Starting Small: Interrupting Racist Narratives in Young Children

Virginia Lea

**2012 Early Childhood Education Conference; University of Wisconsin-Stout**
4/27/12

Ground Rules Exercise

- Help us to make this a space in which you will feel able to express your authentic thoughts and feelings during the session.

- Share the ground rules that will work best for you with a partner. Then, one of you step forward and write down your ground rules on one of the flips charts at the front of the room. For example:

- *"Use 'I' statements*

- *Respect the confidentiality of all members of the class*

- *Don't put others down, or laugh at their comments/thoughts/responses*

I AM MY CURRICULUM!

- We come to embody/hold in our adaptive unconscious minds *dominant social narratives*, including narratives of "race"

- To avoid projecting racist narratives on to our students, we need to work on knowing ourselves

What do you see?
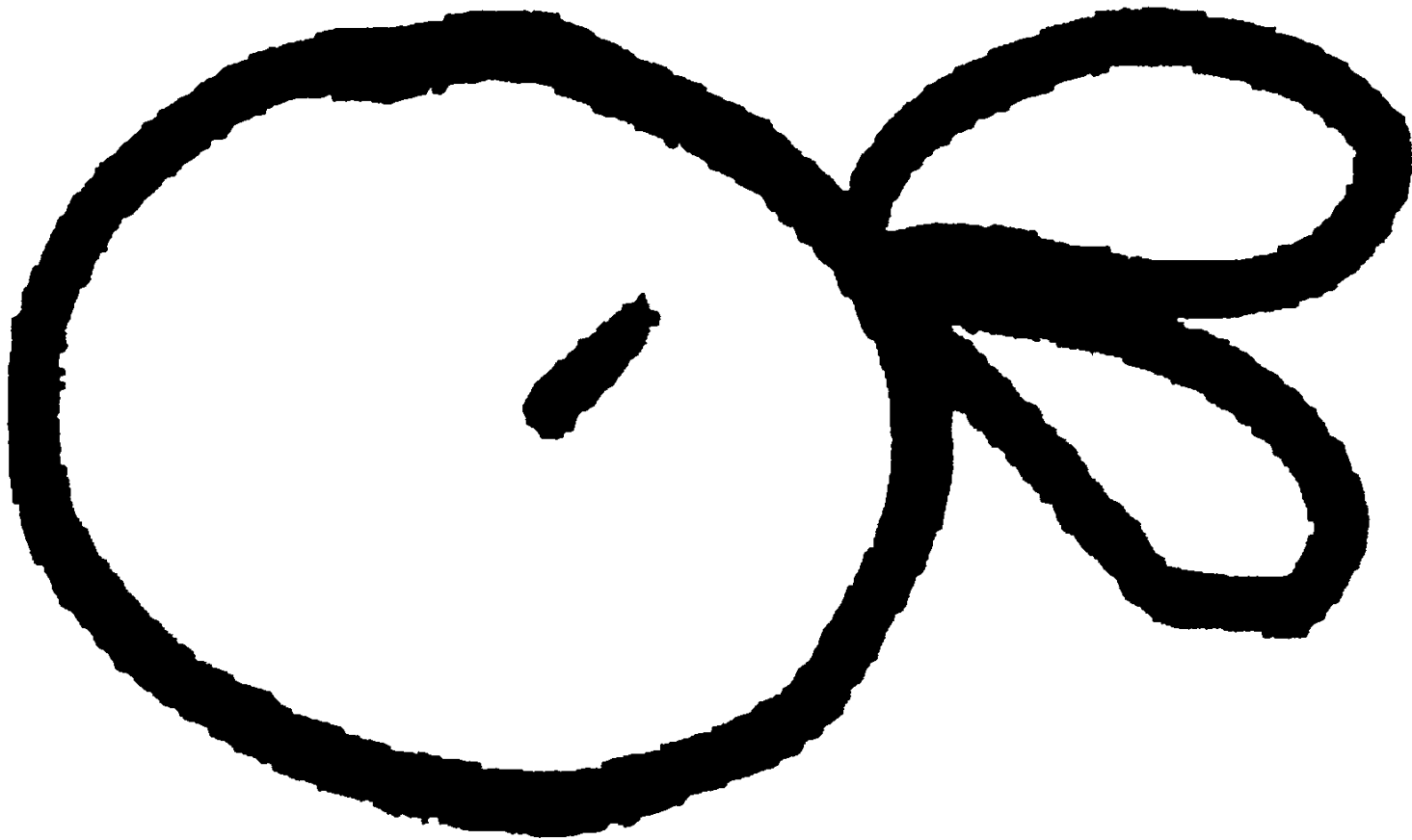
Background

- We are a country of difference

- Some differences have historically been given greater value than others

- People have come to embody/hold in their unconscious minds **a hierarchy of social narratives** as to what those differences mean

- These narratives are disseminated by powerful elites to perpetuate their interests. ***Level of consciousness???***

- Race is one of those narratives that has been used to sort people into the socio-economic hierarchy—from European conquest of the Americas, genocide of Native peoples, slavery, Jim Crow laws (*Slavery by Another Name*, Douglas Blackmon), through to *The New Jim Crow (Michelle Alexander, 2012)*

How do young children gain access to dominant social narratives, including narratives of "race"?

- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jHyzAbV6nuM&feature=related

- In your view, how does this on-going stereotyping of people of color in the media impact the ways young children come to see themselves as well as others?

Internalized racism

- **Research does tell us that young children learn at an early age to see themselves as well as others in terms of dominant racist narratives.**

- The Black/White Doll Test http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MqSFqnUFOns&list=QL

The School Context

- **We are more segregated now than we were 30 years ago (Civil Rights Project, UCLA)**

Compared with low-poverty schools, high-poverty schools have:

- More teachers teaching in areas outside their certification;

- More serious teacher turnover problems;

- More teacher vacancies;

- Larger numbers of substitute teachers;

- More limited access to computers and the Internet;

- Inadequate facilities (such as science labs);

The Context

- More dirty or inoperative bathrooms;

- More evidence of vermin such as cockroaches and rats;

- Insufficient classroom materials;

- Less rigorous and multicultural curricula;

- Fewer experienced teachers;

- Lower teacher salaries;

- Larger class sizes; and

- Less funding.

- *So, how do we address children's learned racism and internalized racism in school?*

Sonia Nieto's Model

- *Where do you think "your curriculum" currently stands in terms of Nieto's model?*

- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NIvmbFKIXvE

From *Tolerance*

to building

Affirmation, Solidarity and Critique

Start with your children

- Gloria Ladson-Billings

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9IeB4SvQIA&feature=related

Community Building

- We need to talk about differences before we can build a community

- Painting ourselves (life size): We are all special; We are all unique/different from everyone else.

- Rejecting color-blindness

Out of the mouths of Babes

New student:

- "I'm white!"

Student familiar with the class process:

- "Nobody's white!"

After putting different colors on his skin:

- "I'm peach!"

We are all differently abled!

"Some people have broken legs, some people have crunches, and some people have to be in the wheeling chair."

Helping Young Students to find Common Ground

- Examining selves: Using puppets

- Learning how to be a friend/Acting like a friend

Children know what they want in the public space!

- ***"That's how you make friends: When you share and corroborate!"***

- ***" I wanted things on the wall (of the classroom) to be things we did together."***
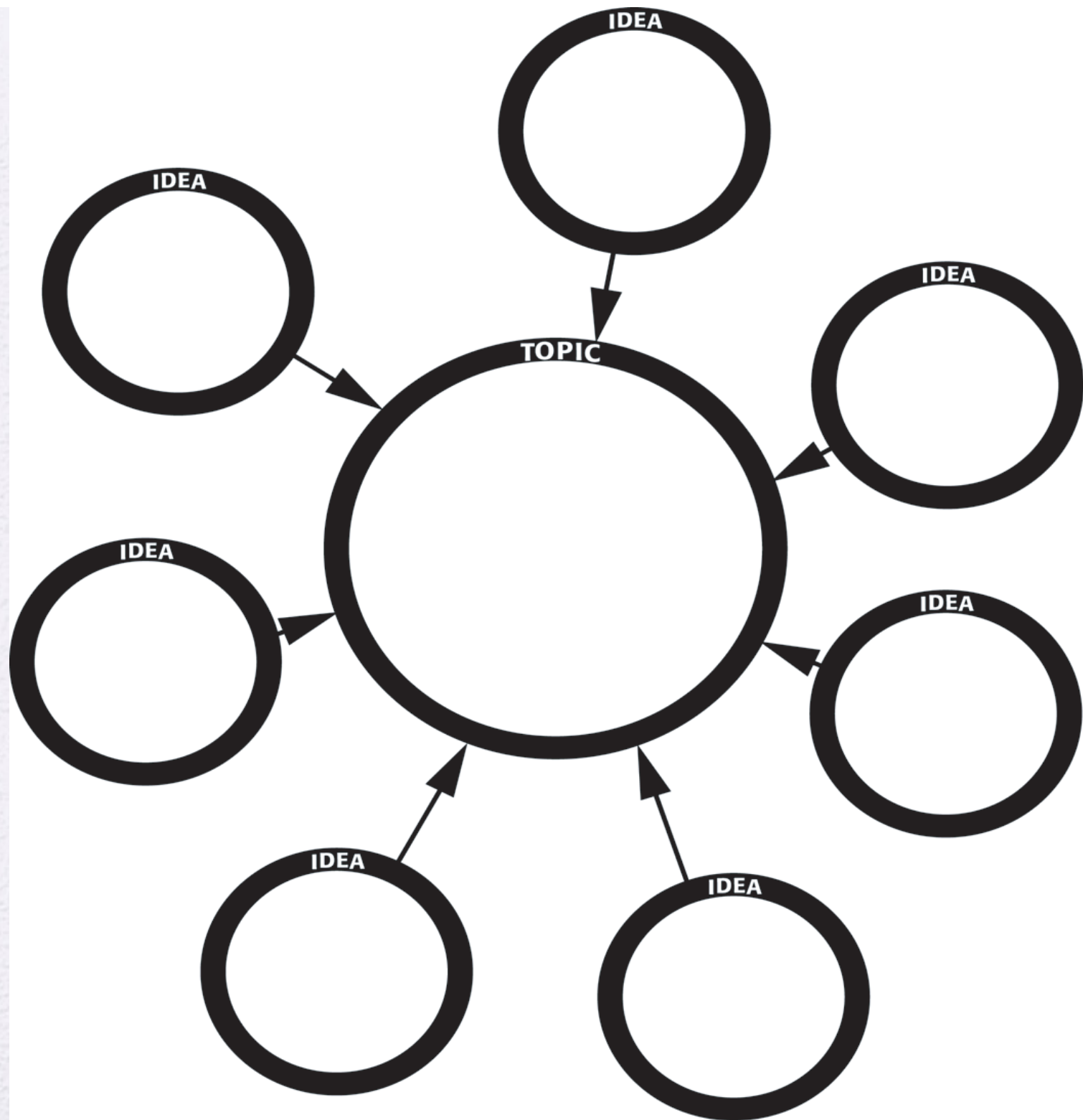
Inclusion

- To interrupt racism, we must interrupt the narratives that reflect a racist hierarchy: symbolic, cultural and economic capital

- Teachers can model anti-racist ways of behaving in society: Be real; share your lives with their students

- Place pictures of people of color on the walls of the classroom—known heroes and sheroes, as well as students heroes and sheroes

Dialogue

- Are all children's value judgments equally valid?

- Do we accept all of their representations without question?

Connect kids to their communities

- Many kids do not have or are disconnected from their communities/reference groups

- They do not have close relationships, or people who are able to show that they care (and usually do)

- Go on walks with kids in their communities and connect with people who do care

- Invite these folks and other people of color into the classroom to share their stories and culture with students

Questioning Reality

- Encourage kids to ask questions—there should be no wrong question

- "That's funny!" Help kids to develop the interpersonal skills to work with children from different backgrounds but do not silence them in public. Take children aside to ask them how they would feel if someone said "that's funny" about something they thought special. Ask the child to find a different word: "That's new (to me)!"

What is a Role Model?

- Build a Hero/Shero wall in the classroom— real and imagined, celebrity and family. Make sure everyone has someone(s)

- *"My daddy protects me from ghosts."*

- *Mr. Joe is a hero because he is kind."*

- *Brother Motumbo is a hero because he gives of his time to come in a share his music with you."*

Framing Role Models

- *Invite visits from many difference walks of life: Native people; People from different religious persuasions (Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, Hindu, etc.); Disabled people; LGBTQ parents, etc.*

- We need to honor every kind of difference to help children develop anti-racist confidence

- Make sure children recognize the intersections of the lives. (The story of Kiilu)

- Racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, abelism all function at the same time. Mario's two mums may be more significant to him at a given moment than his Latino identity.

Knowledge leads many to Anti-Racism

- Ameliorate culture shock by introducing children to many different experiences

- Bring many different languages into the classroom

- Invite student and visitors to bring in objects of interest that represent different cultural practices, traditions, world views

Problem-Posing Education

- Racism is a huge socio-economic problem that prevents maintains hierarchy and prevents human beings developing their full potential

- Encourage children to pose their own problems and research responses (you can use academic means to solve these problems. E.g. writing letters to the mayor!)

- Encourage children to pose a problem about racism and research ways of resolving the problem.

Cooperation and Respect

- By virtue of their humanity, children possess the tools to make the qualities of *cooperation* and *respect* real

- Use the power of play harnessed to children's sense of justice to enact cooperation and respect

- Structured play: Felt puppets on board to enact an anti-racist scenario

- Less structured (monitored) play acting

- Puppet buddies

What is fair?

- *"Fair means it's good!"*

- *Fair means someone does something for you and you do something for them!"*

- *Fair is when everyone gets a sticker."*

What does this say about the ways in which we teachers manipulate kids in the classroom?

Empathy

- Racism is without empathy.

- It may be based on an emotional need to put down others because we feel bad about ourselves

- If kids have developed this need, it makes (unconscious)sense to them (and adults) to put down those people that social narratives tell us are inferior? They don't have feelings; they are not worthy of fairness and social justice

- To over come this and develop the beginnings of harmony, we have to help kids develop emotional bonds with others who they see as "different" from themselves

Building Bonds

- Create rich contexts/projects in which kids need to talk to be successful

- Encourage the exploration of similarities and difference: Difference is good; Black is beautiful; We all have an place in a non-hierarchical world

- Explore the issues of *Status* (Juan's story)

Conflict, Justice and Peace

- There can be no peace without justice

- Children have a strong sense of fairness

- The media nourishes desire for capital: economic/material, cultural, and symbolic—denied to many kids

- Inequality and inequities expressed in racism (classism, sexism, etc.) have resulted in many students coming to school with anger, expressed in different ways. E.G. Toughness, violence, positivity

Conflict Resolution

"I care rules' from the Miami Peace Education Foundation

- *Use "I care" language*

- *We are responsible for what we do*

- *Listen to each other*

- *Care about each other's feelings*

- *Hands are for helping not hurting*

International Diplomacy

- When a conflict occurs, go to the Peace Table.

- Puppets talk for students/communicate the problem and state what they need for resolution

- Vallejo teacher: Bucket of puppets at the door of the classroom

- Marionettes: Role playing conflict and solutions

For many students, this kind of classroom can represent safety and security, and well as providing life lessons

Ideas for Creating Greater Equity in Education

- Technical changes alone will not change outcomes

- From a 'methods fetish' to a 'humanizing pedagogy' in which students' cultural and languages are central (*Cultural relevance & responsiveness*)

- *One size does not fit all - affirmation, solidarity & critique*

- Genuine, inclusive, dialogical model; Include students experiences, controversial material & moral dilemmas in the curriculum

- Teachers' positive attitudes and high expectations central to equity in the classroom

- Teacher need to become students – reciprocity

- Teachers who care/role models

- De-emphasize grades – develop community & avoid competition and hierarchy

- Misuse of praise – must be sincere & meaningful?

- Don't rely on textbooks and blackboards

- Respect for students' languages – bilingualism as a source of empowerment

- Avoid "silencing"/rendering students passive receptors of 'knowledge'

- Encouraging parental/visitor participation

- Teachers need to understand how schools work in wider socioeconomic and political context (*Myth of a meritocracy; learn also how hegemony mediates students' critiques*)

- *Recognize* link between unresponsive curriculum and dropping out of school

- Recognize tangible & *hidden* curriculum

- *"Stereotype threat"*

- Include the arts

- Encourage inquiry and collaborative group work

A serious challenge

- If we are going to continue to live in a sustainable world, if we are not going to continue to wage war worldwide, we must facilitate anti-racism (anti-classism, anti-sexism, anti-homophobia etc.)—institutional, cultural and interpersonal—in ourselves and our children

- http://www.youtube.co`m/watch?v=EHtZJC_4YmE

- Question?

- Comments?

- Many thanks!