

Internalized Racism and the Imitative Nature of the Young Child

My parents are politically liberal. You could even describe them as Leftists. My father grew up on the South Side of Philadelphia, the son of a first generation Jewish immigrant. His Bubbie (grandmother) spoke only Yiddish. My mother is white, a former Catholic, raised by parents who didn't know how to properly love and care for children, but their house was full of music and my mother learned to play the piano starting at age 4. She went on to study nursing at Mass General and music at Eastman School of Music in New York. My parents met at a protest rally.

My mother became a visiting nurse, which she was for most of my childhood and adolescence. In the late 60's and early 70's she was a nurse for the mothers and fathers of the Black Panther movement, among others. She cared for homeless children under bridges and old folks who didn't see any other people between her visits.

When I was 9 years old, my father moved to Washington, DC and soon moved to an all Black neighborhood, where he lived until just recently. He often had Black youth gathered at his house, where he taught them his chandelier business and called them apprentices. But I stayed in New England with my mom and visited him only a few times a year.

Where we lived in New England, there were only White people in my immediate community. We mostly socialized with my mother's family, which was White. I had only one Black student in my kindergarten through 12th grade public school experience.

It wasn't until I went to college, in a predominately White, New England town, that I discovered, to my shock and shame, the insidious presence of internalized racism within me. To this day, I am amazed by how I can 'believe' conditioned ideas about the life of another person, that are totally incongruous with what I know, deeply to be true. I share the picture of my parents, to show that my brothers and I were raised in a progressive household. My parents lived and worked in Black communities, I went to a 'good' public school, but we rarely talked about race at home and we *never* talked about it at school.

Racism is in the air we breathe. It is an ocean in which we swim, knowingly and unknowingly. So what does this mean for the young child?

Rudolf Steiner spoke about the child as an imitative being. He described them as 'A great unblinking eye.' When our school did a workshop on inherent bias, I was so moved to sense that this principal of imitation, which is a powerful tool for wellbeing, is also a way that bias or conditioned thinking becomes part of our being. Everything that children experience enters their body and affects their whole selves. In Waldorf Education, we know that the inner life of the adult profoundly affects the child. We

understand that children take in information through all of their senses, in a totally unfiltered way.

In a workshop offered by a local educational organization on inherent bias and Early Childhood education, the facilitator shared an important piece of research. If a White mother is walking down the street holding the hand of her two-year-old child, and a Black person comes walking toward them, when the mother sees the Black person and tightens her grip on the child's hand, that fear imprints itself on the child. Their little body receives the message that Black person = unsafe. This is imitation on a bodily level. Research shows children as young as two years old use race to reason about people's behaviors (1), by 30 months, most children use race to choose playmates (2) and that expressions of racial prejudice often peak at ages four and five. (3)

Recently, Bessie Jones of Sowell Tots and her friend and colleague Mikaela Simms hosted an important [conversation about race and young children](#). Mikaela spoke about, among other things, how Black people perceive a White person's body tension when they enter into conversation. She said, 'Get rid of the tension in your body.' When, as White educators or parents we get tense or red in the face when a child brings something up about race, or if we feel tense in our bodies when we are speaking with a parent or person of the global majority, that is taken in deeply by the children, all of children; White, Black and Brown. When we pause, breathe, drop into our bodies and proceed with the best of our understanding, we have the opportunity to do less harm. We even have the possibility to make right something that is deeply wrong. In our Waldorf educational practice we are encouraged to reflect, to seek collegial collaboration, to honor and recognize our mistakes and to try again. And try again we must.

One of the most difficult hurdles in Waldorf Early Child education to becoming an anti-bias, anti-racist education is confusion over the idea of 'protecting' children. Many of us, particularly White educators, have mistakenly understood that in order to 'protect' childhood, we must not talk about or acknowledge painful or difficult things in the world. But I would offer that in order to 'protect' childhood we must have the courage to talk with children, in an age appropriate way, about race and class. Children are swimming in the ocean of racism and classism, and we are not 'protecting' anyone when we let them swim there alone.

In Waldorf Early Childhood education some educators and parents are also confused by the idea that anti-racist, anti-bias education somehow tells the children that the world is not good. I believe to my very core in inherent goodness. I believe in inherent wholeness. I believe that the natural world and the potential of every single human being is truthful, beautiful and good. But the society and culture is created and perpetuated by human beings over time and we are confused and conditioned. We are making unconscious agreements all the time, based on fear, greed and an unconscious belief in I versus you. The world is inherently good, but the society is not, so goodness

and wholeness are not the experience for every child. We affirm the goodness and wholeness of the world when we are honest with children about the mistakes humans have made and when we work to correct those mistakes together.

It is our task as Waldorf educators to create educational environments that are deeply honest and courageously self-reflective. We must examine our personal, internalized racism. As a highly sensitive being, I took in what the society ‘told’ me about race. And what it told me was profoundly wrong, dangerous and separating. And it is in there. It is in my subconscious. It is in my body. And I have to work daily at undoing it. (I do this through my meditative practice, through study, through collaboration with colleagues, and through listening deeply when people of color speak.)

We have to work together to cultivate what a Waldorf approach to anti-bias education is and how to practice it. This is how we ‘protect’ children. This is how we show children and make it true, what they know within, that the world is beautiful, good and true.

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I am grateful to The Children’s Community School, in South Philadelphia for the resource They are not too young to talk about race!. They remind us that silence about race reinforces racism. (1) Kelley et al. 2005 (2) Katz & Kofkin, 1997 (3) Aboud, 2008