



TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT RACE AND DIFFERENCE

By Giuliana de Grazia, WSMS Diversity Practitioner

A couple of years ago I observed a white child playing in the block area. She had built a large building and arranged some of the small wooden people on what appeared to be the building's roof. She then lifted one wooden person up, as if were scaling the building, and used another to knock it down. I didn't notice that she had chosen only white people for the rooftop until I heard her say, "No brown people allowed!" I then realized that she was choosing white figures for the rooftop and a brown-skinned figure to be repeatedly excluded from the roof.

Feelings of surprise, concern, and responsibility consumed me. This is not okay! What do I do? Keep watching? Do I say something? Ask her to stop? What if I say the wrong thing? Ugh, I wish I hadn't seen this. Can I ignore it? Why is she doing this?

The question of *why* inspired me to become curious and to learn more for a few reasons. Montessori teachers work daily to better understand their children. Furthermore, as early childhood teachers, we are continually learning about how children make meaning from their experiences. We also want to know how children communicate the knowledge they absorb. I decided to ask the child a question, and I proceeded to learn that this child had recently read a chil-

dren's book about Ruby Bridges and another book about Martin Luther King, Jr. The child explained that white people did this. White people didn't let brown-skinned people in their buildings.

We talked for a little bit longer, and I realized that this child was interested in the power of white people from the stories she had read. She had not, however, picked up on the consequences of the power and the injustice of the power. She didn't realize that the stories were not championing white supremacists, but revealing a terrible and unjust part of our history, our country. I would need to find some books to read with this child to point out the injustice, the unkindness, and to invite her empathy.

This is only one example of a time that I didn't really know what to do or say. I was reminded of how hard it is to talk with children about race and difference, and I felt weak, like I should have found something more powerful to say in the moment. Perhaps now I could. But, honestly, without practice it can also be hard to talk with adults about differences and our society's response to them.

Many adults feel uncomfortable talking with children about race and difference. Perhaps this makes sense, since according to Derald Wing Sue, "How our

STOP AND THINK: Talking About Racial Identity

- What is it like for you when a child raises an issue about race? How comfortable are you talking this topic with children? What makes you uncomfortable? What would help you respond appropriately?
- In what kinds of situations in your life today do issues of racial difference come up? What is that like? Are there things you wished you understood better so you could speak more clearly about them?
- What, if anything, do you do when you see or hear racial prejudice, including a racist joke? What would you feel and do if someone told you that you spoke or behaved in a prejudiced way?

society perceives race is centuries old and is filled with ambivalence, confusion, misunderstanding, conflict, and intense, powerful feelings ... most people prefer to avoid the topic of race, to remain silent, to minimize its importance or impact, or to pretend not to notice it" (*Race Talk and The Conspiracy of Silence*, 2015, p. 5-6). His understanding aligns with the theory of 'aversive racism': the behaviors of white people whose egalitarian ideas conflict with their implicit biases, sometimes leading to discriminatory behavior, ambivalence, and avoidance (*The Aversive Form of Racism*, Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). This idea complicates the path forward. How can people of all races recognize and work against implicit biases?

Derald Wing Sue has advice for adults wanting to talk to children about race; however, his suggestions come with a great deal of work and accountability. He insists that adults must become highly aware of their own biases and relationships with race and difference before preparing to work with children. He writes, "Self-healing must come before other-healing" (2015, p. 213). His is a tall order. What if we don't yet feel prepared or "healed"? Should we stay silent?

Perhaps Sue sets the bar too high for

those of us who are just beginning to awaken to our biases or to the complexity of our participation in society. Isn't there some way we can talk to our children while we are also engaged in the learning and growth Sue describes?

Louise Derman-Sparks reminds us that when we aren't sure of just what to say as an answer, we can almost always help a child make meaning in some way. For example, we can ask questions to better understand what a child is thinking. We can let children know that it is okay to talk about what they notice and what they are trying to understand. We can take the role of listener, and then, after we have done some thinking and questioning about what to say, we can return to the conversation.

This is particularly important if we see something unfair or unkind. Derman-Sparks writes, "If you keep silent, you leave children alone to make sense of a hurtful world. If you wait until you are completely sure of yourself, until you know 'enough,' the moment will pass, and the children you work with will have more deeply learned negative attitudes about themselves and others" (2010, p. 19).

At WSMS, we sometimes look at situations by considering the presence of kindness or unkindness. Our children are practiced in identifying unkindness whether it takes the form of aggression or exclusion. We must practice, as well.

Practice making mistakes. Practice listening. Practice opening to other perspectives and truths. Adults are encouraged to create spaces or relationships in which they can practice with relative comfort. Sometimes these safe spaces are affinity spaces, other times they are groups of people who want to reflect and discuss challenging issues—the very issues mainstream culture insists we leave unspoken. At WSMS, we are creating these spaces for practice.

This year, WSMS has a faculty group with nearly thirty members called SEED (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity). Stefanie Eckhert and I lead the two hour discussions with activities and conversations that give participants practice

broaching uncomfortable topics. SEED describes its work on their website:

"The National SEED Project is a **peer-led professional development program** that creates conversational communities **to drive personal, organizational, and societal change** toward greater equity and diversity...SEED leaders design their seminars to include **personal reflection and testimony, listening to others' voices, and learning experientially and collectively**. Through this methodology, **SEED equips us to connect our lives to one another and to society at large** by acknowledging systems of oppression, power, and privilege."

For example, one SEED exercise invites participants to reflect on their perspectives by simply questioning, reflecting on, and discussing, "Whom was I taught to look down upon?" Everyone is asked to journal, to speak, and to listen. Sometimes we show a video about socio-economic class or racial identity. Participants come away with more self-knowledge, familiarity with their colleagues' experiences, and awareness that we are all taught, implicitly or explicitly, to rank and classify people. We consider how we automatically categorize people when simply passing them on the street or hearing their voices. Working through this discomfort together helps us to know ourselves better, especially as we interact with children and families in the classroom.

SEED meetings, however, are not always uncomfortable. We are building community and working as partners to learn from and with each other. We are regularly stimulated to approach our community as a place to teach and to learn. SEED meetings can feel empowering—we are in this together! We can support each other! This feeling of support is also the intention of WSMS's Diversity Council.

The Diversity Council spends less time on self-reflection and more time on implementation and organization. Every Diversity Council member is also in a SEED group, so they are sure to be doing the 'deeper work' in that group. The



Eric Hoffman, an anti-bias educator and author of bilingual children's books such as *No Fair to Tigers*, offers adults the following guidelines for responding to children's curiosity about difference:

- Just listen. Stay calm and interested. Don't make assumptions or judgments about the child.
- Figure out what the child wants to know. It may not be what the question appears to be on the surface.
- Listen for the feelings behind the words. Does the question reflect mere curiosity or also discomfort of some kind?
- Answer matter-of-factly. Use language appropriate to the child's developmental understanding.
- Always respond. If you do not know what to say, explain that you want to answer, but must first think about what to say. Get back to the child with your response by the next day.
- Follow up. Decide whether a particular child's question warrants follow-up activities.

(from Derman-Sparks and Olsen Edwards, *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves*)

intention of the Diversity Council is to support classrooms with resources and practices, while putting together a vision for the whole school. In these sessions, we use one another to work through specific classroom happenings, deal with challenging conversations, and develop lessons meeting the needs of a specific child or group of children.

For example, last year on the Diversity Council, we examined each classroom environment and talked through some choices that were clearly well-intentioned, but needed to be re-thought. How were we introducing dolls with disabilities? What messages about gender were our comments on children's clothing sending? When is it okay for a child to touch a teacher's hair? These conversations are hard! However, we now see, and continue reminding each other, that these interactions are what will help lead to developing truly anti-bias communities.

Some teachers have expressed the feeling that it's only getting harder; the more you learn, the more you worry about doing or saying the wrong thing. But we are not asked to do this challenging work alone. We have a community of adults committed to learning more and to supporting our children as best we can. I trust the people who have devoted their professional careers and lives to studying socialization, gender identity, race, etc. I can partner with them and learn from their stories to better understand different experiences, values, and truths.

It's okay to feel like you don't know, and it's important to continue trying to learn more, to think critically, to keep an open mind, to listen to others. It is not helpful, however, to ignore these topics or to imagine that race and difference do not exist. Just think of how important it is for adults to be people who children will come to with questions, with observations, and conversations about how they are making sense of our world. As adults, we can help children think critically, practice kindness, and make accurate meaning.

Last year in ALB, the after-lunch program for the oldest children at WSMS,



we spent a few weeks learning about skin-tone. In our first meeting, we heard the ideas WSMS five-year-olds were forming about skin. When asked, "How do you think you got your skin color?" some children responded:

"If you really wanna have a skin color, you have to touch your mom, in her tummy."

"It happens because your cells decide. The boss cells say what your skin color should be and the worker cells do it."

"By going in the sun."

"By standing next to your favorite color and the wind blows it onto you and you close your eyes."

"Somebody gives you your color when you're a baby."

"The people who make the world give the children skin color..."

What an opportunity for teaching, for offering children facts about difference! We extended our conversations from the science of skin-tone to the language some people use to describe different races. We had to prepare for these conversations, but we began with what the children were thinking. The conversa-

tions were not easy, but it was clear that the children had a lot to talk about!

If children want to talk about something, we need to listen; if children experience injustice, we need to respond. As a community, let's accept the discomfort and practice having hard conversations.

RESOURCES

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