

Journal Entry:

Discovering Our Own Whiteness

Rhianna Thomas, M.A.

University of Missouri Kansas City

September 30, 2016

Author Note:

Rhianna Thomas, School of Education, University of Missouri Kansas City.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Rhianna Thomas, School of

Education Rm 372, University of Missouri Kansas City, 615 E. 52nd St., Kansas City, MO

64110. Contact: thomasrk@umkc.edu, 816.799.8750

In this journal entry, I compare my own experience of developing a deeper understanding of my own whiteness to that of my two young children who are beginning to conceptualize race. As a whiteⁱ doctoral student in an urban-serving School of Education with a social justice mission, I am encountering texts that expand my understanding of the United States as a racialized society. My children, who also identify as white, have transitioned from an almost exclusively white preschool to an elementary school that is racially diverse. My son is a second grader, in his third year at our neighborhood elementary. My daughter is a kindergartener. I organize my writing around two quotes from my children that I found especially poignant and examine how those interactions inform my work as an early childhood teacher and teacher educator.

“When I was in your tummy, I was thinking something.” “What?” I asked. “I wish I was a white person.”

My white family had just left a Martin Luther King Day celebration promoted by the elementary school and hosted by a large local Christian church. The celebration was attended by Black and white families from our neighborhood and included some video clips of speeches and lunch counter sit-ins during the Civil Rights Movement. In the car my husband and I talked to the children about peaceful protest. We talked in detail about the purpose of sit-ins and the way Black people were treated while peacefully sitting at the counter. At the end of our conversation, my daughter responded with the above quote. At the age of five, she relies on intuition over logic and seemed to be implying that she had chosen her race in utero. I interpreted her statement as a realization that it is difficult to be Black. I reacted by saying, “It is easier to be white in the United States of America, isn’t it?” “Yes,” she said. Through my lens, it seemed that when

confronted with images and stories of the, often violent, Civil Rights Movement, my daughter realized the privilege she was granted when born with light skin.

Like my daughter, I was just beginning to understand my own whiteness, which at the time, I conceived as white privilege (McIntosh, 1990). As a graduate of the Master's program and current doctoral student in an urban-serving School of Education, I have taken classes on culturally responsive pedagogy and had conversations with a diverse group of graduate students around white privilege. However, the texts I have been encountering in my more recent coursework have offered more challenging concepts. After reading "Post-Racial Racism: Racial Stratification and Mass Incarceration in the Age of Obama" by Ian F. Haney Lopez (2010), I began to struggle with redefining the phrase "white supremacy." Before reading the article, white supremacy seemed a term set aside for overt and extreme racism, the Ku Klux Klan. After reading, I continue to work toward resituating the phrase into my understanding of whiteness. At its most basic conception, white supremacy is the belief that whites are superior and therefore more deserving of resources. My old conception of white supremacy included acts such as cross-burning, enslavement and subjugation, and Jim Crow Laws. In the article, Lopez asserts that covert, systematic racism is just as harmful, or perhaps more harmful, than Klan-style racism. From previous coursework, I had become more aware of privilege in terms of visible advantages: light pink Band-Aids that I applied to the brown skin of my students; a hallway of white teacher faces above the brown faces of children; picture books with illustrations of blond-haired, blue-eyed girls. Now I am beginning to come to terms with the larger, previously invisible systems that maintain white supremacy: teacher pedagogy that reflects European styles of communication, standardized tests that value white middle class knowledge and skills, systems that preserve resources for whites while denying them to people of color; laws designed to lead

to the imprisonment of Black and Latino men. I am struggling with my own identity and guilt as a white person, and I wonder if my daughter is going through a similar process. I seek to understand my place in combatting racism as a person who benefits from being white, and it appears that my daughter is too.

When I picked her up from school a few weeks after the Martin Luther King Day celebration, she told me, “I let a friend go in front of me in line. She is Brown.” I had very mixed feelings about this interaction, and I’m not sure if I should view it as completely positive. I simply responded, “That was nice of you.” Clearly, my daughter is noticing differences in skin color between the students in her class, but our past interactions tell me that this kind of thinking is not new. She often refers to Black children as Brown while she does not mention the color of Latinx or white children. What may be new is a desire to compensate for the societal disparities that she is becoming aware of. I have not yet determined if she let the child in front of her because she was *Brown* or if she let the child in front of her to build friendship. Either way, it seems she wanted to make sure to tell me because she knows I am interested in issues of race. This is the path of the parent who is actively trying to disrupt whiteness. I am rarely sure about how I should respond. It often takes me days to sort through and reflect upon what my child has said in respect to race. However, I believe that these conversations must happen and it is harmful to quiet them.

“Are we a Mix? No, no, I already know.”

My eight-year-old son is also working toward a deeper understanding of his own racial identity in the context of a mixed race elementary school and the larger context of the racialized United States. Just one week after the Martin Luther King Day celebration, my family was eating breakfast together. My son said, “Are we a mix?” Then he paused and stuttered, “Are we a mix?”

I asked what he meant. He paused again and said, “No, no, I already know,” as if he wanted to end the conversation. I asked if he meant that one parent had white skin and one had dark. “Yes,” he replied. Then I let the conversation end, sensing his discomfort. A few days later, I asked him to tell me more about the term Mixed. He said, “Your father is Brown, your mom is white. That’s a Mix. Or if the mom’s Brown and the dad’s white. That’s a Mix too, right?” He explained that a friend in his class told him that her mom “was a Mix.”

Clearly, my son was conveying that he has questions about his own racial identity. I suspect that his curiosity was sparked by comparing his own self-image to his perception of a light-skinned friend who identifies as Mixed and finding similarities in appearance, interest, and academics. Interestingly, he asked if we were Mixed, then immediately recalled his question. Perhaps he was embarrassed about being unsure. It seems as though his inner struggle is around reconciling the binary system of race imposed by society and the real, more complicated issues of racial identity that he is encountering through interactions with people in his daily life.

This interaction with my son, along with readings on race as a social invention (Pollack, 2008), have lead me to deeper examination of the term *Mixed*. I recall my student teaching experience in a predominantly Black second grade classroom. A young girl had become especially attached to me. In the lunch line she said to her friends, “Ms. Thomas is my mamma.” One of the young girls who was also Black quickly replied, “She is not your mamma. She ain’t Black.” The first little girl looked at me and said, “Ms. Thomas, are you Mixed?” I quickly responded, “No.”

More than ten years later, I reconsider my response. I am beginning to see that in the U.S., we are divided into two social groups: white and People of Color. I believe that this binary, imposed by society, is what makes the term Mixed appealing to children. I wonder if the girl

who said I was her mamma, used the term Mixed to define people she trusted who had a different skin color than her. Or perhaps she was looking for connection; she was pushing back against the idea that we could not be close if I was simply white and she was simply Black. The little girl from my student teaching experience and my son remind us that you cannot always tell by looking at someone what his or her race is.

Looking back at the interaction during my student teaching, I consider that I could have responded to my young student differently when she asked if I was Mixed. Rather than shutting down the conversation with a quick “no,” I could have taken the opportunity to have a larger discussion about the terms we use to define race and what implications they have for family make-up. I might have started the conversation by saying, “My mom and dad are both white, but I could still be your mamma.” Likewise, I wish I would have taken more time to discuss the term with my son before defining it for him. I have observed that there is power in allowing children to define the racial terms they use. It allows us a window into their perceptions of the world while also allowing them to adapt language to fit their own evolving conceptions and perhaps develop terms that have the potential to transform perceptions of race.

Am I Doing this Right?

My inner conversations and the conversations I am having with my children are not easy. I’m never sure if I am doing it right. Am I pointing out perceived differences rather than emphasizing our similarities? Am I understanding my children’s meaning rather than imposing adult definitions? However, I am sure that these conversations are important. In her work as a parent-child ethnographer, Erin Miller asserts that, “Children should not be excluded from the explicit conversations we have as adults working toward a new white consciousness” (2015, p. 39). Chang and Conrad recommend that adults “be prepared and willing to follow children’s lead

by listening to children, using their terminology, building on children's ideas, and trying to understand children's statements in the contexts of their experiences" (2008, p. 34). I strive to follow these guidelines and seek out new information on the best ways to have conversations about race, but I know I can't wait for a complete set of instructions. In her book *White Teacher*, Vivian Gussin Paley (2009) reminds us that we talk about what we value and warns that when we avoid topics, we imply to children that the topics are bad, unworthy, dangerous. My role as a parent is to open up space for honest conversations as my children and I continue our discovery of what it means to be white in our community and in the United States of America.

What Does this Mean for Me as an Early Childhood Teacher and Teacher Educator?

My role as a white early childhood teacher and teacher educator in a diverse urban community parallels my role as a white parent. In all of these roles, greater self-examination is essential. Reading new and challenging texts has been central to my self-discovery through journaling. I must continue to read and make choices about what I read carefully. Thompson reminds us of the importance of reading the work of writers, activists, and scholars of Color rather than relying on texts by white authors that we might find more comfortable (2003, p. 11).

I must also continue to have conversations about human difference with my own children, the young children I teach, and the teacher candidates I teach. This means not shying away from uncomfortable topics. Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2010) offer the following guidelines that I have found helpful in talking with my own children and my young students: stay calm and avoid making judgments; try to determine what the child really wants to know and answer accordingly; listen and observe for emotions around questions and comments-consider if they reflect curiosity or discomfort; answer matter-of-factly using simple language; if you are unsure of how to respond, tell the child you need time to think about the topic and get back to

that child by the next day (p. 33). Many of these guidelines also apply when talking with adults about race, and talking with adults about race is essential.

Moreover, as I work toward becoming a culturally responsive educator, I strive to find deeper modes of collaboration with families who may or may not be engaging in their own conversations about race and identity with their children. Thus, it is imperative to communicate clearly with families about sensitive curricular topics around identity such as race. Teacher Dana Frantz-Bentley has found that consistent communication that forefronts child voices leads to greater trust between teacher and families. Frantz-Bentley uses email and parent visits to demonstrate to families that conversations about sensitive topics are child-led and serve to increase problem-solving and inquiry skills. (Souto-Manning, 2013)

Along with making learning visible to families, I also plan to increase my collaboration with families of Color through seeking them out as resources. The creation and normalization of whiteness allows whites the privilege of avoiding conversations about race with their children. The same is not true of African American families who are confronted with racism on a daily basis. Families who identify as Black, Brown, and Mixed are much more likely to have explicit conversations with their children about racial identity and the implications of living in a racialized society (Priest, Walton, White, Kowal, Baker & Paradies, 2014; Thornton, Chatters, Taylor, & Allen, 1990; White-Johnson, Ford, & Sellers, 2010). This fact makes families of Color crucial partners when making decisions as a white educator about how to talk to young children about race. Communicating with parents of Color allows white teachers to become authentic allies of the work parents are doing with their children.

The time has come to disrupt the normalization of whiteness and the silencing of conversations about color that happen in my home, my community, and my classroom. I may

not “do it right” every time, but I can no longer do nothing.

References

- Chang, K. & Conrad, R. (2008). Following children's leads in conversations about race. In Pollack, M. (Ed.), *Everyday antiracism: Getting real about race in school*. (pp. 34-38). New York, NY: The New Press.
- Derman-Sparks, L., & Edwards, J. O. (2010). *Anti-bias education for young children and ourselves*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- López, I. F. H. (2010). Post-racial racism: Racial stratification and mass incarceration in the age of Obama. *California Law Review*, 98(3), 1023-1074.
- McIntosh, P. (1990). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. Retrieved from: <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED355141.pdf#page=43>
- Miller, E. T. (2015). Race as the Benu: A reborn consciousness for teachers of our youngest children. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing (Online)*, 30(3), 28.
- Paley, V. G., & Paley, V. G. (2009). *White Teacher*. New York, NY: Harvard University Press.
- Pollack, M. (2008). *Everyday antiracism: Getting real about race in school*. New York, NY: The New Press.
- Priest, N., Walton, J., White, F., Kowal, E., Baker, A., & Paradies, Y. (2014). Understanding the complexities of ethnic-racial socialization processes for both minority and majority groups: A 30-year systematic review. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 43, 139-155.
- Souto-Manning, M. (2013). *Multicultural teaching in the early childhood classroom: Approaches, strategies, and tools preschool-2nd grade*. NY, NY: Teachers College.
- Thompson, A. (2003). Tiffany, friend of people of color: White investments in antiracism. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 16(1), 7-29.

Thornton, M. C., Chatters, L. M., Taylor, R. J., & Allen, W. R. (1990). Sociodemographic and environmental correlates of racial socialization by Black parents. *Child development*, *61*(2), 401-409.

White-Johnson, R. L., Ford, K. R., & Sellers, R. M. (2010). Parental racial socialization profiles: Association with demographic factors, racial discrimination, childhood socialization, and racial identity. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, *16*(2), 237.

¹ I have chosen not to capitalize the term white while capitalizing Black and Brown as a symbol to minimize white oppression and the creation of whiteness as a dominant construct while recognizing pride of Black identity.