

Multicultural/Anti-bias Education in All-White or Predominantly White Programs

By Louise Derman-Sparks and Patricia Ramsey

The goals and strategies we suggest for working with white children flow from our analysis of what it means to grow up “white.” White children need to:

1. Develop authentic identities based on their personal abilities and interests, family’s culture, and meaningful engagement with the world.
2. Learn that white people have a range of differences and similarities and to respect and value attributes that are unfamiliar to them.
3. Extend their understanding of differences and similarities beyond their immediate family, neighborhood and center/classroom and to challenge the dominant culture assumption that everyone is or should be like him or herself.
4. Build the capacity to recognize, take and empathize with others’ perspectives, build their understanding of fairness and to learn how to resolve conflicts equitably.
5. Acquire the perspective that everyone has the right to a secure, comfortable and sustainable life and that all people share the same planet earth.
6. Develop the ability to identify and challenge stereotypes, prejudice and discriminatory practices among themselves and in their larger communities.
7. Learn about whites that have fought and are fighting for social justice and to develop identities that encompass these ideals and possibilities.

Ultimately, the question of what to do when “all the kids are white” is not only a query about what to do with children in the classroom. Rather it is a long-term commitment to reflect on one’s life and circumstances and to reach beyond self-interest to develop a broader view of the world that embodies more connection with other groups and an acceptance of diminished privilege. It is not possible to be effective unless adults’ face their own identity issues and the life-long messages learned growing up in the United States. Teachers must explore their own cultural backgrounds honestly in order to see how this may influence teaching beliefs, styles, and interactions with children. They must uncover and eliminate previously unexamined fears, prejudices and misunderstandings, understand look honestly and carefully at the societal structures of power and privilege and look honestly at the impact of these structures on themselves.

Teachers and parents must also face and overcome external challenges to doing work with children. Colleagues, parents and administrators may have conflicts and misgivings about the ultimate goals of anti-bias/multicultural education for white children. Issues may not arise as spontaneously as they might in more diverse classrooms. Likewise, adults may not have a sufficiently broad set of experiences, resources, and perspectives to encourage children to think more broadly. Finally, this work also requires a commitment to action -- to working with others both within one’s group and cross-culturally -- to eliminate racism and to build more equitable communities and institutions.

It is vital that people wanting to find answers to the question “what do we do with white children?” connect with each other. We cannot do this work alone. We believe that whites, working with each other and with colleagues from many groups can challenge, diminish,

and transform the assumptions of white superiority that underlie discriminatory attitudes and practices. Together, we can help children see themselves as members of a larger more inclusive world and capable of making changes.

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