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Growing Up in a World of Contradictions and Injustices: A Multicultural Response

Alison and Stephanie (both European American 3-year-olds) are busily feeding their (light-skinned) baby dolls and bustling about the kitchen of the housekeeping corner, chatting about how their babies won't sleep. Sofia (Mexican American 3-year-old) bounces up, holding a darker-skinned baby doll. She grins broadly at Alison and Stephanie and announces, "We came to visit!" Alison and Stephanie stop what they are doing and stare at Sofia. Then Stephanie says (in an adult-like voice), "I'm sorry; we *have* to go shopping." Alison and Stephanie toss their babies into a stroller and head out of the area. They walk across the classroom, their high heels clacking on the floor as they go. Sofia stares after them, a small frown on her face. Then she enters the area, plops her doll in a high chair, and lifts the spoon to her baby's mouth a few times, all the while looking at Alison and Stephanie as they stroll around the classroom.

Terrance (biracial child adopted by a European American family), Jeremy, and Sam (both European American) are building a highway in the block corner. All three boys are 6 years old; Terrance and Jeremy live in a relatively affluent neighborhood; Sam lives with his mother in a subsidized apartment complex. As they begin to move cars along their highway, Terrance says, "We're getting a new car!!! It's gonna have a TV and everything!" Jeremy says, "We got a TV in our car, but my sister and I fight over it, so my parents are going to get another one, so we can each have our own." As this conversation goes on, Sam looks down, his shoulders slumped. He starts sorting through the blocks on the floor and picks up a triangle piece. "Look," he says, "we can use this for the gate to keep the robbers off of the highway!" As he goes to put the piece on, he (accidentally) knocks off a few pieces already in place. Both Jeremy and Terrance yell, "Hey! Stop

that!" Jeremy then hisses to Sam, "You stupid retard!" Sam frowns and hisses back, "You faggot!" A teacher approaches the area and asks if anything is wrong. All three boys look down and silently and industriously start adding blocks to their construction.

These events that I observed in a preschool and a K-1 classroom are similar to ones that occur dozens of times a day in early childhood settings. Each lasted less than 3 minutes, and neither was particularly dramatic or remarkable: Two close friends "politely" rejected the entry of a third child; two boys expressed annoyance at a third who knocked down part of their construction. The overt disputes were fleeting, and the children did not request adult help. In fact, the boys pointedly ignored the teacher. To be honest, had I been a teacher rather than an observer, I would probably not have noticed these momentary conflicts. I would have been too busy—replenishing paint cups, attending to a crying child, helping a child record a story, or working with a reading group.

Yet these short episodes reveal how young children absorb and express attitudes and values that pervade our society. As I reflect on these observations, many questions come to mind. Was it coincidence that the children I observed were playing in gender-segregated groups, or is that a pervasive pattern in these classrooms? Were Stephanie and Alison simply protecting their time together? Or were they reacting to Sofía's darker skin? Or did the manner of her arrival make them uncomfortable, possibly reflecting cultural differences? Does Sofía, who is the only Latina in the classroom, get a lot of similar rejections from other European American classmates? If so, what is she learning and feeling about herself and her family? What gender roles are all three girls enacting? What early economic views are children expressing when they enact "shopping"?

How did Sam (whose mother does not own a car) feel when his friends were describing their fancy cars with televisions? How conscious are these three children of the economic disparities among them? What role does competitive consumerism play in their relationships? What are children learning when family conflicts are resolved by purchasing additional equipment? What values about the environment and land use are all three boys expressing as they build a bigger and better highway, filled with cars and trucks? Do the boys know what "retard" and "faggot" really mean? How do these insults reflect and influence their developing attitudes about people with disabilities or about gender roles and sexual orientation?

Our children are growing up in a world of contradictions. On one hand, they are learning that all people are "created equal" (Declaration of Independence) and that we as a nation are united to provide for the common good (the Constitution). Yet, as these observations illustrate, children, in their

daily experiences, are learning that some groups are valued more than others and that it is acceptable to exclude people and exploit natural resources in order to gain and maintain individual status and material wealth.

One somewhat simplistic but useful way of thinking about these issues is to consider the two meanings of the word *race*. In one sense we are all running in a race, whether it is to get the newest toys in the neighborhood, the best grades, or the highest wage among our co-workers. Even collaborative activities such as sports teams or cooperative work groups function in a competitive context that can undermine teamwork. For example, groups of teachers who have worked hard at developing cooperative working relationships sometimes are dismayed at the friction that arises in the face of merit pay raises or pressures to improve test scores.

As competitors in this race, we can win only as much as others lose; to ensure that there will always be someone behind us, we divide humanity by *race* and accord some groups more power than others. In biological terms, race is a meaningless concept. There are more genetic differences within different "racial groups" (a slippery concept that has been defined and disputed repeatedly) than across them. However, for much of human history and throughout the world, people have created "racial" divisions (often based on virtually no visible physical differences) to justify exclusion, slavery, and genocide (e.g., the Romans enslaved the Britons; the British subjugated the Irish; the European Americans kidnapped and enslaved the Africans; the Nazis killed millions of Jewish people).

Race has been an intractable division in our country since the arrival of the European settlers in the 17th century. Many of the men who wrote and signed the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, which extol liberty and the equality of all people, took for granted their right to kill and cheat the American Indians in order to obtain their lands; and few questioned the practice of buying, owning, and selling slaves. By accepting and codifying these contradictions, our forefathers established the precedent that private ownership, material wealth, and profits take precedence over the ideals of liberty and equality. As Frederick Douglass said in his famous Fourth of July speech in 1852, "What to the American slave is your Fourth of July? . . . To him your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity . . . your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery" (quoted in Meltzer, 1996, p. 5). Before and since that time, race has been an indelible and impenetrable boundary that divides our society.

As immigrants arrived, those who could quickly learned to identify themselves as White in order to distinguish themselves from the lower-status African Americans and, in some areas, American Indians or Mexicans. The racism that lies at the core of our national identity has established a pattern

of exploitation and marginalization that has been played out with varying levels of intensity against immigrants, women, poor people, the elderly, children, gay men and lesbians, and people with disabilities.

All of us have a number of identities and are often caught in the complicated cross-currents of advantage and disadvantage. For example, a poor White woman is racially privileged but may resent the economic advantage of the middle-class Black woman next to her in the checkout line at the supermarket. Generally in our society, males enjoy more power and privilege than women, but African American men are more vulnerable than African American women to unemployment, school failure, police harassment, and early and violent deaths. Some White middle-class gay men have more buying power than their heterosexual peers because their households include two highly paid male professionals. At the same time, they live with the constant threat of harassment and violence. A child born with cerebral palsy is clearly at a disadvantage in many respects. However, if she is from an affluent family, her access to services may mean that her prospects for a good education and gainful employment are better than those of an able-bodied child from a poor family.

We are also living in a time of rapid social change and are seeing shifts in what it means to belong to particular groups. For example, gender roles have expanded and changed over the past few decades. Likewise, language, traditions, and values of specific ethnic groups evolve as their members absorb and/or resist the influences of other cultures. In the 1950s and 1960s, civil rights laws ended the legal separation of Whites and Blacks but introduced more subtle forms of racism that now shape identities and interpersonal and intergroup relationships. Finally, as groups come into contact, intermarriage increases, and more children have multicultural and multiracial backgrounds that incorporate many traditions and values. Thus, with the exception of a few groups that deliberately seal themselves off from other groups (e.g., the Amish), few people can identify themselves as a member of a single cultural or racial group.



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