

GROWING SEED AT WSMS: SEEKING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND DIVERSITY

By Giuliana de Grazia

We sat in a circle of fifty educators from around the country listening to words from Jamaica Kincaid's essay, "Girl":

...this is how to sew on a button; this is how to make a buttonhole for the button you have just sewed on; this is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming; this is how you iron your father's khaki shirt so that it doesn't have a crease; this is how you iron your father's khaki pants so that they don't have a crease; this is how you grow okra—far from the house, because okra tree harbors red ants.

The SEED leader then invited each of us to share our own versions of "boy" and "girl" that we had prepared before arriving at the week-long training in San Anselmo, California. We were asked to listen without responding as everyone shared some or all of their essays. I remember one teacher writing about his father and the unyielding pressure to play baseball. Many women talked about early coaxing to be thin and to be "perfect." The serial testimony lasted for over an hour, and I could feel the room filling with the "gender boxes" we had been asked to conform to from our earliest memories, everyone's slightly different with many strong themes enclosing our sense of self. Interestingly, after we finished, the leader did not ask us to reflect on the content of our essays; rather, he invited us to reflect on how it felt to share our stories and to listen. How did we feel physically? What feelings came up as we listened and prepared to share? We were accessing



multiple levels in the activity: gender stereotypes, the power of storytelling, the stigma of talking about gender and identity, the challenge of listening, self-awareness of our own voice, and the many unspoken layers that comprise our sense of who we are.

This activity is repeated each year at WSMS in smaller groups of teachers who volunteer to join SEED for monthly meetings that build community and raise awareness about identity, diversity, equity and education. I am always amazed to hear the stories, the eloquence, the creative expression that this activity inspires. And, I have become used to hearing about the power certain experiences have of binding us to conform to mainstream expectations at such an early age. The question always arises: do our children feel these pressures from us? Are we building boxes for children to squish themselves into because it is considered "normal"? Many activities in SEED connect the personal to the professional, and after three years of SEED meetings at WSMS, participants have grown both as individuals and as a more collectively conscious community.

Last year at WSMS, nearly thirty WSMS faculty members participated in SEED. Stefanie Eckhert and I, who were both trained by The National SEED Project, led two-hour sessions of activities and conversations. SEED is an organization developed in 1987 by Peggy McIntosh and Emily Style. It was founded at Wellesley College, and today it is the largest nationwide professional development project led by peers. 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.”

SEED helps teachers become authorities on themselves, create a respectful community for each other, and become more aware of their work in classrooms, with colleagues, and with families.

It may seem that learning about and challenging the injustices in our society that are related to racism, sexism, economic disparity, ableism, sexual identity, etc., have no place in early childhood education, or are unnecessary areas of expertise for early childhood educators. In fact, this work is critical. There is a clear need for teachers to better understand themselves and their perspectives while leading young children.

Current research points to reasons why we, as a community of adults who care deeply about the early childhood experience of our children, must pay attention to our own behaviors and perspectives. First, a sampling of research shows that children are not only living in an unequal society, but they



SELF-REFLECTION QUESTIONS FROM LEADING ANTI-BIAS EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

What experiences in school made you feel good about what your family is like, ethnic and racial background, economic situation, physical differences, and being male or female?

What experiences in school made you feel not good about those parts of who you are?

What do you think teachers, school administrators, and other school staff could have done differently to better support positive feelings about who you are?

also develop an awareness of race and ethnicity at a young age, and they make assumptions based on what their society teaches them (Soto and Swadener, 2002; Derman-Sparks and Edwards, 2010). By three years old, children have already developed ingroup preferencing (Bronson and Merryman, 2009). Soto and Swadener note in “Towards Liberatory Early Childhood Theory...” that while “it has taken a whole ‘oppressive village’ to systematically educate young children to internalize the stereotypes and hatred of racism...at the same time these research projects helped make the case that early childhood education is truly a window of opportunity for equity, social justice, and reconstruction” (Soto and Swadener, 2002, p. 44). To serve our children and families well, we must educate ourselves and our community about ourselves and our society.

How do we create these equitable classrooms and positive relationships with families? We start with ourselves. At SEED we look into ourselves, our ideas, and our practices, and we discuss and explore this with others, using resources, activities, and a dedication to sensitivity, openness and honesty.

One way of educating ourselves is through SEED’s fundamental idea to develop the “scholarship of selves.” This phrase, coined by SEED co-founder Emily Style, encourages teachers to consider the learning that exists in a classroom before bringing in books or content from external sources. Teachers and students focus on the stories and experiences that their own community can learn from. Style writes, “Half the curriculum walks in with students in the textbooks of their lives.”

These stories not only build our self-awareness, but also invite the practice of learning about others through listening. As we hear stories from our colleagues or our students, we become highly aware of the “danger of a single story,” as Chimamanda Adiche recounts in her famous TED Talk. If we have only heard that Africans live in rural villages, our knowledge is limited to an inaccurate stereotype. If we only read books with mother/father/sister/brother white suburban families, our knowledge is also limited to an untrue description of “normal.”

What if we never hear a story with someone like ourselves in it? What if we never see ourselves as strong, beautiful, heroic? Furthermore, what if we never hear a story or have a conversation about topics like race, gender or disability?

SEED gives us opportunities to hear one another's stories and to see the windows and mirrors that we share; we learn to understand our similarities and respect our differences. We can also examine stories from outside of our community through watching videos, listening to recordings, looking at art, reading articles, and even reading poetry. One poem we have read to observe "windows and mirrors" (similarities and differences) is the following piece by Lew Gardner:

*My mother's uncle had a horse.
The best time of a deadly relatives' Sunday
was to walk with him to the stable
and watch him feed the quiet animal,
to give it sugar from my own hand
and jump back away
from the big warm tongue,
to smell the hay and manure, to see
the white horse in the next stall,
with tail and mane like yellow silk.*

*If my mother and I ran into him
as he and the horse were making their rounds,
buying up the wonderful junk
they heaped and hauled in the wagon,
he'd lift me up to the seat
and let me hold the reins and yell "Giddy-up!"*

*In the spring of 4th grade,
one afternoon of silent division
we heard a clanking and looked outside.*

*My great-uncle! I could tell them all
how I had held those reins!
But everyone laughed at the hunched old man,
the obsolete wagon and horse,
the silly, clattering junk.
I did not tell them.*

We have read this poem, with the guidance of Emily Style, to observe the different views through the window. Most of the fourth graders in her article laugh at the old man, while the narrator imagines himself holding the reins. Sadly, the narrator remains silent. What if the narrator could share his perspective? Would hearing his voice influence how the other children saw the old man? This activity helps us see the importance of learning from one another, and of speaking up. We can better understand how perspectives influence knowledge and learning.

SEED also gives us a safe place to talk about the topics we've learned to avoid, and therefore have no practice talking about. For example, this year we had several sessions with a focus on race. We reflected on when and how we became aware of race, and we talked about how race influenced how people interacted with us. These conversations brought up the topic of microaggressions, a term that only some members were familiar with. As we were sharing examples of microaggressions in order for us all to begin to develop a shared understanding, someone observed how uncomfortable it felt to talk about race and microaggressions. We all agreed it was better to practice talking about it, even if it felt hard. Another participant offered, "Can you imagine if we had been practicing talking about this from when we were little?" This question brought us to one of the essential reasons we do this work: our conversations bring us to a greater awareness of how we can be better teachers.

Another element of SEED discussions that directly impacts our work in the classroom is the practice of listening and sharing time democratically. SEED activities are often created with regimented time limits to ensure we all share time evenly. This can translate directly into how we give children our undivided attention in the classroom, letting them complete their thoughts and stories without a barrage of adult questions and comments. It also raises our awareness of how to facilitate discussions in which all children are heard and given the opportunity to share. Too often in conversations, whether with adults or children, some people dominate while others stay silent. The more we practice with ourselves, the more we can guide our children to strive for balanced conversations in which all voices are heard.

Finally, our work in SEED regularly brings up the question of "What can we *do*?" Sometimes our conversations generate feelings of helplessness or anger. How is it that income and wealth inequality continues to sky-rocket, that mass shoot-





ings are commonplace, that school segregation remains the norm? In SEED, when we dig into the injustices and the horrors of our current society, we have a group of friends and colleagues to support each other, to question our personal choices, and to talk about how each of us could work against America's powerful systems of oppression. Colleagues have shared their experiences protesting, volunteering, or beginning a conversation with a friend or family member who holds a different opinion. We remind each other of Dr. Montessori's vision of creating peace through generations of children reaching their full human potential. I don't think that anyone in SEED thinks that we have made an impact on a large social scale, but we all feel that we are participants in the change we want to see for our world and our children. Every empathetic exchange, every relationship we forge, and every choice we make in the classroom is a sliver of hope towards change.

We hope this article has shed more light on how SEED impacts our community, and we encourage WSMS parents to consider finding a SEED group or forming their own group to practice listening, sharing, and thinking critically about ourselves and our society. Even if the parent group only meets a few times over the course of the year, they could generate a community like the teachers have built and do work that benefits themselves and their children.

RESOURCES

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