

Racial Justice as a Core Practice of ECE

A Conversation with Margie Carter, Ijumaa Jordan, and Kelly Matthews

"We are in intolerable trouble," American writer and social critic James Baldwin said in 1963. And here we are, over 50 years later, when not a day goes by without media exposure, if not personal experience, of some aspect of injustice occurring in our country. It feels so outrageous and discouraging that some days I just want to hide under the covers. And, hey, I'm



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Ijumaa Jordan, (left) M.A., is an early education consultant working across the U.S. and internationally. Her professional development work focuses on play, reflective practice, pedagogical leadership, mentoring, and anti-bias curriculum. She lives in North Hollywood, California, and enjoys hooping, exploring new restaurants, and African American fiction. She loves connecting with colleagues and can be reached: ijumaa@gmail.com.

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a white, English speaking, secure, middle-class woman with uncounted (and unearned) privileges. If I fail to do all I can to be an agent of change, what does that say about who I am, what I care about, my integrity? Some of us are willing to make calls, take to the streets, or take messages to our legislators. Others make efforts in quieter ways, sharing understandings and challenges in conversations, being of service in our communities, reaching out to people who are at risk, sharing resources, time, and hopefully power.

Whatever avenues we chose to address the contradictions between our democratic ideals and transgressions in our communities, our jobs in the early childhood field offer a tremendous opportunity to help shape a better world. Seizing this opportunity in our work we must think carefully, listen well, and find the courage to be risk takers. Our professional ethics call upon us to honor diversity and year by year we're discovering how complex that is, way beyond a library of multicultural books. Diversity is having all sorts of people at the table or represented in the classroom. Equity, however, is ensuring that those traditionally left out have what they need to participate fully. Achieving equity means everyone will be heard and taken seriously; power in decision-making will be truly shared. So, for instance, we may aspire

to culturally relevant or bilingual practices but equity really means linguistic and cultural democracy, beyond just having translators helping people understand the language of power.

Taking up our profession's four anti-bias goals requires threading deeper understandings of how children develop an identity with efforts to think critically and challenge unfairness. We may post signs that say, "Everyone is safe here," but do we have a shared understanding of what that means and possible risks involved? Our staff may be diverse but do we engage in conversations about how racism, power, and privilege are at work among us? Such conversations are rarely easy and require a shared commitment to stretch ourselves and stay engaged. It can feel terrifying and exhilarating, like working without a net.

A Conversation with Ijumaa Jordan and Kelly Matthews

For some years now, Ijumaa Jordan has been my quiet teacher and more recently, an outspoken one. Despite the many blind spots caused by my racism, she hasn't written me off, and continues to bring to the table her sharp mind, fun spirit, and real experiences as an African American woman. I've learned to turn to other white colleagues to unpack Ijumaa's insights

and challenges around the dynamics of power and privilege so I don't burden her with requests for direct instruction on how to dismantle racism. And speaking of direct instruction, Ijumaa has been a leading voice in calling our profession to look at play as an equity issue. With all the research and literature on the importance of play for young children's learning, who benefits from play-based programs in our communities, and who is subjected to drill and skill direct instruction? What does that say about how we see affluent white children in contrast with economically disadvantaged children of color?

I've known Kelly Matthews for about the same number of years and marvel at how bold and articulate she is. Kelly is a full-on systems thinker and brings that perspective to her ECE work on many levels. She employs systems thinking to unpack understandings of racism, not allowing personal guilt or defenses to stunt her learning. Kelly recognizes how she as a white person benefits from unasked for, accumulated privileges in how the deck is stacked in our country.

Kelly and Ijumaa have joined their strengths and learning curves together and now offer impressive ECE presentations and workshops around the country. Living with a stretch of states between them, they stay in close contact to keep their relationship honest, current, and growing. I always benefit from being around and thinking with them. Hearing more about the evolution of their working partnership will, I hope, inspire others to mobilize more courage and risk taking to work cross culturally and move to naming that elephant in the room called white supremacy.

Margie: What drew you together into a friendship and working partnership and how did you begin to take up the dynamics of race, power, and privilege

in your work together?

Kelly: Well, we often joke that racists made us friends. After that, Ijumaa just declared that we were going to be friends!

Margie: Whoa... there's clearly a story behind that declaration! I don't often see cross-racial relationships coming into being so quickly. You both clearly were ready to get past typical hesitations, fears, and unspoken issues.

Ijumaa: Ha, yes, disrupting racism did bring us together. We met because we were assigned to be co-facilitators for a Harvest Resources Leadership Institute in Oklahoma. I friended her on Facebook, then read her posts, and realized we had similar values on early childhood education. Then we met in person in Oklahoma and by the first day of the Institute, I told her we were going to be friends. I found out later that she was not looking to make new adult friends, but I changed her mind.

Kelly: In our very first professional work together as co-facilitators, we bumped up against some racist behavior in our group. Even though Ijumaa had been identified as the person leading the first discussion, participants continued to direct their answers, eye contact, and other non-verbal cues towards me. At first, I noticed this, but didn't understand why it was happening. I checked in with Ijumaa at a break and she confirmed the behavior I had picked up on. So, here was an initial brave decision we made, not to put our heads in the sand and pretend this didn't matter, or that we couldn't do something about it.

During the lunch break, we checked in with our larger team of facilitators and shared what had happened. We decided to do this check-in to ensure that this behavior was named and understood as a microaggression, a subtle disregard and discounting of a person of color. We didn't want this behavior

written off as if it were a mistake or unintended. This was an opportunity for our group to deepen awareness and formulate action. White people often will excuse behavior or find another reason for it such as, "Maybe the group member had a crick in her neck and couldn't turn her head all the way over to Ijumaa." We were modeling the naming of racist behavior and making a plan for action.

Because Ijumaa was the one impacted most directly by this behavior, we decided that Ijumaa would determine how to move forward in whatever way made sense for her and our co-facilitation team. She thought the right thing in this case would be for her to assume a more comprehensive role as facilitator to remove any excuse for continuing to ignore her leadership. My role was to support her decision, even if that meant lessening the facilitator role for me. This is one of the ways I can use my white privilege to support Ijumaa.

Ijumaa: I remember the look of surprise on Kelly's face when I named their behavior as racist. She was outraged I think, because before I named the behavior as an expression of racism, she thought it was just rude and disrespectful. But to understand that behavior as rooted in interpersonal racism was a shock for Kelly, right? And you thought it odd that I was calm and nonchalant about the incident.

Kelly: Looking back on it now, it was surprising; what I've learned since though, is that behaviors like this are regularly perpetuated against people of color. It's embarrassing to admit how little I knew about microaggressions, but my privilege had protected me — people didn't treat me that way due to my race so it wasn't on my radar. And if I had wanted to, I could have stayed ignorant without any real repercussions, because that is part of how racism works.

Ijumaa: As an African American woman in a position of authority as a facilitator, I know there is always an expression of overt and/or covert racism that participants exhibit and need to change. Because we live in a racialized world, a white person is expected to be in charge, especially when working with a person of color. Working cross racially, when done with attention to the dynamics of race, power, and privilege can challenge the racist social norm.

Margie: Right off the bat you have offered us an example of one of the many ways in which our unconscious racism as white people can manifest itself. Bringing it out in the open is so important and I'm struck by the way you handled this between yourselves and then with the group you were co-facilitating. This incident took place early on in your relationship and you were able to jump right in even without a good deal of time to build trust. Ijumaa, you didn't write Kelly off for her failure to recognize this behavior as rooted in interpersonal racism, and you generously chose to share your perspective with Kelly. I can imagine that repeated experience with this has been exasperating and you've had to sort through when to be patient and when to reveal your anger.

Kelly, you didn't hide behind some need to feel "safe" or defend your initial assumption. You chose to learn from this, and followed with a decision to use your white privilege to support Ijumaa, to step back and let her be the lead facilitator.

Knowing Yourself

Margie: Your story here reveals some solid self-awareness as a foundation for being so intentional in how you handle things. Racism is such a powerful force, a disease really, built into the very fabric of our history and American culture and exposing it often leads to heated, knee jerk emotional

responses. To work productively across racial lines requires not only learning about each other, but more about oneself. What have each of you discovered about yourselves as you work together?

Kelly: I tend to be an external processor and creator when we work together and I've learned that Ijumaa processes internally. So, to be intentional about accommodating how she creates and processes I've had to slow down my mouth and my typing when we work together. This slowing down and making space also helps ensure that I don't steamroll her ideas and I make real space for her voice, contributions, and wisdom. I've benefitted from this slowing down, personally and professionally. I've become more attentive overall to making space for other people in the room to contribute, because it's a way to share power, but also because I learn things: I learn about other ways to think about something, I learn more about someone's daily life, or about a success they had and share in that joy.

Ijumaa: I've learned more about my strength of being intuitively slow to speak. I regularly partner with individuals and groups and in the begin-

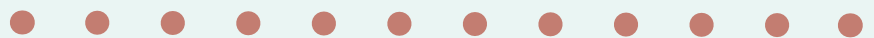
ning of my career as a consultant, I would be miserable because I always felt pressure to give input or advice, either on the spot or in a short amount of time. Working with Kelly helped me realize that I can ask for more time or whatever I need to give a response. I'm much more productive and happy in my work relationships now.

Taking Risks

Margie: The kind of awareness you are each describing is, of course, important in any relationship, but when the relationship includes the legacy of power and privilege that infuses any interracial collaboration, the stakes are really high. You can succumb to unmanageable tension, or carve out new possibilities — demonstrating that these tensions can be navigated and learned from to create a new legacy of equity going forward. I see you both as being risk takers in growing your working partnership.

Kelly: I feel like this is an area where I have more growth to do. It felt like a risk to name racist behavior in a public setting with our extended team that I didn't know very well. Would they believe us? Would they support

Know Yourself



Take some time to assess yourself as a risk taker. When it comes to trying some new actions, which of the following statements feels most like you?

- I avoid taking risks and tend to put my head in the sand when something new is required.
- When there's something new I want to learn, I'm willing to go through the discomfort to learn it.
- When I feel something really needs changing, I'm willing to stick my neck out.
- I'm always ready to challenge the status quo, to speak up, or advocate for something that obviously needs changing.

Are you satisfied with your current relationship to risk taking? Do you want to make any changes?

us? And as I write this, I know that this is something that people of color live every day. We've had a number of experiences where Ijumaa was treated differently while we were working together (i.e., having her name questioned, requiring her to show ID for a credit card purchase when I didn't), and I need to be faster and more direct about interrupting those behaviors in the moment. My relationship with Ijumaa is most important to me and I don't want to be colluding, even inadvertently, with white supremacist behavior. What I keep coming back to when I think about risk is this: I don't see it as much as risk, but as integrity in relationship — it's what you do with people you care about — check in; listen when you've made a mistake, do better; take action to ensure things get better.

Ijumaa: There is always a risk for any person of color to be in close relationship with a white person because the risk is that they can always choose white supremacy over the relationship if they decide that society will reward them for upholding white supremacy. In the meantime, the person of color will be blamed for upsetting the "natural order" of things or not assimilating well enough to uphold white supremacy.

Margie: It took me a long time to understand this, Ijumaa, and to recognize my own participation. Part of our challenge as white people is to understand how we've been taught to not notice or recognize our privilege. Then, when we encounter this mortifying truth, we're inclined to slip into "white fragility" (DiAngelo, 2011), retreating to protect ourselves from the discomfort of understanding and engaging in the need to dismantle systemic racism. Retreating takes different forms (withdrawing, denying, exceptionalizing, becoming defensive, attacking) and ultimately perpetuates, rather than transforms, our participation in this

system of racism. You, Ijumaa, hardly need this explanation as you surely witness it on a daily basis. How have you and Kelly linked arms in this risk taking?

Ijumaa: Currently the risk Kelly and I take is possibly not being hired for a particular job because I'm an African American woman. There have been instances where the potential client begins to waiver about bringing in a team and then they always ask for just Kelly. We describe that in our work together I'm "content expert" and bring the most experience. This is purposeful to be more equitable in our work relationship. When we bring this up to hesitant clients, there is an awkward silence. Then we tell them we are a package deal.

Growing a Strong Relationship

Margie: This is another terrific example of addressing the dynamics of race and privilege. You've clearly developed some great strategies for not perpetuating patterns of white privilege. How would you describe any changes that have happened in your relationship?

Kelly: Because I've listened to Ijumaa share stories of interactions with white people where she's named some of the patterns of behavior that subtly reinforce white supremacy that white people often use in racial conversations, I can see those patterns more clearly now. She's given me the terminology to name these patterns and I can now describe how they are not helpful. I also have the

courage to take action and interrupt those patterns when I see them playing out. I don't get it right every time, for instance in an online conversation where I should have stepped in and didn't. We talked about it and I took to heart her guidance on how to step in without stepping on her voice.

I understand more deeply, though in no means fully, how exhausting it is for a person of color to live in a racist world. I understand better the toll, the uncompensated emotional labor, we

Wings of the Same Bird



We hear the voices of our parents,
our elders, our teachers,
those that came before us
and with us.

We were kids
who cared about justice.
We are freedom fighters
resistance
resistance.

We are teachers for transformation
Workers, in this for the long haul
We are not only undoing
We are building something strong
We are all wings of the same bird
that bird is called...

hope, survival, movement, mentoring,
passion, empowerment, generativity,
change, stubborn,
life-giving,
victory,
And she will fly.

Kissinger, K. (2017). *Anti-bias education in the early childhood classroom: Hand in hand, step by step*. New York: Routledge Press.

expect of people of color. That labor consists of things like being asked to define terms or events relevant in Black culture, for example, that someone who is white could easily look up or read about. Another example I see regularly is how white people respond when made aware that they did something racist. They shift the conversation to talking about their feelings and expect the person of color to now tend to their feelings rather than the white person figuring out how to change their racist behavior.

Ijumaa: One way our relationship has changed is talking about racial justice with the greater ECE community. I was feeling frustrated with educators who had good intentions, but were not engaged in racial justice work. One example was on an online post where a white educator had questions about colorism and internalized racism. I responded by sharing links about the effects of colorism and internalized racism in early childhood and the harm it causes in healthy racial identity development. Several people joined the thread upset that the subject of race would even be talked about in the context of early education. I asked Kelly to join the thread in hopes of having a productive discussion, but people became more and more defensive. They insisted that young children should not have to think about racism until they are older. Kelly and I debriefed that experience. Kelly brought up how many white educators do not receive any anti-bias education or take one diversity or multicultural workshop/class, which only focuses on a surface understanding of culture and the importance of discussing differences. From that conversation we began to work on creating professional development sessions to address systematic racism in early childhood education and bring a critical race theory analysis to all our work together.

Margie: As you continue on this col-

laborative relationship, what are some examples of questions you wrestle with in your work?

Kelly: Questions currently on my mind: How is it possible that so many early educators, especially trainers and “leaders” in our field, fail to include racial justice as a core practice of ECE, not just an additional training or one-and-done mindset? Imagine how different our work and our world would be if all early educators understood how to support healthy racial identity development for all children. Imagine how our decision-making might change if all of our professional development was built on a core value of racial justice and equity!

Another question for me: How do we help individuals to dismantle a racist system, going beyond individual interactions to the need for systemic change? I think of this as analogous to trying to save the planet one light bulb at a time, which isn’t adequate for the environmental crisis we’re in. Racism is a crisis in our country, and while we need to change each of our relationships to be more equitable, we have to transform the systems that keep racism in place and privilege white people.

Ijumaa: I would also add that not only am I along with other BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) experts in our own experience, but if we are collaborating and presenting, we are also content area experts. I’ve been noticing with the news filled with stories of overt racism (white supremacist marching unmasked), there is an increase of programs wanting anti-bias education or anti-racist training. When they contact me, they want multiple people as references; they question me about my résumé; want me to describe what I would offer, including outlines and handouts. Out of the three programs that contacted me, only one hired me while the other two hired a white person with less formal education and experience. I learned

from one of the white people hired that her initial discussion with one of the programs lasted only 15 minutes. They asked her how much she charged and what dates she had available and then hired her. The program leader did not ask her for a résumé or a workshop description. How could I not see that as racist?

Offering Encouragement

Margie: Thanks to each of you for jumping in here with me to offer encouragement for those who are ready to take up the challenge of working across racial lines. Do you have any suggestions or advice for others who want to do this work?

Ijumaa: Yes, that’s the question we are wrestling with now. A question that Kelly posed in the beginning of our work together was, “What words and/or concepts should we use when talking about race?” I was perplexed by this question at first. But then we got to the heart of it, which was, “How do we talk about race without making white educators upset?” My initial response was, “You can’t.” That response wasn’t enough for Kelly. A part of dismantling racism is eliminating white privilege, which can mean not centering the discussion of race around white people’s experiences and feelings. It’s white people’s responsibility to figure out how not to be defensive about talking about racism or becoming overwhelmed with “white guilt,” such that no action can be taken. As facilitators it’s our responsibility to create brave space, not just safe spaces for white people (Arao & Clemens, 2013).

Kelly: People of color are the experts of their experiences. Respect their authority. Don’t second-guess what they tell you or when they share a story with you. Don’t assume the person of color has to educate you. Do some research, know some history, read blogs and other current sources of information about experiences of people who

are different from you — not to show off, but to begin an education denied us by an education system not interested in authentically portraying the lived experience of people of color.

Margie: I really appreciate the courage and clarity each of you has brought to this conversation. May it spur each of us on to overcoming our fears about taking on racism through relationships in ECE and beyond.

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