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## Supporting Conversations about Race and Racism with Young Children While Watching for Manifestations of Whiteness

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# SUPPORTING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE AND RACISM WITH YOUNG CHILDREN WHILE WATCHING FOR MANIFESTATIONS OF WHITENESS

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*Abstract: This article examines two first grade classrooms in Central Texas that routinely have conversations about racial justice. In both classrooms we studied, children participated in racial conversations in large group structured discussions with the teacher and in less formal peer conversations away from the teachers. We follow both classrooms and detail the ways in which the teachers supported conversations about race, racism and racial violence with and among the young children in their classes. We highlight specific strategies and mechanisms that both teachers used to open up their classrooms for social and racial justice conversations. Then, we show how even in highly skilled teachers' classrooms, whiteness can invade children's conversations about race, racism, and racial violence, particularly when the teacher is not present. Given these findings, we offer a set of implications for early childhood teachers who understand the importance of young children talking about race and racism but who want to deprive whiteness in those discussions.*

Children are witness to racist events in real time and through social media (Day, 2015). They both witness and experience continuing racial injustices in the U.S. (Chaudry, et. al, 2010). In addition to witnessing racial violence on the news, social media, textbooks or in their neighborhoods, children learn about race and racism from everyday conversation (Brown & Brown, 2010). Many adults, particularly teachers, are hesitant to talk directly to young children about race and racism (Adair & Doucet, 2014). When conversations about race and racism do happen, they can be difficult, tokenized, or act as a suppressive tool, especially for young children of color<sup>1</sup> (Brown & Brown, 2011; Husband, 2012). Whiteness can enter or guide these conversations, making them a continuation of white privilege rather than a reflection of and transformation towards racial justice (Campbell & Valauri, 2019; Copenhaver-Johnson, 2006). During a four-month ethnographic study of two first-grade classrooms where racial conversation was welcomed and expertly supported as a class, the following took place:

*Khalid, a six-year-old African-American boy and Michelle, a six-year-old White girl are sitting together during reading time as they read 'A case for loving: The fight for interracial marriage' by Selina Alko, a book about history of interracial marriages in the United States. When they read a text about African-American people and the term "colored" is used, Michelle looks at Khalid and announces loudly, "I am White, and you are colored." Khalid looks at her, pauses briefly and then nods, before fixing his gaze at the book again.*

Michelle's explanation and assignment of race to Khalid (instead of Khalid asserting his own racial identities when and if he wishes) is an example of whiteness operating even in classrooms that support children's conversations about race, racism, and racial identities. Khalid deserves to use his own agency in developing identity. Whiteness works very hard to keep that privilege of naming, assigning and enforcing identities within White communities in power and away from communities of color. How can young children be supported in having conversations about race, racism and racial justice at school? How do these conversations run the risk of reinforcing whiteness and white privilege?

This article examines two first grade classrooms in Central Texas that routinely have conversations about racial justice. In both classrooms we studied, children participated in racial conversations in large group structured discussions with the teacher and in less formal peer conversations away from the teachers. We follow both classrooms and detail the ways in which the teachers supported conversations about race, racism, and racial violence

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<sup>1</sup> In this article we use the phrase children of color and BIPOC-identifying (Black, Indigenous, People of Color-identifying) children interchangeable to refer to children from racial minority groups.

with and among the young children in their classes. We highlight specific strategies and mechanisms that both teachers used to open up their classrooms for social and racial justice conversations. Then, we show how even in highly skilled teachers' classrooms, whiteness can invade children's conversations about race, racism, and racial violence, particularly when the teacher is not present. Given these findings, we offer a set of implications for early childhood teachers who understand the importance of young children talking about race and racism but who want to deprivilege whiteness in those discussions.

## **Children's Growing Understanding of Racial Injustice**

Children's early understanding of race is usually a social experience. Between three and five years of age, they start drawing conclusions about aspects of identity the larger society pays attention to, such as race in the U.S. (Hughes, Bigler & Levy, 2007; Derman-Sparks, 2008). They internalize messages early on, sometimes through direct instruction about race but more often through the ways people talk about racial markers, what they see people of varying skin colors and ethnicities experiencing, and how they see people represented in media and books (Segura-Mora, 2008; Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Bigler & Liben, 2007). As children internalize messages about power and privilege with regard to gender, race/ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and language, they work through emerging ideas in their play and through peer talk (Kuby, 2013; Ryan & Grieshaber, 2004; Bigler & Wright, 2014; Hyland, 2010; DiAngelo and Sensoy 2010). They also begin to discriminate, using their emerging and inferred ideas about race (Boutte, 2008; Derman-Sparks, 2008; Tenorio, 2007; 2008; 2009; Brown, Souto-Manning & Tropp Laman, 2010).

### *Deprivileging Whiteness in Early Childhood Education*

Young children operate within larger societal constructions that often privilege whiteness. Many scholars have demonstrated ways in which early childhood education as an institution is built on whiteness in theory and practice (Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018; Saavedra & Pérez, 2018; Nxumalo & Adair, 2019). In this study, we look at conversations from a critical whiteness perspective, which draws on critical race theory to help understand children's conversations.

Whiteness is a social construction that normalizes White ways of being while constructing everything else as "other" (Leonardo, 2009). This norming process affords certain people hidden (or not so hidden) privileges that can be oppressive (Sleeter, 2016). Whiteness produces and maintains structures in which mostly White and wealthy people are able to maintain their position of power through unintentional and unconscious acts sanctioned by the social and cultural processes (Doane & Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Whiteness often emerges as a barrier to speaking openly about race or speaking about race from the perspectives of students, families, and communities of color (Brown, 2016). While there is significant movement to incorporate and broaden developmental knowledge to theorists and communities of color as well as deprivilege whiteness (Nxumalo & Adair, 2019; Pérez & Saavedra, 2017), schooling continues to support many manifestations of whiteness.

### *Manifestations of Whiteness*

Whiteness can be hard to trace or recognize because it is, as Leonardo explains, upholding white supremacy as a "normal" state of being (Leonardo, 2004). Building on the work of Harris (1993) and Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), Dixson and Rousseau's (2005) work shows that subtle acts of white supremacy or "whiteness" that seem natural or taken-for-granted can be visible and traceable, thus making it recognizable and finite. They refer to this visibility as "manifestations of whiteness" (2005, p.8) that can be seen through efforts to control and exclude people of color by creating labels for those who do not speak, act or see the world as monolingual, White middle class Americans as well as through a range of political, socio-historical and physical efforts to ignore (or dismiss) the experiences, movements, explanations, community practices and historical realities of communities of color. In school, this can be teachers providing white-normative children's literature with only supporting characters of color or dismissing children's stories about Juneteenth but welcoming a story about the rodeo or allowing young children to touch each other's hair without permission.

In conversation, manifestations of whiteness can be seen through the arrangement of who is speaking, how much, and who is able to control their identities, representation and presence in those interactions. Whiteness can be visible when common sense ways of being as well as norms, values, and regulations are shown to reflect the interest of a particular group of people in the society (Nakayama & Judith, 1999). This visibility is important to asking questions about whose experiences and voice are privileged or even present in any given social experience, such as

conversation (Adair, 2014; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). In this study, critical race perspective helps us to understand what pedagogical practices allowed important conversations about race, racism and racial justice to emerge in the classroom among young children but also at whether manifestations of whiteness were present.

## Method

This analysis of racial conversations in early grade classrooms draws from the much larger Agency and Young Children study<sup>2</sup>. For this paper, we look at data from two classrooms that supported consistent and ongoing racial conversations. We defined racial conversations as conversations with children that included any reference to race or racial justice or racial history. These first-grade classrooms were purposefully chosen for two reasons. First, the teachers, Mr. James and Ms. Ruiz, deliberately engaged in conversations around race because social justice was an integral part of their curriculum. Both teachers were supported and recognized by school leadership for skillfully facilitating meaningful racial justice conversations with their young students.

Second, both teachers used project-based learning as a primary learning tool. Children could use their agency to initiate conversation, projects and learning ideas. Agency is the ability to influence and make decisions about what and how something is learned (Adair, 2014). Agency allows children to bring up race, racism and racial injustice in conversation with one another.

### *Classroom Sites that Supported Racial Conversations with Children*

Ms. Ruiz and Mr. James worked at a public and private elementary school, respectively, in Central Texas. Ms. Ruiz was in her first year of teaching and had gone through a traditional four-year teacher certification program at a prestigious, large public university. Mr. James was in his fifteenth year of teaching and completed teacher certification through an alternative certification program at a historically Black college.

#### **Mr. James's classroom**

Mr. James taught at St. Mary's School, a preK-8<sup>th</sup> grade private school that served 395 students. His classroom had 18 children with an equal number of girls and boys. The classroom community included one African-American girl, two biracial (African-American/White) boys, one Indian-American girl, five children from Latinx families and nine White children. Mr. James self-identified as White and is a father of two adopted African-American children.

#### **Ms. Ruiz's classroom**

Ms. Ruiz taught at Connor Elementary, a dynamic public school in a large urban school district in Texas. Ms. Ruiz's classroom had 17 children, six girls and eleven boys, of which three were African-American, seven were Latinx, six White, and one was biracial (White and African-American). Ms. Ruiz self-identified as bi-racial and Latinx.

### *Data Collection*

In order to collect data in Ms. Ruiz's and Mr. James's classrooms, we spent 1-2 days each week for four months engaged in participant observation. We spent some time helping and some time observing, documenting, and recording. We took detailed field notes, video and audio recordings of most peer conversations, regardless of whether or not they appeared to be about or concerning race. Our field notes detailed the ways in which children talked about race with one another away from the teacher as well as how the teacher and children spoke about race when in class discussions. We also noted the books and other resources that the teachers used to talk about difficult subject matter such as unfair working conditions, slavery and segregation with the young children in their class. We shared our notes and observations often with both teachers for their feedback and insight about racial conversation.

Towards the end of the four-month fieldwork, we filmed in both classrooms for three days. Our goal was to capture as much of what was happening in each full day as possible. We chose days to film in which both teachers planned class discussions about racism. The films ensured that we had documented the conversations the class had together and the conversations children had with one another without the teacher. We wanted to go back to the conversations multiple times to look for nuances like body language, context, spatiality, positioning of bodies and tone of voice. Videos also enabled multivocality (Adair & Kurban, 2019) in our research because we were able to

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<sup>2</sup> The Agency and Young Children study was a video-cued multi-sited multivocal ethnography that was trying to understand how agency impacts children's learning. Data collection was carried out in 4 classrooms in 3 schools in Central Texas (See Adair, 2014; Adair, Colegrove & McManus, 2017).

show them to the teachers and talk about them to make sure we were making sense of what we were seeing. We filmed from the time the children arrived until they went home. We used two cameras, one focused on the teacher and the larger group discussions and the other camera moved around the room to capture smaller discussions and peer interactions around the room. The filming resulted in over thirty hours of footage from each classroom. After filming was complete, we transcribed the videos, which yielded over 200 pages of transcript data.

### *Data Analysis*

Data collected through observations and transcripts went through several rounds of qualitative analysis. We took an inductive approach to our analysis (Creswell, 2013; Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). In the first round, we read through all the transcripts and field notes and generated a list of key terms related to race and social justice (such as White, Black, fairness, immigration, slavery, slave and so forth. We then searched for those key terms in all the transcripts and field notes to make sure we were not missing any conversations.

Next, we focused on the conversations children conducted without a teacher present in which children brought up race with one another. We used emergent coding (Punch, 2014) to categorize how children brought up race. In our data, children talked about race – or summoned racial conversation – while doing one of the following: *giving information, seeking clarification, using a person as pivot to enhance understanding, using an object to enhance understanding, and asking questions*. This list became the codes for the analysis of the transcripts and field notes. In the next round, we looked at the video recordings of all the isolated racial conversations that happened away from teachers. We wanted to understand the contexts as well as children’s body language in those conversations. We located patterns in the kinds of racial conversations children had away from their teachers and the roles different children played in those conversations, and those became the themes that emerged.

Although Mr. James’s and Ms. Ruiz’s classrooms were very different from one another demographically, they made similar pedagogical and content decisions which supported racial conversations. For the remainder of this article, we share data from both classrooms to make sense of how racial conversations happen in early childhood settings. First, we detail the kind of teaching and learning environments teachers created to set the stage for talking about race. Next, we share common pedagogical strategies that effectively initiated and supported conversations about race, racism and racial justice with and without teachers present. We see these pedagogical tools as necessary steps for teachers who want to support more racial justice conversations with young children. Finally, we share three manifestations of whiteness that emerged when young children had conversations without a teacher present.

### *Teaching and Learning Environments That Can Support Conversation*

Classrooms that support conversation, particularly about children’s real lives, require space and time to talk, share, laugh, listen and offer detail spontaneously when the idea comes to mind (Genishi & Dyson, 2009). Classrooms that are open enough so that children can share their stories regularly in a trusting and caring environment make conversations about race and racism more likely, and are more likely to be inclusive of many children’s perspectives and vantage points (Kuby 2013; Wohlwend, 2015). Our data showed that both classrooms cultivated a teaching and learning environment with agency, dialogic teaching and community building.

### *Agency*

In both the classrooms, we observed that teachers deliberately created a space where children could use their agency in their learning, meaning they could “influence and make decisions about what and how something is learned in order to expand capabilities” (Adair, 2014, p. 219). Both classrooms were unique in early childhood education because although children’s agency has been linked to improvements in learning and development outcomes (Adair, 2014; Bandura, 2001; Carpendale & Lewis, 2006; Corsaro, 2005) as well as well-being and neurological functioning (Bandura, 2001), many children do not have consistent or equitable access to agency in their learning (Crosnoe, 2006; Fuller, 2007, Genishi, 1992; Colegrove & Adair, 2014; Adair, Colegrove & McManus, 2017).

In Ms. Ruiz’s and Mr. James’s classrooms, children used their agency in a variety of ways. They moved around the classrooms without permission, selected their own partners, worked often in collaborative groups on long-term projects and created products with materials they were interested in using. Learning did not have to be still and quiet. They were not restricted to their tables, or to their partners by their teachers. This created a space for children to work out issues on their own and develop a sense of community and individual empowerment made the many racial conversations possible as children tried to further their understanding.

In both Mr. James’s and Ms. Ruiz’s classrooms, students had multiple opportunities to have conversations about all kinds of subject matter. Children were invited to have conversations with each other and with their teacher

in both formal and informal ways. They had conversations everyday as a whole class, small groups, pairs, and among their friends throughout the day. Children shared with their classmates about parents who were in prison, sick or injured. For instance, one child in Ms. Ruiz's class shared with the class about her parents who were injured at work but were unable to get time off. Ms. Ruiz then asked the class how they felt about this situation and what kinds of rights workers should get if they are injured or hurt at work. In Mr. James's classroom, children shared about their racial identities and family issues such as divorce and death. Their topics were met with comfort and questions by the teacher and other children in the class. The open nature of this time allowed children to talk about things that were important to them and connect it to the larger issues of equity and social justice that they were talking about in class.

### *Dialogic Teaching*

Both teachers believed in a dialogic approach to teaching (Freire, 2012; Freire & Macedo, 1995), as opposed to didactic, teacher-directed set of experiences for children. During our interviews with the teachers, they told us that they saw children as co-constructors of knowledge; that their role as an educator was to produce new and transformative learning experiences with children as well as to engage in critical dialogue with children by engaging in critical literacy within their classrooms (Vasquez, 2014). Teachers often introduced new topics with questions and experiments. When direct teaching was used, it was followed by embodied activities to practice and deepen the concept.

### *Community Building*

Both classrooms had a strong focus on building community among the children in their classrooms. The teachers spent a lot of time helping the children in their classrooms develop empathy and learn to take others' perspectives. Children practiced socio-emotional skills in everyday situations of conflict or problem-solving, rather than through specific SEL branded lessons or curriculum. Often both Ms. Ruiz and Mr. James would see children struggling or trying to figure something out socially, and the teachers would watch before intervening. They let children sort out many issues on their own. Children practiced these skills often even when they were not around their teachers.

Collectively, agency, dialogic teaching and community building set the stage for racial conversations to take place in the classroom. To initiate and further support racial conversations as a class, teachers also used a number of pedagogical strategies. Between both classrooms there were four common strategies that successfully led to conversations about race, racism and racial justice among and/or with young children at school. First, teachers used strong children's literature that directly addressed race and racism along with books that normalized racial diversity. Second, teachers used materials and resources about current events to prompt conversation or support children's concerns by talking about them as a class. Third, teachers shared or referenced their own racial identities often. Fourth, teachers connected past and present racial injustices. It is important to note that these strategies were shared by teachers who did not know one another or work together, and in schools that were very different from one another. Still, these four strategies seemed to make racial conversation happen in both first-grade classrooms regardless of teacher, school and student demographic differences.

### *Strong Children's Literature*

Ms. Ruiz and Mr. James spent extensive time and effort providing children with adequate time, opportunities, and resources to develop knowledge and vocabulary to help them have racial conversations in the classroom. Both of the teachers had an extensive library with many books on social justice issues as well as books that were about everyday childhood experiences with characters who happened to be from communities of color. The normalization of racial diversity paralleled a desire to talk openly about social injustices. Their social justice books told stories about racism, protests, and/or discrimination from a child's point of view. Mr. James used several books that directly described agentic and active stories of fighting against the conditions of slavery such as *Henry's Freedom Box* by Ellen Levine, and *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt* by Deborah Hopkinson. Ms. Ruiz also had several books about social justice issues in her classroom that described protests and unfair working conditions such as "The Day the Crayons Quit" by Drew Daywalt and "¡Si, Se Puede! / Yes, We Can!: Janitor Strike in L.A." by Diana Cohn. Both teachers included books about collective efforts to stop injustices as well as books about specific people such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks and Ruby Bridges. Teachers sometimes chose books to read aloud and discuss with the children. Sometimes, the teachers put the books into the class library or showcased them on a shelf or table where children could notice it and choose to read it. Children were also free to use them as they worked on their projects or other classroom activities.

Both teachers constantly updated their library, depending on their children's interests and questions. For instance, during an interview Ms. Ruiz told us that when they were talking about race, Hannah, a biracial student in her classroom, got curious about her identity. She told us, "*I could see her frustration, that she couldn't find herself reflected in any of the materials that we had. She asked whether she was Black or White after we had talked about racial discrimination and slavery.*" Hannah's concerns prompted Ms. Ruiz to rethink her materials. She brought in books about the history of interracial marriages and stories told from the point of view of biracial children to help children think about having more than one racial identity.

### *Materials and Resources that Show Current Racial Injustices*

The teachers shared videos, photographs, and anecdotes to help children develop an understanding of social justice issues. Children used these and other resources to work on projects such as the one about the underground railroad that Mr. James's class was working on while we were filming. The teachers also brought in other kinds of resources, like videos and photographs to share with their students to carry their conversations forward. Mr. James once shared the story of Trayvon Martin after his death with the classroom during morning circle time when they were discussing about discrimination that African-American people continue to face. Ms. Ruiz showed the children videos of a janitors' strike in L.A. and those of McDonald's employees protesting for better wages after she read "*¡Si, Se Puede! / Yes, We Can!: Janitor Strike in L.A.*" with them. Both teachers used resources to start conversations, projects or push the class towards a nuanced idea of racial justice, including connections between Native-American removal policies and immigration policies or projects connecting the underground railroad with the current #Blacklivesmatter movement. Teachers encouraged children to have lots of conversations in small groups.

### *Past and Present Connections to Racial Justice*

Both teachers referred often to historical events that are often challenging and therefore avoided by early grade teachers. These included White-European dominance through forced enslavement, the dangerous and courageous process of creating the underground railroad, farmworker protests, child labor, Native American violent removal and women's suffrage. Both teachers connected historical events of civil, immigration and gender injustices with current injustices. Usually these connections between the past and present happened through children's picture book that depicted historical events. Children were encouraged to apply the books to their current lives and this meant lots of difficult conversations, often including race.

Ms. Ruiz read a lot of books about Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks, paying specific attention to the use of boycotts to make change. The children constructed timelines with different boycotts as a way to better understand the civil rights movement and the many people who participated. One morning, Ms. Ruiz showed the children videos of janitors' protests in Los Angeles and strikes by Walmart and McDonald's employees as modern examples of a tool used during the civil rights movement. She engaged the children in a conversation about how protests and strikes are still relevant in today's world and not just a thing of the past. When she showed a photo of Walmart employees protesting for minimum wage and asked the children why they thought they were on strike, one of the boys said, "*They are boycotting, because they want to work the whole time, till the Walmart closes, not a little while and then go back home.*" Another boy added, "*Yes, they want to work more hours so they can get more money.*" She also made connections to how teachers could go on strike if they felt that their students were not getting the best quality education or resources in school, to which one of the boys asked, "*Would you go on strike if you didn't have a computer, Ms. Ruiz?*"

In Mr. James's classroom, the children learned about the underground railroad and the many ways enslaved people tried to escape or fight back against White, powerful owners. Mr. James told us that his goal was to help the children see the fight and movement that people used to stop slavery from existing as an institution. One morning, Mr. James brought a picture book titled, 'Henry's Freedom Box' to talk about the ways in which both Henry Box Brown tried to escape slavery after losing his family and to emphasize that many people and communities helped him. His goal was to help the children see that efforts to change injustices require groups, not just one leader or hero. Just as he was about to read the book, Marigold raised her hand and told Mr. James and her class that she had heard about Trayvon Martin on the radio earlier that morning. She said that his story—being shot and killed by George Zimmerman—sounded a lot like what happened to enslaved people. Mr. James led a conversation with the children about the connection between what happened long ago and what is happening now between Black communities and the police. The children were stunned to learn that Zimmerman was not in jail. Mr. James reassured the class that "*we know it is wrong to think someone is dangerous just by their skin color but there are a lot of adults who don't know that.*" He asked the children a lot of questions about why they think these things keep happening. At the end of

the discussion one of the biracial children in the class, Isaac, declared that he was African-American and that he wanted everyone to know because his community had been through a lot.

Both teachers connected social justice historical content to children's everyday lives. The books, materials and other resources that they used in the classroom became living moments through which children could make sense of larger societal issues, particularly racial injustices. As the above examples illustrate, a few months into the year, the children made many of the connections between the past and the present on their own and initiated conversation both with the teachers and away from the teachers.

Both Ms. Ruiz and Mr. James supported racial conversations in which they were present and participating as well as when they were not present. One reason why these conversations happened so often in the first-grade classrooms was because both teachers cultivated and welcomed children to talk about race. When teachers were present, racial justice was privileged as the frame through which children spoke with the group. Their insight, stories and connections were from an empathetic or engaged stance with communities of color. However, when the teacher was not present this was not always the case.

Young children in both classrooms struggled to center their conversations in racial justice when teachers were not present. White children in class especially struggled, sometimes making comments or connections that elevated whiteness to the operating framework for the conversation to the exclusion of racial justice. We believe that better understanding this tendency will help teachers recognize (or look out for) manifestations of whiteness as they arise in racial conversations among children without teachers present and then be able to proactively work against it in preparing children to have racial conversations without an adult that still privilege racial justice, not whiteness.

## Occasional Manifestations of Whiteness in Children's Racial Conversations

In both Ms. Ruiz's and Mr. James's classrooms, children sometimes had racial conversations that ignored the established classroom-community values of social justice, taking one another's stories seriously and open racial conversations. In such moments, whiteness (rather than racial justice) manifested as the operational force. Three manifestations of whiteness were most common in these conversations away from the teacher. These manifestations of whiteness are all ways that whiteness, white supremacy or the normalization of White perspectives as operative or singular, took over conversations in ways that deprivileged the perspectives, ideas and experiences of children of color present in the conversations. We briefly define each manifestation and then offer a data example from both classrooms to show how these manifestations appeared. After these examples, we offer ways that teachers could use pedagogical strategies to support children's racial conversations while watching out for manifestations of whiteness that are possible when young children continue conversations without teachers present.

Manifestation #1: Whiteness is the primary source of knowledge.

In some cases, White children in both classrooms insisted that their perspective be considered first and most in ways they did not do when the teacher was present.

Manifestation #2: White perspectives or the perspective of White students are the one and only legitimate perspective.

Sometimes, White children insisted that their idea about race was the right or correct one, even when the conversations were about racial identities that more closely matched the experience and community of the BIPOC-identifying children in the conversation.

Manifestation # 3: Whiteness can borrow, connect to or share racial experiences of BIPOC-identifying children without permission.

Sometimes, White children explained the identities or experiences of BIPOC-identifying children to them without permission. They assumed that others' stories and identities were theirs to talk about without consent or seeking understanding or approval first.

In the following two examples, one each from the classrooms of Ms. Ruiz and Mr. James, we show how the manifestations of whiteness emerged in racial conversations away from teachers. In the first example, a group of children in Ms. Ruiz's class have a conversation about biracial identities away from her. In the second example, the children in Mr. James's class have a conversation about enslavement.

### *Biracial Families: A Story from Ms. Ruiz's Classroom*

In Ms. Ruiz's classroom, most of the books featured strong lead characters of color. Typically, she read these books with the whole class. Sometimes the children read them with a "book buddy." The book buddy program was an opportunity for fifth grade students to read books together with first graders. Both Ms. Ruiz and the fifth-

grade teacher prioritized books about social (and particularly racial) justice. So, both classes were accustomed to mostly reading books about or by communities of color. One day, Hannah, who identified as biracial and David, who identified as White, were both reading a book with Mateo, a Latinx fifth grader, during book buddy time. David had picked out a book on interracial families and both David and Hannah were reading the book with Mateo. The book was titled “What a Family” by Rachel Isadora and was about a grandfather explaining to his grandson about degrees of cousins in their very different looking family which had members from European, African and Asian heritages. At one page, David paused and looked closely at the picture. “*Wait, her cousins are White! Look, they are White!*” He then changed his statement to a question and asked Hannah, “*They are White?*” Then he looked at Mateo who did not respond but looked disapprovingly with a frown and furrowed eyebrows at David. David immediately started answering his own question. “*Well, they ARE! They are the darkest White. Oh, she is White. They are White (pointing to the picture). They are Black (pointing to a Brown face). They are Black, but these two are White, right?*” David asked this last question but did not wait for an answer from Hannah or Mateo. He continued to read the book out loud. After a few pages, he stopped again and looked closely at the pictures. “*It’s weird how they have different kinda eyes. Like the White ones have these sorta eyes (pointing to the White faces) and the Black ones have these sorta eyes (pointing to the Brown faces).*” Hannah disagreed and said, “*What is that? I don’t know if they are different.*” David responded quickly, “*Well, they look different to ME!*” Then David started reading the book again over Hannah’s voice, who was trying to respond. Hannah stopped talking and they finished the book.

Despite Hannah’s objection and Mateo’s silent disapproval, David continued to read the book, asking rhetorical questions to the two children of color, one of whom was five years older than him. David asked racialized questions and then immediately answered them himself without seeking or waiting for engagement, ideas, answers or thoughts from the BIPOC-identifying children in his group, essentially denying them a voice (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). David offered Hannah and Mateo racial opinions to make sense of the differences he assumed existed and took up all of the space in the conversation. When David pointed out that eyes of children with different skin colors looked different to him and Hannah disagreed, David ignored her and insisted that they looked different to him. David’s insistence on his racial opinion and interpretation of race prevail was not something we saw him do when Ms. Ruiz was present. Whiteness or the perspective of White people was positioned as both the source of knowledge (manifestation #1) and the most true perspective (manifestation #2). When Hannah argued against David’s interpretation of the eyes he replied, “*Well they look different to me.*” This insistence by David that his interpretation of racial features as a White person was correct (better than Hannah’s) was met with silence by both Hannah and Mateo. The silence could have been resistance, disengagement, or other kinds of coping mechanisms towards racial violence imposed by dismissive White perspectives. She could have just not wanted to participate or object in that moment for a variety of reasons. Hannah was a strong biracial child, who routinely questioned her teacher’s choice of materials. She shared her opinion freely when Ms. Ruiz was present. And yet in the moment with David, she was silent and did not participate.

David, in the moment and often in conversations away from the teacher, was unable to recognize or value the “experiential knowledge of people of color” (Matsuda et al, 1993). There was little space or time for counter-narrative (Delgado, 1989), in stark contrast to the racial conversations led by the teacher. The conversation and the silence ran the risk of reinforcing—if only to David—that his opinion or labeling mechanisms as a White person was the most deserving of time and attention in institutional spaces.

### *Assigning Personal Connections to Enslaved Families: A Story from Mr. James’s Classroom*

Mr. James began a unit on enslavement by emphasizing the that tribal groups had lived for thousands of years in Western and Central Africa as civilizations and that White-European used horrible force to capture them and bring them to the U.S. The unit emphasized how enslaved people fought back against their captors and the injustices they experienced. For this reason, Mr. James spent most of the time in the unit on the Underground Railroad. The children designed a project to explain the Underground Railroad to other children in the school. As part of the project, children had a lot of class conversations that both involved race, racial identities and racialized struggles across time, and privileged enslaved peoples’ perspectives on what happened.

Sometimes, however, children had conversations that privileged a White dominant perspective. In one such conversation, two biracial (African-American and White) students, Wilson and Isaac, were talking to Hugh, a White student in the class. Navya, whose parents are from India, worked along silently next to Isaac. Although Navya does not say anything in the conversation, her identity is invoked and discussed. It is important to note that Wilson and Isaac talked often with one another about their skin tone. Wilson had a much lighter skin tone than Isaac but not as light as many of the other children in the class. Navya did not discuss her skin color much with others in the class but was always forthcoming with ideas and encouraged constantly by her teacher to share her opinions.

While all three of the boys were working on their posters about the underground railroad in a group away from Mr. James, Hugh started a conversation in which he explained race and slavery to Isaac and Wilson. He looked at Isaac and said, “*Isaac, some slaves came from India. People in India are Black too.*” Wilson joined in, “*Yeah, and people from the United States are Black, like my mom.*” Isaac did not look up. Instead he continued to work on his model of a train track for his interpretation of the underground railroad. Navya, who often had opinions and liked to talk while working with her friends, continued to work quietly next to Isaac. She did not look up either. A few minutes later, Wilson announced that Isaac was a slave.

Wilson: Isaac is a slave!

Hugh: Isaac is not a slave.

Isaac: Yeah, I’m not a slave!

Wilson (louder than before): Yeah, but maybe someone in your family was.

Isaac: No one in my family is slaves. That was a long time ago, so...

Wilson: Slaves are gone a long time ago. Oh, but don’t you know there are still slaves in some other countries?

At this point, Isaac picked up his model and moved away from the table. Eventually he walked over to Mr. James who was standing by the project supplies. Isaac, who felt enabled to proudly announce to his entire class that he was African-American when his teacher talked about Trayvon Martin during circle time, chose to walk away when his identity was discussed in ways that he did not consent to or seem to like.

While we cannot infer why, there was a sense by at least Wilson and Hugh (as well as with Michelle and David in previous stories) that they could tell Isaac about being a slave. Wilson insisted that either Isaac or someone in Isaac’s family had to have been enslaved. Hugh answered for Isaac and told the group that he was not a slave. Both assertions spoke for and on behalf of Isaac’s identities. Hugh and Wilson felt comfortable enough to give information about skin tone and slavery to Isaac. They did not ask a question but rather asserted an identity they assumed to be most relevant (manifestation #1) for Isaac and they both did not wait for Isaac or Navya to respond. Hugh and Wilson ignored Isaac’s assertion that he was not a slave and that no one in his family was enslaved (manifestation #2).

In both stories, other children challenged David, Hugh, and Wilson, yet their ideas centered in whiteness prevailed. They insisted that their perspectives were the true perspectives, ignoring the possible merit of others’ points of view and/or experiences. BIPOC-identifying children were used as pivots to further White understandings of race. In all of our data (audio, video and field notes), we have no instance of a BIPOC-identifying child using a White child to understand race nor is there an instance where they pushed their views of race on White children. White-identifying children borrowed experiences of children of color without seeking permission from them to further their understanding about race. They did that by either not giving them space to talk, like when David explained skin tones to Hannah and Mateo, or by raising their voices when they insisted that theirs was the correct perspective, such as when Wilson insisted that somebody in Isaac’s family was a slave. These often resulted in BIPOC-identifying children leaving the space. It is also notable that BIPOC-identifying children varyingly seemed to defer, defend themselves against or negotiate their White peers’ statements. White insistence that people of color have to deal with, or work through their racial opinions and thinking without being consulted is a form of microaggression that we observed when the teacher was not present.

### *Making Sense of Manifestations of Whiteness that Appear in Young Children’s Racial Conversations*

These manifestations of whiteness occurred in both classrooms and were led/introduced by White students. They occurred in Ms. Ruiz’s classroom in which White students were soundly in the numerical racial minority. They occurred in Mr. James’s classroom where White students were in the racial majority. The presence of whiteness was evident despite teachers’ skill at introducing and supporting young children in difficult racial conversations. And the manifestations of whiteness only occurred when children talked away from their teachers.

Manifestations of whiteness we highlight here could be seen as an assertion of children’s white privilege, wherein Michelle, David, Hugh and Wilson feel entitled to assert an opinion about others while dismissing the opinions of others. We could see the manifestations of whiteness as exclusion when they asserted their opinions, ignoring the perspectives and experiences of children of color. These conversations could be interpreted as racist and in need of being corrected. It seems problematic to blame young children for the manifestations of whiteness they bring into racial conversations and yet there is significant harm and danger in allowing whiteness to dismiss, ignore, devalue or oppress the racial conversation contributions of children of color.

Tobin (2000) urges us to see children's talk as more than just a means of conveying their previously held notions, beliefs and thoughts. Instead, he pushes us to look at children's conversations as "positions that are being tried out and developed in the course of talking about them" (p. 19). By doing so, we begin to see children's words as a representation of the larger social meanings that they are trying out and attempting to make sense of. What children say, for example, tells us more about larger shared concerns than just about the child herself. These children's statements would represent not their individual psyches but the larger discourse that enables and maintains whiteness. Their words and actions could then be seen as the embodiment of white privilege the way it is prevalent in the larger society. In doing so, we shift the onus from Michelle, David, Hugh and Wilson as individuals to the larger discourse that surrounds us, a discourse is almost always dealing with or dominated by whiteness. Bringing attention to whiteness makes whiteness visible in early childhood spaces, and helps to make space for teachers to notice and intentionally counter it as we collectively work to deprivilege whiteness in early childhood settings.

## **Implications for Early Childhood Education**

Even in classrooms that support racial conversations and work hard to privilege communities of color, teachers' absence can enable whiteness to stubbornly emerge. Whiteness brings with it an insistence on White perspectives being correct and more important. Whiteness also brings with it a range of microaggressions that include children using children's racial identities and community knowledge against them. Whiteness can invade children's conversations and can thereby undo teachers' hard work to decenter whiteness. This, however, does not mean that teachers shy away from racial conversations with young children or that they do not give children the space and agency to have these conversations on their own. Our findings that young children invoked whiteness to talk about race and racism when teachers were not present suggest that young children may need some extra help navigating conversation away from the tight grasp of white supremacy. We offer three possibilities for teachers who want to have conversations with young children about race, racism and racial injustices while deprivileging whiteness.

### *Valuing Communities of Color Apart from Whiteness*

We suggest that teachers be mindful that whiteness and white privilege can and does creep in and invade children's conversations, most actively when they are trying out different positions in their own conversations. Teachers' influence and intervention can be helpful in these cases. We suggest that teachers start by rethinking the literature that they offer to the children in the classroom. Both Mr. James and Ms. Ruiz tried very hard to provide their students with thoughtful materials and resources to build on their understanding of race and racism. Both teachers emphasized problems created by whiteness or in response to white supremacy. Even though unintentionally, the teachers offered stories, books and histories as responses to the harmful actions justified by whiteness instead of a richness and history that was independent of or, at least, parallel to oppression by white supremacy. They inadvertently presented a version of existence that depended on whiteness, even if in a negative way. This itself can reinforce whiteness as powerful and counter teachers' efforts to position communities of color as powerful, active and engaged. Constant conflating of Black and Latinx identity with slavery, immigration, and civil rights, can work against efforts to help young children normalize racial diversity and see whiteness as one perspective among many.

### *Teaching Children to Identify and Resist Microaggressions*

Teachers' influence and guiding efforts to privilege communities of color needs to extend past their own class conversations and extend to conversations children have away from teachers. Teachers need to keep their eyes and ears open to watch for any distress that BIPOC-identifying children might feel. Disrupting whiteness is not a linear step-by-step process. Although both teachers impressively prioritized agentic learning over others ways of teaching, ensuring racial conversations deprivilege whiteness in and away from their presence may require that they intervene, correct behavior that privileges whiteness, and teach some skills of listening or advocating didactically. Young children are learning to deal with or embody microaggressions at an early age. Specific counter efforts to bring attention to microaggressions are appropriate for young children if done with care and gentleness.

Children are not to blame for the ways in which whiteness already operates in their lives, and they need intentional guidance to think outside of how normal some microaggressions or manifestations of whiteness have become. For example, when Wilson indicated that someone in Isaac's family was a slave or when Navya remained

quiet when he said that Indians were slaves too, Mr. James could step in to make sure Isaac and Navya are not alone in the conversation and to model advocacy for oneself and one's community. He could have shared his own discomfort with the assertions of identity pushed by two students onto others. He could have helped Isaac and Navya articulate their concerns. We repeatedly saw him do this in whole class discussions. He appropriately countered ideas of whiteness or corrected White children who interrupted often or talked for others.

Similarly, when David was asking rhetorical questions and speaking over Hannah and Mateo, Ms. Ruiz could have intervened and engaged by sharing her own interpretation or discomfort with how David was bringing attention to physical characteristics in a seemingly negative way. Ms. Ruiz could also address Mateo and help him with strategies to object to David's insistence in respectful and leader-oriented ways. BIPOC-identifying children benefit from learning how to be powerful and stand up for themselves when faced with manifestations of whiteness (Delpit, 1988; 1995). Also, White children need to be gently called out when they take up too much space in a conversation and taught to wait for others to finish talking before they speak. Teachers can help children notice for themselves when they are not listening to others' opinions and teach them to actively seek other viewpoints. On similar lines, BIPOC-identifying children need to be given the language to tell others when they feel uncomfortable or unheard. Teachers can create a classroom community that collectively reflects on racial conversations. They can create spaces where children voluntarily bring conversations back to the community to reflect on and talk about them. This would help teachers guide young children in unmasking and decentering whiteness. If teachers recognize how whiteness is stubbornly present in class or child-only conversations, they can turn to resources like picture books, stories, anecdotes, community experts and personal experiences to help children identify and learn to resist microaggressions. Bringing attention to microaggressions and how they can creep into conversations, and having a plan for what to do when they notice them, can help police and deprivilege whiteness.

### *Reflecting on Intersectionalities of Their Own Identities*

Ms. Ruiz and Mr. James constantly reflected on their teaching practice and their positionality in their classroom. They were acutely aware of who they were, how they could be perceived and how their identities could affect their relationship with children, especially when they talked about race. We think it is imperative that teachers who want to talk about social justice in their classroom be constantly reflective of their own identities and possible entanglements with power in the classroom. For example, Ms. Ruiz once told us that she always told her students that her father was Latinx and her mother was White. This often shocked some students because Ms. Ruiz's students assumed that she was Latinx like them. She intentionally deconstructed her own identity with her students because she felt that it helped in showing them that race was not simplistic nor singular. Similarly, Mr. James would constantly refer to himself as White, as a way to encourage others to share their own identities. He wanted to model how White people can talk about and respect racial differences as well as recognize and fight back against racism. His students knew his African-American children well. He used language like "people who look like me" to refer to White people and "people who look like my son" to refer to Black people, often in the same sentence. He felt that it was important for his students to hear him acknowledge that he looks like people who were and continue to be oppressive. Mr. James saw his willingness to be vulnerable as critical to engaging in authentic conversations about race and social justice with young children.

## **Closing Thoughts**

Even teachers who are constantly aware and reflective of their own identities and understand their intersections with power struggle with supporting racially just peer conversations about race when they are not present. We believe that young children normalizing race and recognizing racism requires a lot of discussion, talk and play. Young children need to be able to talk about race, racism and racial justice. The data presented here documents a common risk of supporting such conversations and can help teachers be more aware of how whiteness can prevent children's conversations about race, racism and racial justice from actually achieving the goal of equity and justice. Knowing that whiteness is stubborn and always already present in the thinking of young children as they negotiate the complicated social constructions of race, identity and community can help teachers proactively teach children to listen, reflect, ask about identities rather than assume or force labels onto the "other," as whiteness continuously tries to do. Our hope is not that teachers stop supporting racial conversations among young children. Rather, we hope that teachers can support these conversations with their eyes wide open, knowing that deprivileging whiteness requires vigilance, bravery and intention.

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