

Courageous Conversations and Actions

An interview with Julie Bisson and Theresa Lenear

by Margie Carter

"We need dinner table conversations about how some white people grow up without a racist bone in their body but others are predisposed to sing songs about 'n____' on a frat bus.

How does that happen?

What is the cause?

What is the solution?

White people need to drive this dialogue."

Joshua Dubois



Julie Bisson has worked in the field for more than 30 years, as a teacher, director, college instructor, consultant and trainer, and workshop presenter. Author of *Celebrate! An Anti-bias Guide to Including Holidays in Early Childhood Programs*,

Julie is currently a director in the Seattle area and living her dream of leading with a vision and a core set of values, one of the most important of which is a commitment to social justice.



Theresa Lenear's ECE journey began as a Head Start parent. Now with over 46 years of experience, her focus centers on teaching and coaching those wishing to strengthen skills in providing services and resources relevant to the diverse children

and families in their communities. A co-lead researcher engaged in the Teaching Umoja Participatory Action Research and a member of the African American Childcare Task Force, Theresa is actively engaged in working with others on issues of equity and social justice.



Margie Carter has been a regular contributor to *Exchange* for over 20 years and has co-authored a number of early childhood books and training videos. She brings a social justice and equity lens to all of her work.

With rising tensions across our country over the last year, including increased occurrences of hate crimes, it's tempting to slip into separate silos of fear and only engage with folks who share our same views or experiences. But that diminishes our humanity and erodes our democratic ideals and our country's founding aspirations of liberty and justice for all. Do we want fear to grow larger than a curious mind and generous spirit?

Though we don't always feel like we have power, in the context of systemic racism and institutionalized privileges, those of us with white-skinned privilege and financial security have the most sanctioned influence to change or support inequities. That's why Joshua Dubois says white people need to drive this dialogue. And while our professional code of ethics and anti-bias goals compel us to respect diversity, most white people don't like to be pushed out of our comfort zone. Do we recognize how this leaves all the discomfort and courage transferred to our colleagues and families of color? What will it take to move us into some heart-to-heart, hard conversations — not only around the dinner table, but in our organizations and communities? Will anything else grow the necessary trust needed to heal our democracy?

Honest conversations about inequities involve some discomfort and require risk taking and courage. Depending on the context, these conversations can uncover a range of painful emotions from denial and guilt to anger and fear. In their provocative chapter "From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces," Arao and Clemens (2013) remind us that useful conversations around diversity and social justice require emotional safety, but the idea of safety shouldn't be conflated with comfort. In fact, the expectation of safety could be just another manifestation of privilege because our country has never been truly safe or equitable for people of color. If you are white, this may be a new understanding to face. If you are a person of color, you may be tired, angry, or living in despair with that reality.

Conversations in Our Early Childhood Settings

Are there examples of 'brave spaces' in early childhood organizations, with leadership that models, teaches, and provides a process for people to respectfully listen, truthfully participate, and learn from each other's perspectives? This isn't something we can tick off a checklist, but a steady learning, building of trust and commitment. The outcome of this work will be more engaged,

equitable relationships and an enhanced ability to be more engaged citizens in a true democracy.

In years past I had the good fortune to be part of a professional learning group, which explored culturally relevant and anti-bias practices. As a diverse group of women and men, we worked to deepen our understandings, challenge and support each other, with the goal of enhancing our social justice work in our jobs, professional organizations, and communities. At times there were rough spots, tears and anger, but the work and learning continued, trust was re-established, and friendships were strengthened.

Recently I learned that two members of this group have teamed up again — Julie Bisson, a European American woman directing a small ECE center, invited Theresa Lenear, an African American colleague and consultant, to further the social justice goals of Julie's center. This work began several years ago, but seems especially pertinent now. In talking with them, I felt this conversation might be useful for a broader audience of educators trying to navigate the troubled waters of our country.

An Interview with Julie Bisson and Theresa Lenear

MC: Julie, can you give us an overview of your thinking in how you incorporate this work at your center and how you began to involve Theresa?

JB: One of our core values at Epiphany Early Learning Preschool (EELP), since its inception, is social justice. Our program was built on a vision of strong, effective work in cultural relevancy and anti-bias practice, as well as a diverse community of children, families, and staff committed to dialogue and growth in these areas.

MC: I find this so commendable, especially given the affluent population your center draws on. So often people think that social justice work is for programs that serve families in poverty. But I know that's never been your perspective. This work needs to take place in all communities, especially in settings where the conversation is probably NOT happening around the dinner table, because it doesn't feel like 'their struggle.'

JB: Racism, classism, ableism, sexism, and homophobia affect all children, although in very different ways. The white children, multiracial children, and children of color in our program, the majority of whom have affluent parents, need teachers and parents to work together toward the four anti-bias education goals. All of these children deserve to feel good about who they are, and to feel comfort and joy with others, and they need the skills to notice unfairness and to take action against unfairness. These are skills that children must have in order to be successful in an increasingly diverse world where the 'isms' are alive and well. White children and children of affluent parents in particular need the opportunity to develop a strong sense of identity that is not built on privilege, but on character traits including collaboration and compassion.

While our tuition costs and small scholarship fund mean that most families we serve are more affluent, I wanted us to be a culturally diverse program. Three years after our launch, we were 55% children of color but our staff remained 75% white and our leadership team, made up of four mentor teachers and myself, was all white. Looking forward, I wanted two things to happen: deeper dialogue and practice around the four anti-bias education goals, and broader perspectives and accountability than our all white leadership team could provide. I knew we would need strong, guided professional development with a focus that intention-

Anti-bias Goals

Goal 1

Each child will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities.

Goal 2

Each child will express comfort and joy with human diversity; accurate language for human difference; and deep, caring human connections.

Goal 3

Each child will increasingly recognize unfairness, have a language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.

Goal 4

Each child will demonstrate empowerment and skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions.

Louise Derman-Sparks & Julie Olsen Edwards (2010). *Anti-Bias Education: Tools for Empowering Young Children and Ourselves*.

ally challenged us to deepen our understanding of our own cultural identities and expand our skills. We needed to bring in voices that were missing at the table and to be held accountable for the work we said we were committed to.

Theresa and I have a long history. She has been a colleague, a teacher, a mentor, and a friend for 25 years. She is also a gifted trainer and facilitator of conversations. Theresa knew of my commitment to social justice work and, I think, trusted my intentions with my staff and knew we were ready to work hard together.

TL: I knew Julie indirectly in the past prior to her moving to Seattle as a member of the Seattle Culturally Relevant Anti Bias (CRAB) group. When Julie moved here to the Seattle area, I got to know her on a more personal and deeper

level as we engaged over time in deep dialogue on the issues of inequity in our communities. Our friendship went even deeper as we were both parents. I think that it got really up-close and personal later for Julie when her daughter, who is multiethnic, came into Julie's life.

Because we had a foundation of trust, which supported mutual honesty, I decided to work with Julie and her staff. I am careful in my choices around facilitating others (groups and programs), as I must have a sense that the group or program is honest about their commitment to being inclusive, working towards equity and social justice issues, especially as it relates to children and families. I trusted Julie in her goals and commitment for her program and program staff.

Whenever I begin working with a program I say, "So tell me about your staff and the families you serve." Julie was already thinking along these lines and very intentional about her goals. Based on where she knew her staff was around the program's agenda and where Julie and her staff wanted to take their efforts, I was able to formulate in-service professional development opportunities... a sort of a check-and-balance framework that would encourage staff being responsible and accountable, not only to the children and families they served, but to themselves as members of that same community.

JB: To begin the work I gave you a summary of our history and work done to date and then asked, "What do you think?" I was clear we had set the stage to take our anti-bias work deeper, but we needed a perspective that we didn't have — another set of eyes and ears and thoughts to push us. We decided to use racism as a framework because our staff was predominantly white, yet working with diverse families.

TL: Julie was already at the helm of this anti-bias work. I was just going to add more wind to the sails, add more juice where that was needed.

An Ongoing Process

JB: I have to say that just figuring out how to carve out TIME for this work with Theresa was a success in and of itself. Theresa joined us for a couple of two-hour staff meetings, but she also spent several half-day in-service days with us. Before each training, Theresa and I would talk. She learned the demographics of my team in terms of race, culture, language, and other aspects, and I updated her before each training about any changes in the team or any teachable moments or questions that had recently come up. I would share with Theresa the leadership team's thinking about what form the upcoming training might hold and then I'd hand it over to Theresa, trusting that she would plan the right experience for us on that professional development day. It was immensely helpful to debrief together after our time together. It helped me know where to go next.

TL: I always say you have to trust the process. I'm not just coming to do a training for the sake of getting professional development hours checked off. We say we must prepare children to be global citizens, but what does that mean? I see this work more as a calling than a training. It is our obligation and responsibility to call out and name our issues in the context of the *NAEYC Code of Ethics* and the anti-bias goals. This means we cannot choose NOT to speak to an issue of justice. I'm going to come on strong. That's my commitment, my allegiance to children as they are core and central.

JB: And this made a difference, Theresa. After each staff meeting or in-service with you, our staff reported that they saw things in a new light, that

they had new understanding and sometimes that they had more questions than ever, which I see as important growth. This significant investment of our time and money opened our teachers' eyes to the long road ahead, to how much they still needed to learn and do.

Lessons Learned

MC: Because of your professional history together and shared commitment to the work of social justice in anti-bias programs, your partnership might seem unique to some readers. It isn't always easy for cross-cultural collaboration to go so well. I think culling some insights from your experiences might be helpful as guidelines for others.

TL: Our experience doesn't mean we're experts for others, but we can offer examples of how we think about this work.

JB: As a white person, the first thing I'd say is that if you've never built a strong relationship, personal or professional, with a person of color, start there, before you try to bring someone in to help with your goals. And remember, bringing in someone to do trainings or facilitate deeper conversations is only one aspect of the work. As a director you have a sphere of power in your center for how you develop and live your values, how you grow your organizational culture, use your time and resources. Be honest about what you know and what you are doing. Be humble, willing to have a wrong idea or make a mistake.

TL: People of color want that honesty. If these issues aren't about your survival, you have the luxury of not having to think about them. What I like about Julie's approach is that she's not only humble, but intrinsically responsible. She wants to be held accountable for what she says she believes and is doing. People of color sometimes debate whether we should be honest or nice as if

these two concepts must be intrinsically different — an either/or situation. I think you can be nice, but you still gotta tell the truth. It may not always be comfortable because the nature of these social justice topics just isn't nice! I understand why some people might be closed off. But, in the end, you are missing so much when you don't open up.

You know, growing up, I never thought about being an activist. I thought in terms of heroes and sheroes, daily acts of humanity, doing the right thing. This is more than my work, it's my life; it's about the quality of life.

Recommended Print Resources

Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens. (2013). "From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces. A New Way to Frame Dialogue Around Diversity and Social Justice." In *Art of Effective Facilitation: Reflections from Social Justice Educators*, Lisa Landreman (editor). Stylus Publishing.

Louise Derman-Sparks & Julie Olsen Edwards. (2010). *Anti-bias Education: Tools for empowering young children and ourselves*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Stephanie Feeney & Nancy K. Freeman, with Peter J. Pizzolongo. (2011). *Ethics and the Early Childhood Educator: Using the NAEYC Code* (2nd edition). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Recommended Online Resources

<http://citizenshipandsocialjustice.com/2015/07/10/curriculum-for-white-americans-to-educate-themselves-on-race-and-racism/>

<https://emergingus.com/>

A Look at Race Relations Through a Child's Eye:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=GPVNJgfDwpw



"Racism is a deep-seated disease this country suffers from. Non-black people suffer, including white people. White people are raised to believe ... that everything is equal and on an equal plane. If you just work hard you're going to get what it is you need, and you're deeply taught to distrust and to fear black folks and to fear black bodies. And that is a disease that infects all of our society. When we nail this piece around black lives, we're actually trying to unlock the humanity of this country. That's what we have to do."

Opal Tometi, Co-founder,
Black Lives Matter, EmergingUS.org

Sample Professional Development Agenda to Explore Equity and Anti-bias Goals

Epiphany Early Learning Preschool • Seattle, Washington

Epiphany Early Learning Pre-School (EELP) has a strong commitment to developing ourselves as anti-bias educators. We regularly explore the four anti-bias goals for children and ourselves with staff meeting agendas that combine personal work on understanding ourselves and each other, studying our observations of children with an equity and anti-bias lens, and deepening our understanding of how children's literature can support or undermine our goals. A quarterly three-hour professional development agenda might look like this:

First hour:

With carefully designed activities and facilitation for each session, we explore how our personal histories and identities have been shaped in relationship to power and privilege. To launch this kind of big conversation, we often discuss a reading or watch a video launching this kind of big conversation, such as "Light in the Shadows" by Shakti Butler. An outside facilitator for this portion of our agenda allows all of us to participate equally. We explore our experiences with regard to race, cultural and linguistic identities, gender, and economic realities. We uncover how institutionalized racism has shaped our country, the different forms it takes, and how justice and cultural democracy could look. We consider the school-to-prison pipeline and how we can disrupt it in our work and communities. We seek to find our common ground, respect our differences, and how privileged people can be allies to those who are disenfranchised.

Second hour:

With teachers bringing documentation as they do to each of our pedagogical staff meetings, we make a particular point to focus on the four anti-bias goals as a lens through which we study our documentation, attempting to better understand children's perspectives and identity development, and considering possible teacher actions that could help us learn more and foster our goals with children and families.

Some of our time is spent in smaller teaching teams to do this work using a protocol for our discussion to keep us focused. At least one piece of documentation is taken up by the whole group to widen perspectives and keep ourselves abreast of what is unfolding in our different classrooms.

Third hour:

Because we believe in the power of high-quality children's books to shape how children see themselves and the world, we carefully build our children's library with intentional purchases. We want our teachers to be very familiar with the books we have across our center and consider different ways and occasions when various books might be used. Teachers study the books and choose one they are drawn to. We meet together in small groups to discuss the content of the books and how we might use them to have discussions with the children. We also look for books that reflect bias or have issues we may have to think through as we read the books to children. We've adapted the idea (from the Pacific Oaks Children's School) of putting dialog cards in our children's books. The whole group shares their thoughts about the books and how they can tie together the first two parts of our agenda and brings closure to our day.

Photo courtesy of Theresa Leneer

