

## Childhood Innocence and the Racialized Child in a White Space

Alisha Nguyen (Boston College)  
alisha.nguyen@bc.edu

In Summer 2020, the well-circulated surveillance video footage of the murder of George Floyd tore up the American illusionary cloak of diversity and woke millions of White Americans from their racial amnesia, leading to one of the largest social justice movements since the 1960s. The escalation of racial conflicts urged educators to engage in long-overdue conversations to address the prevalent “-isms” in educational institutions. School districts across the U.S. started sending out emails confirming their anti-racist stance and highlighting the messages of diversity and inclusion. Directors of diversity were appointed, teachers’ professional development sessions were scheduled, and PTO book clubs were created. Yet, amidst these performative efforts, little attention has been paid to curriculum and instruction, especially in the context of early childhood education.

### Childhood Innocence: Burden & Privilege

Early childhood is a unique realm where the overwhelming discourses of care, love, and protection often dominate and can justify the silencing act of social injustice issues. In American culture, children are often seen and perceived as racially unconscious, asexual, and cognitively incapable of understanding complex matters such as race, gender, and sexuality. Early childhood teachers and parents often avoid touching on these issues in order to protect “childhood innocence” (Robinson and Jones-Diaz 2016). It is crucial to understand that childhood innocence is a literacy formation from the Romantic era and a social construct that functions to uphold the child/adult binary and to project adults’ “longing for something lost and forever unattainable” (Robinson 2008, 116). The mystified innocent child forever resides in the over-filtered space defined by the absence of sins (Bernstein 2011). Racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, discrimination, hatred, bigotry, and violence do not exist in that imaginary world. Social injustice issues, hence, must be purposely ignored or hidden.

Problematically, innocence has always been a racialized *and* gendered concept: it is White-exclusive as historically in Western culture “only White kids were allowed to be innocent” (Bernstein 2011; 2017). In addition, it strongly relates to the notion of idealized White femininity: childlike, innocent, and dependent. For children of color, childhood innocence is neither presumed nor entitled. Many researchers have raised serious concerns about the criminalization of Black boys and adultification of Black girls in U.S. classrooms (Dumas and Nelson 2016; Epstein, Blake, and González 2017). To justify dehumanizing treatment against Black children, White logic affirms that Black children are less innocent and therefore, should receive less protection and do not deserve the same level of tolerance compared to White children. Across educational settings, Black and Latinx students suffer tremendously from structural racial discrimination, harsh discipline practices, and microaggressions (Bryan 2018; Kohli, Pizarro, and Nevárez 2017; Skiba and Losen 2016; Wun 2018). Childhood innocence, hence, is a burden and a contested privilege that needs to

be debunked, in order to reclaim child rights of civic engagement, participation in critical conversations of social justice issues, and access to important knowledge.

### **The Racialized Child in a White Space**

During recess, two 5-year-old girls, Mia and Zoey, went to the playground and raced to the swing set together. Giggling and enjoying the cool breeze of the spring, Mia and Zoey tried to swing in sync and went as high as they could. Suddenly, Pete, a male classmate, came and pushed Zoey off the swing.

“That is not nice!” – Mia helped Zoey get up and said angrily to Pete

“Mia, you should not play with Zoey anymore!” – Pete said

“Why?” – confused and surprised, Mia asked Pete

Pete answered, “Because you are White and Zoey is not!”

(Note: Zoey is Black Latinx, Mia is Asian, Pete is White)

Such a racist incident is not an isolated event. It happens more frequently in White spaces where children of color are often racialized and suffer from racial discrimination and oppression (Troyna and Hatcher 2018). Troubling playground examples like this one, call for the urgent task to implement anti-racist intervention programs in White spaces.

In Fall 2020, I conducted an ethnographic case study in a kindergarten classroom located in a White-predominant neighborhood in the Northeast (Dyson and Genishi 2005). Guided by the anti-bias education framework (Derman-Sparks and Ramsey 2011), the research project was a collaboration with a White female teacher to implement an anti-bias read-alouds curriculum. The classroom case was selected as it represented a typical White-predominant early childhood classroom in which the teacher and students engaged in the shared context of read-alouds sessions. As a veteran teacher and a community treasure, the teacher is well known, well loved, and respected by the school community. Based on my participation assisting in learning activities, I observed that similar to other early childhood teachers, the kindergarten teacher adopted a colorblind approach and her classroom practices sometimes touched on the issues of diversity, kindness, and tolerance, but they were “more illusionary than real” (Boutte 2008, 166).

As a graduate student, I remembered feeling like walking on eggshells to gain access to the research site. Entering the White space with an anti-racist agenda, I certainly violated a stereotypical perception of the “nonthreatening kind of person of color” (Nguyen 2020). My research project received little attention and support from the school administrators. As explained by the principal, who is White, my research might give the impression that the school did not already engage in “this work.” In this White affluent district, “this work” merely included professional training sessions in which (mostly White) teachers read books, sat through lectures, and reflected on their implicit biases and stereotypical thinking of (mostly racialized) students and families. Families were not involved even though nondominant families and students of color have been sharing their troubled schooling experiences fueled with discrimination and marginalization. And nobody was interested in doing “this work” with young children even though racism is a reality for children of color like Mia and Zoey. However, it is certainly a misconception to think that talking about race

and racism is only needed in racially diverse classrooms. As reflected in the vignette above, White children like Pete need anti-racist interventions to combat their internalized White supremacy. We should nurture White children to become anti-racist allies and foster their commitment to racial justice from an early age.

In the research project, I presented multiple titles of anti-bias picture books and co-designed the lessons with the early childhood teacher to engage students in critical conversations of important topics such as racism, White privilege, gender stereotypes, gender nonconformity, sexism, and homophobia. Still, the teacher tried to avoid titles that explicitly present the negative effects of racism, bigotry, and transphobia. While the titles selected for read-aloud use mostly focused on the messages of acceptance and inclusion mainly offered and determined by the dominant group (White or gender-conforming/heteronormative characters), the unselected titles were written from the perspectives of the oppressed. Most importantly, they amplified how the main characters investigate and actively resist, either through personal transformation, and/or participation in collective actions against social injustices. Justifying the decision of dismissing these picture books, the teacher labeled them as “not developmentally appropriate” and “too heavy.” Contradictorily, at the end of the project, the teacher also expressed her surprise with students’ insightful comments on race and gender issues. She reflected on how they listened and interacted with the selected titles in ways that proved wrong her assumption and underestimation of their capacity to “handle the stories.” Commenting on the younger learners, the teacher shared, “I find that generally they are very accepting of others and they are very accepting of any range of differences. I think because they have like an innocence... a lot more than other age groups do.” To the early childhood teacher, the kindergarteners are special because of their perceived innocence, the level of which purportedly decreases with age. This was exemplified through the teacher’s censoring act that was mostly influenced by her adult-centric stance and colorblind ideologies. These ideological obstacles appeared to prevent the teacher from investing into a long-term anti-bias project. She eventually opted for using and teaching what are deemed, from her perspective, as less risky materials. Hidden under the surface are the teacher’s own fears and discomforts in relation to certain topics present in anti-bias picture books: “*I am not comfortable with this title,*” she wrote on a sticky note placed on the cover of *Something Happened in Our Town*, which is about police brutality and racial violence against Black people in America.

We all know what happened in our town in Summer 2020.

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**Author contact:** Alisha Nguyen (Boston College), [alisha.nguyen@bc.edu](mailto:alisha.nguyen@bc.edu)

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