the classroom frames the notion of silence or omission, where it is believed that if we don’t talk about it, it doesn’t exist. Many parents believe that it is wrong to have an active, informed dialogue with children about racism. They oppose anti-racist education in early childhood on the grounds that concepts such as prejudice and discrimination are too complex for young children to understand, that educators “shouldn’t be forcing their political issues down

the throats of young children,” and that the “early years are for playing and having fun, not solving the ills of the world” (Davidson & Pelo, 2000, p.1). Yet the research is clear that children are aware of race, able to grasp and grapple with issues of discrimination and injustice, and should be provided with the opportunities to engage in this important conversation.

A closer look at some of the theories that frame a developmental perspective of children’s understanding of self and other is essential in addressing racial identity development. Children 3 to 4 years old, for example, are able to categorize by racial group based on color (brown or pink skin color); and 5- to 6-year-olds are capable of accurately identifying racial labels based on socially constructed skin color identifiers (black or white). Similarly, children associate socially constructed positive attributes with white and negative attributes with black, thus reflecting research findings associated with their Euro-centric, or White-oriented, racial preferences (Phillips, Swanson, Cunningham, Youngblood, & Beale Spencer, 2009, p.270).

Selman’s (1980) theory of social perspective-taking ability examined the development of racial awareness in children. Selman developed his model of children’s understanding of their social environment in the context of human individuality, parent-child relations, friendship formation, and peer-group dynamics. Aboud (1987) examined these ideas within the developmental period of early childhood. This researcher concluded that at this initial level of awareness and self/other examination children utilized an affective differentiation of races frequently based on pro-White, anti-Black bias. Additionally, idiosyncratic terminology was used for race—awareness race based on observable, biological features. Racial attitudes, especially racial prejudice, were

found to be present in very young children. On forced-choice and projective measures of racial prejudice, White children as young as 4 years of age consistently showed racial preferences (see reviews by Aboud, 1984, 1987). More recent research indicates that at around age 6 stereotyping and racism begins to occur (McKown & Weinstein, 2003). The foundation of children's identity development is formed at a very young age. Early childhood preservice teachers and practicing teachers must understand this, and integrate this developmental knowledge into their teaching within the classroom.

Discourse on Diversity in Early Childhood Teacher Education

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2009), the world's largest organization working on behalf of young children and families, outlines standards and practices that shape many early childhood teacher education programs and early childhood centers alike. In an attempt to provide readers with an understanding on their position regarding diversity and multicultural education, they provided a brief overview and endorsement of a book on Anti-Bias education (2010). This book is a helpful tool in beginning the dialogue about respecting differences and exploring their implications (i.e. cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic) within the context of an early childhood classroom. Upon examining the literature on early childhood education, both in terms of college coursework and of practice within early childhood classrooms, we are only beginning to uncover the complexities and deeply embedded issues that surround these critical tenets.

In the 2009 NAEYC *Where We Stand* position statement, which outlines the organization's position regarding cultural and linguistic diversity, there are many informative and helpful recommendations regarding preparation of early childhood

educators, as well as classroom teaching and practices in early childhood settings where there are multicultural children and families. Specific recommendations for preparation of early childhood professionals include the following language: “Provide professional preparation and development in the areas of culture, language, and diversity. By examining their own cultural background, educators come to see how young children’s culture and language influence responses, interactions, and approaches to learning” (p..2). This statement doesn’t provide any specific language around helping early childhood professionals examine their own biases, perceptions and dominant racial identity (assuming they are White) within the context of a teacher preparation program.

Simply examining your own cultural background doesn’t necessarily lead to a knowledge of or appreciation for a child or family who is different from you. Authentic discourse names privilege and power, and closely examines how a dominant identity has often named and framed the definition of “Other” from the place of privilege. These ongoing conversations must be present and active within teacher education programs, in order to help teacher candidates truly understand themselves and others. These statements aren’t intended to direct any negative feedback towards NAEYC. They provide excellent standards for quality early care and education. More importantly, they uncovers a deeper issue within the field of early childhood education. A deeper look at the entities creating policy (such as NAEYC) as well as teacher education programs preparing future educators must take place. Teacher education programs must carefully plan course materials and field experiences that help to expose the problem of racism within both the individual and the broader system, and work with preservice teachers as they grapple with these constructs. These conversations must occur in order for programs to claim that

they value social justice, and in order to assert that we are preparing our preservice teachers to work with all children.

Linking Pedagogy, Practice and Privilege

Each semester almost thirty majority Caucasian, middle class, female teacher candidates enter my course on Observation and Assessment. Most embark on this course with little or no knowledge of their own privilege, how it has contributed to their current educational frame of reference, and what bearing this has on their practicum experiences with young children. Byrnes (2005) supports the infusion of multicultural education throughout the daily curriculum. “No matter how homogenous or assimilated one’s students are, a teacher has a responsibility to teach children about the perspectives of minority ethnic and racial groups as well as the dominant group” (p.10). Arguably, the more homogenous a group, the more that multicultural, social justice content is needed.

While this idea pertains to children, the same level of intentional instruction woven into a daily course curriculum also pertains to teacher candidates; for they too were robbed of a k-12 education that incorporated broad and complex perspectives and a focus on social justice and social change. The core of this course is a field experience where students complete a practicum with young children in either an urban or rural setting. These settings provided a unique context to begin to understand the constructs of race and ethnicity, both through the eyes of children of color and from White children from rural, homogenous communities. Early childhood teacher candidates are immersed in classroom settings within schools and community based settings. The course readings and assignments are directly connected to their practicum experiences, which provide the opportunity to link theory and practice in a more authentic manner.

As indicated previously, it is critical that teacher candidates are exposed to readings, discussions and opportunities for reflection on topics of equity and inequality while they are in the field, often observing these dynamics firsthand. Helping students understand this link, and begin to critically analyze their field experiences and course content, is where true and meaningful transformation takes place. The semester begins with students viewing Tim Wise's video: *White Privilege: Racism, White Denial and the Costs of Inequality* (MEF Challenging Media, 2008). This frames the course in such a way that early childhood teacher candidates are grounded in the notion that a journey and discovery of self, through recognition of privilege and place in society, must precede any discussion about assessment or curriculum with young children. The elements of the video, along with readings on anti-racist pedagogy and anti-bias teaching, take students on a journey to question themselves in a new way. Students begin to take ownership for the content through critical journaling exercises and meaningful chapter presentations that require them to read, analyze and be able to teach their peers.

This level of investment in the material cannot be achieved by just reading or reflection. When one is asked to present content and relate it to one's own life and experiences, it is transformed and transformative. Topics such as White identity development, history and current context of racism, and examining how children form and enact White identities (Derman Sparks, 2011) were just a few of the topics that the early childhood teacher candidates had to critically engage and analyze. Derman Spark's text (2011) *What if All the Kids are White?* has particular saliency in an early childhood course, since the book was written by an early childhood educator, and weaves themes of self-identity into concrete teaching strategies for young children. Choosing texts that help

early childhood teacher candidates to identify with the author, herself a former early childhood teacher, while also moving them beyond the comfortable lingo that doesn't require self-awareness and change, is critical. Cochran-Smith (2004), who has written extensively on issues of social justice stated that:

As teacher educators we cannot shy away from unpleasant and uncertain conversations because the failure and unwillingness to look, listen, and learn about diversity, oppression, and the experiences of the cultural other significantly interfere with the ability to critique and problematize schooling or "teach against the grain." (p.xii)

In approaching and engaging the uncomfortable, early childhood teacher candidates began to feel more comfortable bringing up their own personal biases, childhood stories and lived experiences. A delicate balance between the "traditional" course content, which in the past focused solely on observation and assessment of young children, and the addition of multicultural content, was important. Throughout the semester, early childhood teacher candidates were asked to question the inequalities that exist in every facet of society. They attended lectures on immigration policy and the school to prison pipeline, and had an opportunity to tutor refugee students from diverse countries. Students grappled with these complex issues, which are often left out of the conversation in traditional education courses. Students processed their experiences through reflective writing, which provided an opportunity to ask questions, consider alternate perspectives, and gain a deeper understanding regarding the myriad of issues that impact and are impacted by education.

Teaching the Child, Teaching the Student

Much of the research presented, as well as other seminal studies that examine racial awareness, have examined these tenets only from the perspective of the teacher

candidate—how s/he developed a more complex understanding and appreciation for other perspectives, stories and experiences. If our teacher education programs are committed to successfully engaging difficult subjects of race, oppression and inequity in schools, communities and other social institutions, we must understand that multiple processes are occurring within the hearts and minds of teacher candidates and their young students alike. If we expect our teacher candidates to be able to advocate for social change in their classrooms, be a voice against oppression and discrimination, and effectively integrate a multicultural curriculum, we must give them the knowledge and skills to be able to do so. In order for our future early childhood teachers to be able to effectively engage in a dialogue around race and ethnicity, we must create spaces and conversations for this discussion to occur—both within the walls of the college classroom and in practice within an early childhood classroom, where they are engaging their biases in a real way. Encouraging discourse and dialogue about race, ethnicity and gender within the classroom is traditionally seen as an afterthought, or perhaps in response to an incident between children, rather than as a foundational component of the curriculum to be explored in every facet of the day.

I often tell the students that once they become self-aware regarding the multiple levels of inequality that exist in society, they will begin to see it, hear it and feel it everywhere. How then can we support our teacher candidates to first acknowledge and understand that racial bias exists in the early childhood classroom? How can we give them the tools to be empowered toward action through helping young children understand the etiology of their biased behavior or comments, and move to a place of change? The early childhood teacher candidates in my course began to see, hear and feel

the realness of these issues and how salient they were in the preschool classrooms. As the early childhood teacher candidates became more comfortable with exploring these issues within their own lives, they in turn became more aware of these issues within the classroom. Teacher candidates would remark how often they heard young children make biased comments or observed them excluding certain children in the classroom. This level of awareness quickly moved to action, as teacher candidates developed a sense of responsibility to engage these dynamics and determine ways to help young children understand the bias that is present. Early childhood teacher candidates learn that it is not enough to simply tell children that “it’s not nice to say those things.” Rather, they have developed the words and actions to help young children realize that bias is wrong, and explore where these feelings are coming from.

Conclusion

The need for increased exposure to content and meaningful field based learning experiences that connect theoretical constructs with “on the ground” teaching is essential. Supporting early childhood teacher candidates in the difficult conversations regarding race, and how to actively teach using a social justice and anti-racist approach throughout the curriculum, is imperative. This task is no simple one. Many schools would rather push for uniformity rather than individuality. They may focus on student learning, disregarding who that student is, and the identity that as teachers bring to the classroom. We must continue to push our early childhood teacher candidates to see their classroom as a place for social change, and to transform their teaching in such a way that each child understands who they are and has an opportunity to not only “tolerate” others, but join in the struggle for a more just and equitable world.

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