Beyond the Illusion of Diversity: How Early Childhood Teachers Can Promote Social Justice

GLORIA SWINDLER BOUTTE

ABSTRACT. Whereas professional organizations recognize the centrality of diversity in school curricula and instructional practices and most educators conceptually agree, little of this information and ideology is translated into classrooms. When examining the ethos in most schools, the valuation of diversity is not readily apparent in teacher attitudes, instructional practices, curricula, and school policies. Although rapidly changing demographics and accompanying negative performance trends of students from nonmainstream backgrounds implore educators to consider issues of diversity and equity, teachers give little or no substantive attention to sociocultural and sociopolitical issues that mediate teaching and learning in an increasingly diverse world. In this article the author encourages educators to envision and enact new legacies on behalf of humanity. The author discusses issues of social justice along with pedagogical strategies and includes examples from micro and macro levels of society.

Keywords: diversity, early childhood, pedagogy, social justice

The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

—Martin Luther King Jr.

In this article, I explore what we as teachers can do to ensure that “the arc of the moral universe continues to bend toward justice.” I summon us to collectively envision and teach pedagogies that can potentially positively change the world beyond what our current worldviews permit us to imagine. Presenting examples from the micro to the macro levels, I pose the following questions: Why should educators candidly address issues such as race, discrimination, hate, and oppression in early childhood classrooms? Which pedagogical approaches should be used? How do we create a more inclusive rather than exclusive social order?

“Freedom and love,” according to historian and author Robin D. G. Kelley, “may be the ‘most revolutionary ideas’ available to people, but academics have ‘failed miserably’ in understanding their significance” (qtd. in Frank 2000). In general, we are doing a grave disservice to prospective and practicing teachers if we provide little or no substantive attention to sociocultural and sociopolitical issues that mediate teaching and learning in an increasingly diverse world (Freire 1999; Nieto 2003). I am concerned that many teacher educators are not well versed on issues of diversity and the corresponding knowledge bases and, thus, will bequeath this legacy to our charges. Few of us have developed tools to address difficult issues such as discrimination and oppression, and we likely naïvely believe that if we respect the individual child, all will be well. I wonder who will provide children with the necessary critical skills and knowledge base that they will likely need.

In this article, I consider two four-letter words—hate and love—that are largely ignored in teacher education programs. In educational settings, love connotes that all humans deserve the right to dignity, freedom, and equal opportunities. On the other hand, hate in educational settings is defined as a lack of compassion and lack of respect for the rights of others. Like hatred in the social sense, it is usually not intentional but often results from lack of knowledge. Professing love for children and humanity...
without reflective and collaborative action is inadequate.

Educators face the challenge of preparing students from diverse populations and backgrounds to live in a rapidly changing world in which some groups have greater societal benefits than others because of race, ethnicity, gender, class, language, religion, ability, or age. Approximately 40 percent of students in U.S. schools are from African, Asian, Latino, and Native American ethnic groups. In urban schools, 63 percent of the student population consists of students of color; in areas on the fringe of cities, 36 percent; and in small towns and rural areas, 20 percent (National Center for Education Statistics n.d.a).

Extending the demographic lens beyond the United States, the majority of the world’s population consists of people of color, with Asians and Africans composing nearly 75 percent of the world’s population, 60 percent and 14 percent, respectively (World Almanac Education Group 2006). Yet, the vast majority of students in U.S. schools know little or nothing about people and culture in the eastern hemisphere.

The knowledge base on culture, diversity, and equity issues is voluminous and has existed for decades (Banks 2006; Pak 2005; Woodson 1990), but the language of culturally relevant pedagogy and cultural diversity—used heavily in accreditation reports, course syllabi, and policy statements—is often rhetorical in classrooms (Boutte 2002a). Although the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and other professional/ accrediting organizations recognize the centrality of diversity in school curricula and instructional practices and most educators conceptually agree, classroom practices that substantively address diversity are more illusory than real (Villegas and Lucas 2002).

There is much that we could and should do in teacher education programs to better prepare early childhood educators to address complex issues such as discrimination and hatred. Notwithstanding some of the important efforts to make antibias instruction an integral part of early childhood classrooms (Derman-Sparks and the A.B.C. Task Force 1989; Derman-Sparks, Ramsey, and Edwards 2006), current events indicate there is still much work to be done. Educators need to develop and institutionalize programs and practices that “make attention to diversity, equity, and social justice centrally important” (Banks et al. 2005, 274). In the following sections, I present personal and societal examples that point to the need for early childhood educators to increase the vigilance of their efforts. I also detail pedagogical strategies to address some of the associated concerns.

**Why Should Educators Candidly Address Issues Such as Race, Discrimination, Hate, and Oppression in Early Childhood Classrooms?**

There is no other profession in the world that directly or indirectly touches the lives of people at the same level as teachers do. While educators are not responsible for all that is good, bad, or indifferent in schools and society, they can certainly take a more active stance to fight for good (Nieto 2003). While acknowledging the structural inequities in society and schools that limit educators’ impact and simultaneously recognizing the need to collaborate with like-minded individuals, this article is a call to action. Assuming that the vast majority of teachers enter the profession to make a difference in the lives of their students does not negate the fact that without guidance and appropriate knowledge bases, educators are likely to inadvertently contribute to oppression—despite good intentions. Without a knowledge base in critical pedagogy and corresponding strategies for addressing issues of oppression and discrimination, many teachers are overwhelmed by the rapidity of changing demographics. Inherent in many conventional educational knowledge bases and teaching methods is a deficit perspective that “functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it” (Shaull 1999, 16). We have the right to remain silent, but silence on issues of oppression and discrimination connotes agreement.

The following sections present two illusions that educators may have, with examples that demonstrate the need to actively address social justice issues with young children. Appendix A shows comments made by my son when he was four; appendices B–D present comments from university students. Appendix B is used to emphasize worst-case scenarios of unresolved diversity issues. At the end of each section, I offer some advice for educators.

**Illusion 1: Young Children Are Colorblind and Do Not Think about Issues of Race and Racism**

As appendix A points out, young children are continuously internalizing messages about people who are different than they are—even when parents value diversity. It is thus important that children receive ongoing messages from several sources that convey a commitment to social justice and equity.

The first part of my conversation with Jonathan is characterized by his monosyllabic responses indicating his general disinterest in my “lecture.” Nevertheless, I wanted to emphasize that it is a privilege to have a home, so I continued. His comments that people from different racial backgrounds could not live together surprised me, and I tried presenting information that countered these notions. It intrigued me that he classified people from the Asian diaspora as white (when he said he did not know any Asian people). Although I had actively taught Jonathan that people from different backgrounds can coexist, the larger societal message of racial divisions remained somewhere deep in his consciousness.

Jonathan is not unlike most other children who very adeptly internalize social divisions they see around them. Recently, my friend’s eleven-year-old daughter queried, “Mom, why do you always move your mouth like this [illustrating her mother’s grimace] when you talk?” I chuckled because her comments
reminded me of my daughter’s constant “social criticism” and commentaries of my every move and nuance. What parents and educators do not say or do is as powerful as what we do. We often inadvertently teach children how to behave, and since they are programmed to survive in the settings and culture into which they are born, they are very proficient at studying adults’ actions and unspoken values.

Returning to my dialogue with Jonathan leads me to examine how other influences may have contradicted and undermined my efforts at home. The book collection at his preschool was typical. The books were primarily Euro-centric or portrayed animals with characteristics and values of mainstream lifestyles. Presenting an occasional book about an ethnic or cultural group does not teach children to view diversity as the norm rather than the exception. Most of the books in Jonathan’s classroom focused on whites. Reading only a few books here and there on people of color (often historical folktales) sends strong messages about what is normal and what is not (Boutte 2002b). Examples of people living and working across cultural lines are virtually invisible in many classroom book collections—even in fairytales. Likewise, other media (i.e., television, movies, videos) depictions of living and working together across racial lines are often absent.

In terms of Jonathan’s perspective regarding cross-racial relationships, I had to reexamine ways that I may have presented contradictory information at home. I queried myself about values that I may have covertly or overtly taught Jonathan about how to treat and view people different from us. How do I approach people from different ethnic groups in public (e.g., grocery store)? Do I make eye contact? Do I smile and greet them or suddenly find something to look at in the opposite direction? Do I send ever-so-slight nonverbal messages that do not go unnoticed by my astute child whose primary job is to figure out what is appropriate and inappropriate based on my actions? What is the ethnicity of the children who sleep over at our house or who are invited to birthday parties? These questions can lead each of us to think deeply about how we teach children to accept or reject others who differ from us.

On careful reflection, I recognized that even though I tried to teach Jonathan to appreciate diversity, my efforts were small in comparison to societal realities beyond our home. For example, even simple observations of families in our every move and nuance. What parents and educators do not say or do is as powerful as what we do. We often inadvertently teach children how to behave, and since they are programmed to survive in the settings and culture into which they are born, they are very proficient at studying adults’ actions and unspoken values.

Returning to my dialogue with Jonathan leads me to examine how other influences may have contradicted and undermined my efforts at home. The book collection at his preschool was typical. The books were primarily Euro-centric or portrayed animals with characteristics and values of mainstream lifestyles. Presenting an occasional book about an ethnic or cultural group does not teach children to view diversity as the norm rather than the exception. Most of the books in Jonathan’s classroom focused on whites. Reading only a few books here and there on people of color (often historical folktales) sends strong messages about what is normal and what is not (Boutte 2002b). Examples of people living and working across cultural lines are virtually invisible in many classroom book collections—even in fairytales. Likewise, other media (i.e., television, movies, videos) depictions of living and working together across racial lines are often absent.

In terms of Jonathan’s perspective regarding cross-racial relationships, I had to reexamine ways that I may have presented contradictory information at home. I queried myself about values that I may have covertly or overtly taught Jonathan about how to treat and view people different from us. How do I approach people from different ethnic groups in public (e.g., grocery store)? Do I make eye contact? Do I smile and greet them or suddenly find something to look at in the opposite direction? Do I send ever-so-slight nonverbal messages that do not go unnoticed by my astute child whose primary job is to figure out what is appropriate and inappropriate based on my actions? What is the ethnicity of the children who sleep over at our house or who are invited to birthday parties? These questions can lead each of us to think deeply about how we teach children to accept or reject others who differ from us.

On careful reflection, I recognized that even though I tried to teach Jonathan to appreciate diversity, my efforts were small in comparison to societal realities beyond our home. For example, even simple observations of families in
the party was somewhat artificial and stilted. Interestingly, all of the white couples left first after spending what must have seemed to be the appropriate amount of time to be polite. The tone of the party changed considerably after they left—becoming more relaxed, more sustained, and filled with louder laughter—even though all the black couples did not know one another.

So what can educators learn from all of this? First, we have to question how and why it is possible for us to coexist and not be familiar with our classmates’, neighbors’, and fellow citizens’ various cultural communication styles. As educators, we have an opportunity to extend the currently limited definitions of humanity so that a wide range of lifestyles and perspectives are seen as acceptable. This requires careful examination of our instruction, curricula, and resources to determine which ideologies and worldviews are central and which are invisible. Educators can also provide and reinforce strategies and tools for communicating and adapting in cross-cultural situations. Herein lies the depth of the opportunity that early childhood education teachers have. I am hopeful that we can begin to change the hearts, minds, and behaviors of our young charges. While young children often eagerly play cross racially (Delpit 2007), they have “an unstated but nonetheless sophisticated understanding of issues of race and power” (Tenorio 2007, 20). Countering discrimination and inequities should involve thoughtful, ongoing efforts from several sources since children learn covert and overt messages from many sources, including television, home life, literature, and peers.

Illusion 2: Multiculturalism and Diversity Are Valued in Today’s Society

Although the ethos of appreciation of diversity is frequently espoused, most Americans have few opportunities to discuss issues and take actions that work toward the appreciation of both unity and diversity among people. The messages in appendixes B–D were copied from a women’s and men’s restroom at a mid-size, mostly white university. The messages were written on the walls of the three stalls, with most of the writing in the second stall. While early childhood educators cannot fathom young children holding strong beliefs and opinions such as the ones recorded in appendixes B–D, the thoughts developed over time and did not start at adulthood. Additionally, young children live among adults and are socialized by people who hold varying values about diversity.

These scribbled writings on taboo topics, which young adults in college wrote within the secrecy of restroom stalls, likely convey antidiversity subtexts in society. Based on the handwriting and colors with which the comments were written, it appears that a different person wrote each comment.

On reading the first comment (see appendix B), I was compelled to document the apparent need for discourse on the topic. Although it probably loses some of its impact when transferred from the bathroom wall to paper, I immediately sat down and recorded it all—staying in the bathroom for an extended period of time and returning the next day to take photos, fearing the graffiti would be painted over. Was the restroom the only allowable outlet for these adult women (presumably) to express their suppressed feelings?

Interestingly, the initial comment elicited a thread of comments in this “bathroom chat room.” The first writer seems to have a need to talk about racism—a taboo topic in society. The second person responded by questioning social and political racial categories. The third writer discouraged this dialogue, seemingly intimating that writing on bathroom stalls is foolish and that the topic does not warrant discussion. As the comments continued, another person chimed in by recognizing the beauty of differences among humans and resisting categorical divisions of race but expressing discontent that whites cannot openly celebrate some aspects of their culture. This is followed by a person, perhaps in jest, promoting hate and divisions among groups. The next commenter made an attempt to express love for humanity, albeit, laced with stereotypes. Finally, an acknowledge-
her best friend (and the only other black child in the classroom) a “nigger.” My daughter was excited that she had actually heard someone use the word and did not concentrate on the word’s hurtful intent. I was pleased to learn that the teacher handled the situation in a commendable manner. She first took care of the victim’s feelings and then reprimanded the child who made the offensive comment and contacted his parents. She also spoke to the class about the issue. The drawback of the situation is that discussions of racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination were not part of the classroom dialogue. Although dealing with these topics is undoubtedly complicated and difficult, when left unaddressed, faulty beliefs and stereotypes develop and can potentially fester.

Race can even define children’s games (e.g., a child might say something like, “You can’t be the queen. There are no black queens.”) As teachers, it is important to recognize racism’s effect on children, address the issue directly, and give children the skills they will need to combat racism in their lives (Tenorio 2007). Omitting the word race obscures the issues at hand.

Returning to the graffiti in the bathroom, one writer artistically wrote in huge, two-dimensional colored letters, “Love each other.” This message, while sweet, is naïve and simplistic, missing the mark as does much of the typical commentary on race relations in early childhood classrooms. The writer urges readers to see our larger connection as humans and to seek harmony among different ideologies, cultures, ethnic groups, and economic and political systems.

The comments obviously reflect issues about race and racism that need to be discussed. I wondered how many of the students revisited the dialogue and what purpose it served in their lives. Did they think about their comments before writing them? Did they strategically go to the restroom when they had time to write undetected? What prompted the first comment? Did any of the women discuss what they had written with others or in classes? Would they feel comfortable doing so? How many of these women were going to be or were already teachers?

Without venues to discuss issues surrounding diversity, actions and discourse will continue in subversive ways. Teachers need guidelines and professional development on these topics. Multiculturalism is often valued conceptually versus practically and efforts to address diversity issues are frequently superficial.

Many may think that acts of hatred are few and do not affect our daily lives. Examining acts of genocide around the world, the January 2006 issue of National Geographic reported that an alarming 50 million people have been killed during the twentieth century (Simons 2006). In many cases, the perpetrators of these heinous acts were following orders. Readers in the United States may feel relieved and disconnected because the genocide accounts cited were from Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and South America, and instances in the United States were comparatively missing. However, approximately 5,000 people—mostly African American men—were lynched in the United States between 1882 and 1968 (Walker 2003). Additionally, the number of hate groups continues to escalate each year, and there were 844 hate groups in the United States in 2006 (Southern Poverty Law Center 2007). Children from families who teach hate attend our schools. In many cases, teachers may be the only people who have a realistic chance of countering such indoctrination by presenting other perspectives.

National Geographic posed the following question to readers: “Will humans ever overcome the ethnic hatreds and other factors that contribute to genocide?” (Simons 2006, 35). The results were close: 52 percent of 12,987 respondents said “yes” and 47 percent said “no” (National Geographic n.d.). As Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel notes, “Only human beings can move me to despair. But only human beings can remove me from despair” (Simons, 35).

Despite worldwide protests, wars such as the one in Iraq continue to erupt and result in the loss of lives of innocent people. As long as hatred dwells in the human mind, real peace is impossible (Vreeland 2001). So we have to learn how to fight hatred and to attack its roots. But first we have to be able to recognize it—even when it is disguised as education or socialization.

While genocide represents extreme acts of hatred and divisiveness, most societies inadvertently teach division and ethnocentrism early on. It starts with seemingly benign and common instances: girls versus boys, us versus them (these poles can represent any groups), the Lakers versus the Suns, the Deltas versus the non-Deltas, my state versus other states, east side versus west side, Bloods versus Crips, and so on. While these polarities are not hateful per se, the sense of competition is embedded and becomes second nature. People often become so vested in the divisions that they forget that most of them are contrived and not originally intended to be taken beyond a healthy level of amiable competition.

It is important for children to begin to understand the social, environmental, and situational roots of the hostility that leads to hatred and genocide (Zinn 2007). Children can learn that these events are not inevitable and adults need to show them how such antagonisms divide people, thus making it difficult for them to solve their problems.

For many early childhood teacher educators and teachers, the thought of addressing issues of hate and oppression is daunting because most of us tend to be most familiar with and associate with people who are similar to us. It may also be difficult for us to conceive of relinquishing some of our favorite dichotomies since these are a part of our identities. Additionally, conventional wisdom regarding what young children are capable of processing makes many teachers understandably leery about venturing into such serious topics. Yet, if teachers want to begin to make a difference, it will be necessary to counter many prevailing ideologies that inadvertently teach ethnocentrism. Obviously, the degree of information presented to children will vary with age and sociocultural.
edly, most teachers want to make a posi-
in the world (Ayers 1993). Undoubt-
by asking if we are making a difference
lives and children's lives. We can start
these issues are already affecting our
rooms. First, we must recognize that
more than being nice to others and add
ing the aforementioned issues requires
early childhood teachers that address
convey to practicing and prospective
Should Be Used?
Which Pedagogical Approaches

Which Pedagogical Approaches
Should Be Used?

As teacher educators, we have to help
teachers understand how to comprehen-
sively make changes in their pedagogi-
cal approaches and curricula. Although
not exhaustive, eight interlocking compo-
ents of classroom practice are
recommended for confronting inequi-
ties woven into the social fabric of our
society (Au, Bigelow, and Karp 2007). Classroom practices that move beyond
rhetoric to substance should be:

1. Grounded in the lives of our students.
Instruction and curriculum should be
rooted in children's needs and expe-
riences. Children's lives can be used
as a starting point for deepening their
understanding of social justice. Con-
nexions between students' lives and
the broader society are necessary.

2. Critical. Children should be taught
to critique information, literature,
media, and the like. These critiques
must move beyond the classroom and
be linked to real-world problems. Are
students learning the skills they need
to be critical thinkers, advance their
education, be prepared for employ-
ment, and become active citizens?

3. Multicultural, antiracist, and pro-
justice. Substantive changes to
instruction and curriculum include
presenting ongoing content and
dispositions that address multiple
perspectives.

4. Participatory and experiential. Using
a variety of mentally and physically
engaging activities, children should
be involved in projects, role plays,
simulations, mock trials, and so on.
Children need to learn how to make
dealer decisions and to collectively
solve problems.

5. Hopeful, joyful, kind, and vision-
ary. Even though difficult issues are
addressed, children need to feel
emotionally safe. Classrooms
should be designed in ways that
teach children to trust and care for
each other. While illuminating posi-
tive efforts and outcomes should
be an important part of what we
teach, teachers should not deceive
children on issues through what
Polly Greenberg (1992) refers to as
"sins of omission" (omitting differ-
cultural perspectives and infor-
mation) and "sins of commission"
(spreading incorrect and inaccurate
information about cultural groups).
The way to provide hope is to dem-
strate how good people can be
empowered to overcome inequities.

6. Activist. Complementary to critical
thinking is reflective action (Freire
1999). We should teach children to
be human and humane; that is, to
think critically, feel, and act. Inspi-
rogen contemporary and historical
examples of people struggling for
justice are important to share.

7. Academically rigorous. A social jus-
tice curriculum should be academi-
cally rigorous and should prepare
students for the world in which they
live and for the future. This includes
increasing children's ability to do
well on state-mandated standardized
tests and perform well in class.

8. Culturally sensitive. Critical teach-
ing requires teachers to admit that
they do not know everything. We can
learn from our students by listening
to them. We need to document, respect,
and learn about people from all over
the world, particularly those who are
dramatically different from us.
The following guidelines to prevent and address prejudice specifically for preschool children may also be helpful (Williams 2007, 11):

1. Be honest. Do not insist that children should not to “see” color or tell children we are all the same. Rather, discuss differences openly and highlight diversity by choosing picture books, toys, games, and videos that feature diverse characters in positive, non-stereotypical roles.

2. Embrace curiosity. Be careful not to ignore or discourage your students’ questions about differences among people, even if the questions make you uncomfortable. Not being open to such questions sends the message that being different is bad.

3. Broader choices. Be careful not to promote stereotypical gender roles, suggesting that certain games, sports, or activities are gender specific.

4. Foster pride. Talk to your child about your family heritage to encourage self-knowledge and a positive self-concept.

5. Lead by example. Widen your circle of friends and acquaintances to include people from different backgrounds, cultures, and experiences.

For those who remain unconvinced that vestiges of inhumanity, racial superiority, and hate (for self and others) are issues that early childhood educators should address, results from Kiri Davis’s recent re-creation of the famous 1940s doll experiment conducted by Dr. Kenneth Clark demonstrate that young children are still learning negative stereotypes about African Americans (Good Morning America 2006). In the 2005 study, Davis found that fifteen of the twenty-one African American children said that the white doll was good and pretty, whereas the black doll was bad. We can only imagine what white children think about the black doll. Without ongoing counter-narratives in classrooms, prejudice and stereotypes are left unchallenged and can lead to outcomes like those in appendixes B and D. It would be easy to identify thousands of examples to illustrate the oppressive messages that bombard us daily (e.g., It’s a man’s world; Jews are cheap; Arabs are terrorists) (Harrow 2000a). From the time we are born, we are inundated with unquestioned and stereotypical messages that shape how we think about ourselves and others. They are woven into every structural thread of the fabric of our cultures (e.g., media, school, songs, and cultural practices).

Although we are not teaching children prejudice, we are not teaching them not to be prejudiced. Readings and content in teacher preparation programs need to address these issues in a comprehensive and systematic way.

And as far as making the world, our world, a better place goes, there is no need to distinguish between modest or extravagant actions. Anything that can be done with competence, loyalty, clarity, perseverance, anything that strengthens the fight against the powers of non-love, selfishness, and evil, is equally important. (Paulo Freire, qtd. in Nieto 2003, 91)

Conclusion

Classrooms can be places where we give students glimpses of the kind of society we can live in beyond what we may currently envision. There are more than sixty million teachers in the world who, in turn, teach billions of children. If we can make our own classroom instruction and content inclusive and also help prospective and practicing teachers do the same, we can contribute to creating a more inclusive social order. Teaching toward a more inclusive social order or teaching for humanity means working toward reducing our peculiar ethnocentrism so that we can appreciate humanity in its many dimensions.

While the vision of a less hateful world seems unattainable to some, we can start by respecting the infinite ways to be human and recognizing that all of them should be valued. Teachers who teach social justice are professionals who care about nurturing all children and who are enraged at the prospect of injustices (Kohl 2004). Racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination and oppression do not have to be cultural legacies.

Fighting all forms of discrimination is a challenge for everyone—not just people of color, poor people, or other marginalized groups. It is especially important for white, mainstream, and privileged individuals to fight along with disenfranchised people. Historically, changes have occurred when people of all races, social classes, genders, and religions collectively fought oppression and discrimination (e.g., abolition of slavery, civil rights legislation). Therefore, a central focus should be placed on unifying forces of good around the globe.

REFERENCES


Derman-Sparks, L., P. G. Ramsey, and J. O. Edwards. 2006. What if all the kids are
white?: Anti-bias multicultural education with young children and families. New York: Teachers College Press.

APPENDIX A

A FOUR-YEAR-OLD’S COMMENTARY ON RELIGION, HOMELESSNESS, AND CROSS-RACIAL RELATIONSHIPS

In our family, we typically bless our food before eating. Jonathan, four years old, forgot to bless his food before eating.

Me: Jonathan, do you know why we bless our food before we eat?
Jonathan: No.
Me: It’s our way of thanking God that we have food to eat. Some people don’t have food to eat or homes to live in. Did you know that?
Jonathan: Yes.
Me: Where do they live?
Jonathan: Outside.
Me: Do you think they like that? They have to be outside even if it is cold or hot or rainy.
Jonathan: No, they don’t like it.
Me: What can we do to help them?
Jonathan: We could let them live with us—if they are black, but if they are white we would have to find somewhere else for them to live.
Me: Why?
Jonathan: Because white people live with white people and black people live with black people.

Me: How about Uncle Steve and Aunt Tam?
Uncle Steve is black and Aunt Tam is white, and they live together. How is that?

Jonathan deliberated on this point for two minutes. (He wrinkled his brow and put his hand on the side of his head in the thinking position.) Finally, he said, “I don’t know.” (This is a first for this four-year-old who has solutions for everything.)

Me: Do you remember when we stayed in the room with Auntie Susan and she’s white?
Jonathan: No.
Me: Do you have friends who are white?
Jonathan: Yes.
Me: Who are they?
Jonathan: Clarke, Drew, and Lane.
Me: Can they stay with you?
Jonathan: Yes, if their mommies and daddies are going somewhere, but not for a long time because when they [parents] come back, they [children] have to go home.
Me: If white people only live with white people and black people only live with black people, who do Asian people or Mexican people live with? [I chose these because we know people from these ethnic groups.]

APPENDIX B

COMMENTS ON A UNIVERSITY BATHROOM WALL SHOWING UNRESOLVED DIVERSITY ISSUES ON RACE AND RACISM

Comment 1: “Can somebody answer one question for me. Why is it okay to have black rallies to celebrate their culture, but it’s racist when whites want to?”
Comment 2: “Who is black? Who is white?”
Comment 3: “You people have too much time on your minds.”
Comment 4: “It’s okay for any culture to celebrate their heritage. It only becomes racist when you glorify our race in a rally. Why separate us from them anyway. We all come from our roots.”
Comment 5: “I’m not racist, I hate you equally.”
Comment 6: “I love y’all! I’m a cracker (can’t dance or jump).”
Comment 7: “Indians were here first.”
Comment 8: “I don’t know Asian people.”
Comment 9: “Black people don’t have the power to be racist.”
Comment 10: “All ya’ll b---- need to shut up h/c none of ya’ll can dress.”
Comment 11: “We are all AMERICANS first.”
Comment 12: “See this type of ignorant s--- is exactly why racism will always exist. B---- you try to hate on somebody, get your facts straight first, B----. We all came from African Kings & Queens. Blacks were the 1st ones on the earth. Whites try to make us
commit genocide by rewriting the Bible to make Adam & Eve in their image. I bet you didn’t know Africans taught Europeans how to take baths. Look it up Ho! Shut your trap & open a book & ya’ll be a much better asset to civilization. Go back to Europe.”

Comment 13: “STOP” [The writer super-imposes the word in letters large enough to cover the entire dialogue on the wall where the writing was most prolific.]

APPENDIX C

COMMENTS ABOUT RELIGION WRITTEN ON A UNIVERSITY BATHROOM WALL.

Comment 1: “There is no God, only that pattern that link [sic] us further with the universe.”
Comment 2: “So you’re saying you come from a monkey (?)”
Comment 3: “Heaven is not segregated.”

APPENDIX D

RACIAL EPITHETS WRITTEN ON A UNIVERSITY BATHROOM WALL.

Comment 1: “The word nigger came from the Latin word Niger meaning Black.”
Comment 2: “I feel bad for black people. They have a justified inferiority complex when it comes to intelligence.”
Comment 3: “Niggers, go back to Africa.”