



What About the Children?

Teachers Cultivating and Nurturing the Voice and Agency of Young Children

Brian L. Wright

What about the children?

To ignore is so easy

—Yolanda Adams, “What About the Children?”

This lyric from the chorus of gospel singer Yolanda Adams’s “What About the Children?” captures the critical need for early childhood educators to listen to the insights of and pay close attention to the experiences, perspectives, and realities of *all* children. This need is conveyed further by the phrase “to ignore is so easy,” especially given the reality that childhoods are unequal along lines of race, class, gender, language, ability, and disability. Therefore, children from

marginalized groups often receive an education that does not recognize their worth, agency, potential, and brilliance (Wright with Counsell 2018).

Guided by this reality, the critical need for early childhood educators to be culturally competent in recognizing what children learn in their homes and communities as relevant to in-school learning is the focus of this article. Teachers’ knowledge and understanding of the links between race, culture, and learning are vital to effectively cultivating and nurturing voice and agency in young children. Understanding how race and culture matter for learning manifests in bold and honest conversations

and the delivery of creative lessons and activities in which teachers encourage children to explore their racial, ethnic, and cultural differences. Encouraging young children to share their perspectives, experiences, and realities based on their cultural worlds of home, school, and community provides opportunities to cultivate and nurture their voices and agency toward advancing equity in early childhood education. In the sections that follow, there is a discussion of the impact of inequitable schooling on children of color in general and Black children, particularly Black boys. Then, the focus is on children's awareness of racial differences and why the silence about these matters allows children to draw their own often misguided conclusions. The article concludes with an explanation of why it is necessary to cultivate and nurture voice and agency in young children through meaningful activities and authentic multicultural children's books.

Schools as Sites of Inequality

Inequitable schooling contributes in substantive ways to missed essential opportunities to cultivate and nurture the ideas, interests, strengths, and abilities of children from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds. An example of inequitable schooling is the way in which Black boys—as early as preschool—are frequently viewed by White educators as older and less innocent than their White peers, a practice called *adultification*. Additionally, their play is perceived as more dangerous, violent, and not developmentally appropriate (Wright with Counsell 2018; Wright 2019).

According to a 2014 report from the US Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, Black children make up 18 percent of preschool enrollment, but they represent 48 percent of preschool children receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions (OCR 2014). In comparison, White children represent 41 percent of preschool enrollment but only 28 percent of preschool children receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions. These data are telling and are a clarion call for positive changes in schools and classrooms related to race, diversity, equity, and inclusion. The lack of familiarity by educators to recognize the diverse ways that children organize their experiences and express meaning undermines children's sense of belonging, becoming, and being. This, in turn, places

Teachers' knowledge and understanding of the links between race, culture, and learning are vital to effectively cultivating and nurturing voice and agency in young children.

the self-identity, voice, and agency of Black boys and other marginalized children in jeopardy. Further, these deficit approaches create a clash between children of color and their languages, literacies, and cultural ways of being as deficiencies to be overcome in learning and, by extension, legitimize dominant language, literacy, and cultural ways of schooling as the sole gatekeepers to school success. Such a belief not only raises the question *What about the children?*, but, more specifically, *What about the languages and other cultural practices that children of color bring to the early childhood education classroom?* Moreover, these questions are a reminder of why early childhood educators must be culturally competent about matters of race, diversity, equity, and inclusion.

They're Not Too Young to Talk About Race

It is a mistake to assume that young children are unaware of racial differences and that they do not discriminate based on race, class, and gender. It is well documented (Souto-Manning 2013; Ramsey 2015; Kuh et al. 2016) that children quickly learn from their environment to attach beliefs, attitudes, and values to differences and to mimic dominant society's discriminatory practices unless such biases and behaviors are challenged using anti-bias and anti-racist teachings (Kendi 2019; Derman-Sparks & Edwards with Goins 2020). Comments and interactions that children notice as well as their curiosity about racial and cultural differences cannot be ignored. Children want to know more about the world in which they live.

Teachers, therefore, must be culturally competent and astute in their observations of young children to understand and accurately interpret their sense-making practices to cultivate, nurture, and recognize each child's individuality and humanity in ways that develop their voice and agency. This is especially true for teachers working with children marginalized by systems of inequality (Blackburn 2014).

In the remainder of this article, I describe two activities that teachers can use to facilitate the development of voice and agency in all children. These activities build on children's strengths and interests and go beyond the contributions level (surface-level topics) of food, fun, fashion, and folklore (Banks 1994, 2014; Ford et al. 2017). These activities are grounded in the following:

1. Children notice and think about racial differences, and they engage (perhaps unwittingly) in discriminatory practices based on race, class, gender, and other characteristics.
2. When adults allow children to draw their own conclusions based on what they see, hear, and read without critical and courageous conversations, racism and discrimination are reinforced.
3. Early childhood educators play an important role in helping children develop positive attitudes, individual voice, and personal agency to promote a more just future.

An Activity to Cultivate and Nurture Voice

One activity to cultivate and nurture voice in young children is centered around a poem by George Ella Lyon, "Where I'm From." To engage children in this activity, the teacher reads aloud the poem as the children read silently. The teacher draws attention to the author of the poem's inclusion of specific details representing culture and ethnicity (e.g., food, family names, location). Children are given several options to represent their version of the poem to capture their cultural and personal identities. This poem invites children and their families' experiences and histories into the early childhood classroom. The poem follows a repeating pattern ("I am from . . .") that recalls details, evokes memories, and has the potential to encourage some excellent poetry writing by young children

(Christensen 1997/1998). The power of this poem is its ability to bring together the individual and collective voices within the classroom.

As children work on their poems, teachers should encourage them to include aspects related to their cultural wealth, such as their home country or native language, the history of their name or names of family members (e.g., aunts, uncles, cousins), favorite dishes served during family gatherings, special places they go with their family, and more. As mentioned above, teachers should provide children with different options to choose from to represent their personal "Where I'm From" poems. For example, children can create a Me Poster that includes, but is not limited to, family photos, pictures from old magazines, and other cultural artifacts that represent and reflect the child's cultural and personal identity, family, and community. Or, children might create a diorama using a shoebox to represent different aspects of their cultural identity, family, and community. Children can also create a skit to dramatize an element of their culture or an illustrated poem that shows the beauty of their culture through color. Additionally, teachers should encourage bilingual children to choose the language(s) in which they wish to compose their poem. Teachers can invite children to share with their peers in either large or small group settings.

An Activity to Cultivate and Nurture Agency

Agency answers the questions *What actions can I take?* and *Will my actions make a difference?* Agency is children's ability to construct and co-construct their environment by negotiating different courses of action. For example, when children choose among different learning center activities or negotiate sharing props during dramatic play, they exercise agency by problem solving to satisfy both individual and group needs (Wright, Counsell & Tate 2015; Wright with Counsell 2018).

Cultivating agency in young children requires the delivery of curriculum and instruction that encourages children to be actively involved in their own learning by asking questions, sharing insights, and providing opinions. Fostering agency in young children provides opportunities to build a child-centered and child-driven learning environment where multiple and

opposing points of view, empowerment, equity, and social justice are at the center of recognizing each child's strengths and talents.

Authentic multicultural children's books serve as a developmentally appropriate way to cultivate and nurture agency in young children. They can introduce children to a variety of topics such as cultural pride, self-identity, gender expression, friendships, families, and much more. All children, but especially children of color, need what Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) calls "mirror" books—that is, books that reflect themselves, their families, and their communities in positive ways. Currently there are far more "window" books—books that give a glimpse into the lives of other people (mainly in the White world)—than mirror books showing children of color their own communities. These mirror books highlight cultural histories, music, the arts, language varieties, fashion, cuisine, and other culturally rich experiences found in communities of color but not always found in school curricula.

Here is a list of picture books featuring topics that children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds might see in their everyday lives and ways teachers can use them to cultivate and nurture children's agency and voice:

- › *Hats of Faith*, by Medeia Cohan, exposes children to people around the world who share in the practice of covering their heads for similar and different reasons. Moreover, this book helps educate and prepare young children for a culturally diverse world in which they take a stand for inclusivity. Teachers can invite children to investigate the concrete, behavioral, and symbolic purposes of the head coverings that most interest them.
- › *Hey Black Child*, by Useni Eugene Perkins, uses words and visuals to introduce readers to important people and events from Black American history. It encourages Black children to pursue their dreams and, by extension, all children to take pride in their cultural backgrounds.
- › *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote: A Migrant's Tale*, by Duncan Tonatiuh, uses an allegorical tale to discuss the hardships faced by thousands of families who illegally cross the border to make a better life for themselves and their children.

Authentic multicultural children's books serve as a developmentally appropriate way to cultivate and nurture agency in young children.

- › *Pink Is for Boys*, by Robb Pearlman, challenges the gender stereotype that pink and purple are feminine colors. The author invites children to celebrate all the colors of the rainbow. Teachers can design their own celebration of the colors of the world and encourage each child to share how these colors enrich the world.
- › *René Has Two Last Names/Rene tiene dos apellidos*, by René Colato-Láinez, is a bilingual book that describes a young boy's cultural pride when he uses the last names of both his mother's and father's families—an important Latino/a tradition.

When early childhood educators provide children with books that are mirrors and windows (Bishop 1990), children develop pride in their cultural and linguistic identity. They notice similarities and differences. These observations become conversation starters for rich dialogue based on children's insights, questions, and experiences.

Conclusion

It is a mistake to assume that young children are too young to utilize their voice and agency to develop deeper and richer learning experiences as well as take a stand for equity and social justice. Giving rise to children's voices in this way reaches far beyond their individual experiences and instead empowers them through agency to think about the experiences of others. When early childhood educators recognize that all children have a right to freedom of expression and the right to be heard, then questions about the children are not so easily ignored.

Brian L. Wright has been bringing his expertise to the NAEYC community both as a writer and a consulting editor since 2015. The following is a list of his NAEYC contributions:

- › “We’re Many Members, but One Body: Fostering a Healthy Self-Identity and Agency in African American Boys,” in *Young Children* Vol. 70, No. 3 (2015)
- › “Black Boys Matter: Cultivating Their Identity, Agency, and Voice,” in *Teaching Young Children* Vol. 12, No. 3 (2019)
- › “Black Boys Matter: Strategies for a Culturally Responsive Classroom,” in *Teaching Young Children* Vol. 12, No. 4 (2019)
- › *Each and Every Child: Teaching Preschool with an Equity Lens*, Chapters 12 and 13 (2020)
- › “Tell Families, ‘We See You and We Value Your Contribution,’” on the NAEYC Blog (2020)
- › “Understanding the Sociocultural Context of Families is More Important Than Ever,” on the NAEYC Blog (2020)
- › “Supporting Teachers Through Change,” in *Young Children* Vol. 75, No. 4 (2020)
- › “Message in a Backpack™ Helping Your Child through Change,” in *Teaching Young Children* Vol. 14, No. 1 (2020)
- › “Now Read This! Books that Promote Race, Identity, Agency, and Voice: Part 1,” in *Teaching Young Children* Vol. 14, No. 1 (2020)
- › “Now Read This! Books that Promote Race, Identity, Agency, and Voice: Part 2,” in *Teaching Young Children* Vol. 14, No. 2 (2021)
- › *Advancing Equity and Embracing Diversity in Early Childhood Education: Elevating Voices and Actions*, Chapter 9 (coming this summer)
- › *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8*, 4th ed. NAEYC. (Forthcoming)

About the Author

Brian L. Wright, PhD, is associate professor and coordinator of the early childhood education program as well as coordinator of the middle school cohort of the African American Male Academy at the University of Memphis. He is author of *The Brilliance of Black Boys: Cultivating School Success in the Early Grades*, with contributions by Shelly L. Counsell, which won the National Association for Multicultural Education’s 2018 Phillip C. Chinn Book Award.

References for this article can be found online at [NAEYC.org/yc/summer2021](https://naeyc.org/yc/summer2021).

Photographs: © Getty Images

Copyright © 2021 by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. See Permissions and Reprints online at [NAEYC.org/resources/permissions](https://naeyc.org/resources/permissions).

naeyc[®]

This article supports recommendations from the NAEYC position statement:

Recommendations for Early Childhood Educators

Create a Caring, Equitable Community of Engaged Learners

Item 1: Uphold the unique value and dignity of each child and family.

Item 4: Consider the developmental, cultural, and linguistic appropriateness of the learning environment and your teaching practices for each child.

Item 6: Actively promote children’s agency.