

# Engaging Young Children in Activities and Conversations about Race and Social Class

While Philip is making a restaurant in the block area he boasts, “It’s gonna cost \$200 just to get in!” The teacher sitting near him holds up a few small dolls and asks in a quiet voice, “What about my family? They don’t have any money.” Philip hesitates and looks downcast for a few moments. Then he brightens up and says, “I know. We’ll pay for them!”

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**Conversations** are a vital part of early childhood antibias and multicultural education because they enable children to connect with others and to begin to see the implications of certain assumptions, as Philip did when he realized that some people could not afford to eat at his expensive restaurant. However, engaging children in these conversations is not always easy. No matter what the question, children frequently resist answering adults, and for some, concerns about race and social class may seem distant or even irrelevant.

This article describes a project in which the authors observed kindergarten children’s responses to specific antibias and multicultural activities to see which materials and teaching practices most frequently elicited meaningful conversations. We chose activities that focused on race and social class because many teachers find these issues difficult to address with young children and sometimes choose to work with “safer” topics, such as gender, disabilities, and culture (Ramsey 2006).

Because young children think in concrete terms and rely on their immediate experiences, many adults

assume that young children are “color blind” to race and oblivious to economic disparities. However, studies spanning several decades have shown that children notice racial cues during infancy (Kelly et al. 2007) and that, by the age of 3 or 4, most children have a rudimentary concept of race (Katz 1976; Ramsey & Meyers 1990; Katz & Kofkin 1997; Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001; Katz 2003; Ramsey & Williams 2003). Many preschoolers also have learned that some people are “rich” and others are “poor” and associate concrete items such as certain types of clothing, homes, and possessions with each group (Leahy 1983; Ramsey 1991; Chafel 1997; Lee 2004). Children’s relatively early cognitive development makes it difficult for them to discern between accurate depictions and stereotypes about race and social class prevalent in the media and in their communities (Aboud 1988; Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001; Katz 2003).

Reflecting this research, the NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards and Accreditation Criteria (2008) advocate developmentally and culturally appropriate practices, which are supported by an abundance of suggested curricula in antibias/multicultural



textbooks and programs. Unfortunately, there are very few systematic studies on the effects of these programs at any grade level, and those studies that have been conducted in early childhood settings have relied on anecdotal data.

These studies do, however, offer some insights into the effectiveness of various approaches. Some suggest that the “tourist approach”—simply exposing children to materials that represent different groups (such as diverse dolls, foods, clothing, and pictures)—does not stimulate substantive conversations or challenge children’s attitudes (Day 1995; Aboud & Levy 2000; Lee & Lee 2001; Pfeifer, Brown, & Juvonen 2007). In contrast, other studies have shown that, when encouraged with meaningful activities and questions, children often do express, compare, and challenge their views and discuss social justice issues among themselves and with teachers (Marsh 1992; Levine 1993; Reeder, Douzenis, & Bergin 1997; de Marquez 2002; Chafel, Flint, Hammel, & Pomeroy 2007). These findings support a recurring theme in the NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards that encourages teachers to engage children in explorations and discussions about many topics, including diversity (see accreditation criteria 1.D.01, 1.B.15, 2.L.03, 2.L.06 [NAEYC 2005]).

Simulations in which children experience firsthand the effects of discrimination, such as Jane Elliott’s well-known “Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes” exercise (Peters 1987), have elicited strong emotional reactions, intense conversations, and reevaluations of assumptions (McGregor 1993; Pfeifer, Brown, & Juvonen 2007). Despite the impact of such simulations, intensive role-playing activities have not been replicated in recent years, in part because current federal guidelines prohibit research projects that cause distress in children (Aboud & Levy 2000). However, shorter, lower intensity simulations that cause less discomfort are allowed and have the potential to stimulate

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conversations about the effects of stereotypes and inequities.

Because conversations help uncover and challenge children’s assumptions, it is important to systematically assess which activities are most likely to spark discussions about race and social class. To this end, we conducted a study in a kindergarten classroom. There were five girls and eight boys in the classroom. One child was Asian, one was biracial (African American and White), and 11 were White. Children were mostly middle class and lived in a suburban community. For this study, we implemented a series of antibias and multicultural activities (see “Materials and Activities”) during the month of January and closely observed and reacted to children’s responses. We increased the novelty of the relevant materials by removing some of them (skin-tone markers, for example) from the classroom for the month prior to the observation period. Then in January, two teachers introduced materials and activities while observing the children’s initial reactions—including level of interest, aspects of the materials they seemed to notice, and the types of questions they asked. Based on the children’s responses, the teachers modified the activities (when possible), added elements to make the activities more complex, and/or asked

open-ended questions to encourage more meaningful discussion.

The teachers recorded field notes throughout each day. After each activity, they discussed their experiences and compiled a summary of the children’s responses to the activities. Two trained undergraduate observers (who were not teaching) recorded detailed accounts of children’s responses and their interactions with each other and the teachers. At the end of the month, the research team collated the observations and field notes into one chronological document with all the reports about each activity clustered together.

Next, the team categorized each activity by type: art, stories, puzzles and games, or role play. The first author and a fifth researcher (who did not participate in any of the teaching or observations and so had no preconceived ideas about the curriculum) read and coded the materials and identified which activities attracted and engaged children, triggered conversations related to race and social class, and/or helped children begin to express and challenge their assumptions.

## Art activities

During the observation period, the art area featured skin-tone markers and paints and color photographs of people from different racial groups. At first, the teachers simply added these new materials to the art area and

**Art activities can familiarize children with skin tones and help them begin to differentiate subtle distinctions in tone and hue.**



observed children's comments and their choice of colors for free drawing activities. Then they encouraged children to use the materials to make portraits of themselves and others—often drawing children's attention to the displayed images.

Over the course of the month, several children appeared to become more conscious of their own skin tones and the spectrum of skin colors, both among their peers and in the photographs. For example, at first, more than half of the White children chose orange, rather than more accurate peach and beige tones, to depict their skin. Others used their favorite colors, such as purple and green, regardless of their skin tones. In contrast, by the end of the observation period, children used the skin-tone markers more frequently and were able to determine what was (and was not) a skin color. At one point, Jake, looking at a commercially packaged box of "skin-tone" crayons that included white and black crayons, asked, "Why are all these colors together?" The teacher replied, "They all could be the colors of people's skin." Jake quickly answered, "The black and white ones don't belong."

At the end of the month we introduced a handprint activity, during which children identified paints that matched their own skin tone and

those of children depicted in the images displayed in the classroom. The children then chose two skin-tone colors and painted them onto the palms of their hands, each child making two unique handprints. During this activity children readily differentiated subtle skin colors. For example, while closely comparing his hand with his teacher's, Silas remarked, "You have the same body color as me. Everybody has different body colors. My mom is peach."

Children's emotional reactions to the shades of brown also shifted. In the early days of the curriculum, several students avoided using brown tones during free art activities or indi-

cated that they were less attractive than other colors. Jake said to Kyle, who was using a beige marker, "You can use a beautiful color instead," and pointed to a pink marker. Later in the month, children referred to the brown-hued paints in much more positive terms. Silas said, "I'm using caramel. I love caramel." Peter remarked, "It looks like cocoa . . . beautiful." Children also used the skin-tone colors more freely for a range of art projects. Sally made a rainbow using peach and two tones of brown.

These changes in children's reactions suggest that art activities can familiarize children with skin tones and help them begin to differentiate

## Materials and Activities

### Art

- Skin-tone crayons, markers, and paints provided in the art area
- Displays of contemporary and realistic images of children and adults from a range of racial groups
- Portraits of themselves and others
- Handprints
- Illustrations for a book about differences
- Family collage

### Stories

- Books and songs focusing on the themes of similarities and differences among people and families. Examples include
  - *Amazing Grace*, by Mary Hoffman
  - *Dear Juno*, by Soyung Pak
  - *The Talking Cloth*, by Rhonda Mitchell
  - *All the Colors of the Earth*, by Sheila Hamanaka
  - *Black, White, Just Right!* by Marguerite Davol

### Puzzles and Games

- Concentration game with children's faces
- Life-size child puzzles
- Puzzles depicting a range of racial groups, families, occupations (some challenging gender roles)

### Role Play

- 30 small multiracial, multiage dolls
- Play houses representing different levels of affluence (small, large, apartment style)
- Store simulation with unequal resources



subtle distinctions in tone and hue. Moreover, this exposure can potentially counteract the aversion to darker colors that is prevalent in our society (for example, the common use of *black* and *dark* to describe negative objects, people, and events) and that children frequently express.

For another project, a teacher created several books that children could “write” according to their own interests and experiences. Each book contained the same outline of a story about a newcomer to the classroom who is different from her or his new classmates. Children then worked one-on-one with a teacher to adapt and illustrate the story. The children drew the requested pictures but did not seem very engaged and rarely added to the story or asked questions. In reviewing the observations of this activity, we concluded that it was too structured and didactic, thus stifling rather than engaging children’s creativity and curiosity.

## Songs

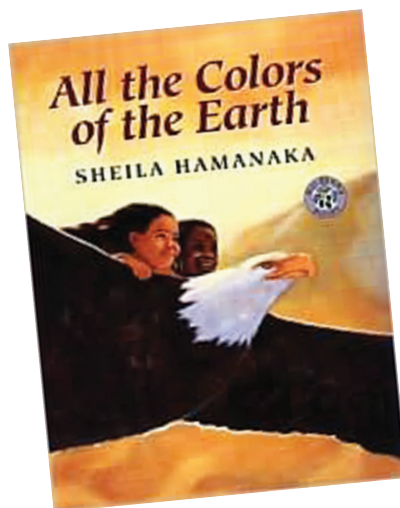
The children learned a number of songs that explicitly supported multicultural themes during the observation month. Some of the songs were in different languages, and others had lyrics celebrating similarities and differences. While the children enjoyed these songs, they did not comment about the content or feelings expressed in them. We concluded that the songs might have generated more discussion if they had been incorporated into a larger theme. For example, teachers could have read and discussed several stories about appreciating physical differences and then introduced songs such as Sarah Pirtle’s “Colors of Earth.” Likewise, a theme about people struggling against discrimination could incorporate songs of protest, such as “We Shall Overcome,” often used by U.S. civil rights protesters in the 1960s, or “De Colores,” a traditional folk song that

became an unofficial anthem of the United Farmworkers Union.

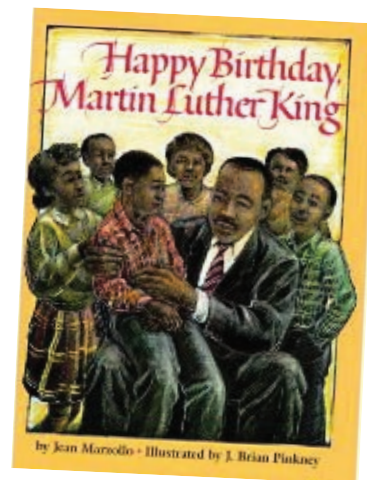
We also noted that stories and music were usually part of circle time, which did not always encourage conversations. During large group activities, children are generally expected to follow the teachers’ leads and are less disposed to ask questions or bring up new ideas. Moreover, teachers are often focused on managing the group and completing a lesson and, therefore, are less likely to encourage or follow up on unexpected twists in the conversation. In the future, we would either introduce stories and songs in small groups or follow large group presentations with small group discussions.

## Books

During the observation month the teachers read several books with multicultural themes during circle time. After each story, the teachers asked the children open-ended questions about what they learned from the book. The impact of the books varied. In some cases (such as with *Dear Juno*, by Soyung Pak, and *All the Colors of the Earth*, by Sheila Hamanaka), children listened attentively but did not say much in the follow-up discussion beyond commenting on certain events or illustrations in the book.



One book that elicited lively conversation was *Happy Birthday, Martin Luther King* (see “Discussing Martin Luther King Jr.”). Since we read the book in January, the children had talked about Martin Luther King Jr. at school and, in some cases, at home, so the book related to ongoing discussions and activities. During their



conversation about the book, children explored and refined their understanding of the events of the civil rights movement. Several children mentioned information they had learned from their families, illustrating the benefits of engaging children in discussions both at home and at school and using books to develop and support ongoing themes.

Another book also generated a lot of discussion about race and fairness. *Amazing Grace*, by Mary Hoffman and Caroline Binch, tells the story of an African American girl who wants

## Discussing Martin Luther King Jr.

**Silas:** I know who he was. Black people had to sit on the bus, so he had to stop the bad things that were happening.

**Nigel** [correcting Silas's account]: Black people had to sit in the back of the bus. Martin Luther King Jr. had to stop that.

**Cassandra:** The white-skinned people sat in the front, and the black-skinned people sat in the back.

**Kyle:** No, they [White people] sat wherever they wanted.

When the teacher read the part of the book describing how King was shot, the children made comments such as, "The bad person didn't want the rules to change" and "The bad man shot him because he did not like what he was saying." Several other children joined in, and others raised their hands...

to play Peter Pan in the class play. Classmates tell Grace that she cannot have the part because of her race and gender. This book appeals to children and shows the effects of discrimination in a concrete and meaningful way.

Interestingly, one of the boys in the class sparked an emotional discussion with his biased comment, "Why could she be Peter Pan if she's a girl? And she's black . . . uh . . . she's brown?" The other children disagreed with his position. At one point the teacher mentioned that Grace might not look like the Peter Pan on television, but that did not mean she could not play the part. One child said, "Things you see on TV aren't real," which led to further discussion about inaccurate

images on television. This conversation suggests that, when books do capture children's attention, they can evoke discussions that challenge stereotypes and misinformation.

When considering why some books elicited more conversations than others, we noted that a clear story line and familiar themes or people (such as Martin Luther King Jr.) seemed to lead to more discussion. One way to spark conversations about books that do not have a clear story line, such as *All the Colors of the Earth*, is to stop frequently, reread pages, and ask children to elaborate with their own images and words. Moreover, reading in small groups and encouraging children to take the lead in discussions (Cowhey 2006) and to connect the stories to their own lives and experiences (Chafel et al. 2007) may promote more in-depth conversations.

In reviewing our book selection, we realized that, as with the songs, although all the books reflected anti-bias and multicultural issues, they did not necessarily connect with each other or with the other curriculum materials. In the future, we would work to develop clearly identified themes—such as building appreciation for physical differences or sharing stories of people fighting for civil rights—and read several related books. This method would familiar-

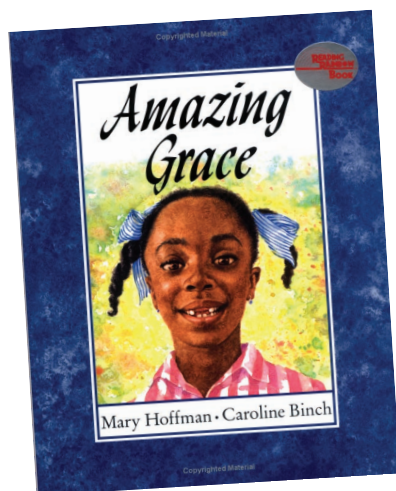
ize children with relevant issues and people and could potentially lead to more in-depth discussions.

## Puzzles and games

Throughout the month of our study we introduced a number of puzzles featuring people in various occupations and children and adults of both genders from a range of racial and age groups. As with the art activities, teachers put out the materials and observed children's initial reactions. The children liked the puzzles but primarily focused on completing them rather than talking about the people depicted in them, even after the teachers asked questions about the content of the puzzles.

A Concentration-like game, which involved matching eight pairs of identical photographs of children representing different racial and gender groups, was more effective in sparking children's conversations and challenging their perceptions. The game drew children's attention to within-race differences and complemented the art activities that explored skin tones and faces. Initially, the White kindergartners matched the photographs of the White children easily but often erroneously paired different African American or Asian American children, suggesting they might see all children in those groups as identical.

When teachers observed children making these mistakes, they asked the children to look more closely. Usually the children identified the false match and corrected themselves. In contrast to his White peers, Nigel, the one biracial child in the class, made all of the matches correctly the first time and often pointed out the mistakes in others' matches. When one classmate started to pair two different African American girls, Nigel quickly corrected him, pointing to one of the pictures and saying, "No, she has browner skin."





## Family Collage Activity

As part of our efforts to engage parents with the antibias/multicultural curriculum, we asked each family to create a poster, using whatever materials they wanted, to express what makes them unique. At the end of the month, the families shared their posters at an informal reception. Collecting systematic observations at the reception was difficult because of the high level of activity. However, according to the field notes, both children and parents seemed fascinated by the collages and often made references to similarities and differences among the families. Not surprisingly, no references to race or social class were noted, but the posters highlighted the many variations that existed among this relatively homogeneous group.

This game appealed to children and helped them to differentiate among individuals in various racial groups. However, once children had learned to make the matches successfully, they stopped engaging in the activity. To maintain their interest, we could have added pictures and introduced children to an ever-widening range of physical differences to keep the game challenging.

We also introduced several life-size floor puzzles with photographs of children from different racial groups. This particular set came with matching posters, which the teachers displayed in the room. The children enjoyed assembling the puzzles but rarely commented on the content. In contrast, they frequently talked about the identical posters, suggesting that the act of putting a puzzle together may actually distract children from talking or thinking about the image. One exception to this pattern was a puzzle of Martin Luther King Jr., which was related to the classroom theme

mentioned earlier and did elicit several conversations. It seems that, like stories, puzzles alone may not engage a child's thinking about diversity, but they may stimulate conversations if the images are connected to other ongoing activities and themes.

## Role play

During the first week of the observation period, the teachers placed 30 small rubber dolls (male and female of varying races and ages) near two identical wooden playhouses usually available in the classroom. They encouraged the children to play with the dolls in any way they wanted. Interestingly, almost all of the children formed multiracial families. (See "Playing with Dolls" for a teacher's description of two girls playing with the dolls.)

During the second week, the children painted three cardboard dwellings constructed by the teachers to represent different levels of affluence: an apartment house, a small single-family house, and a large single-family house. When the teachers moved the dolls over to these new houses, the

## Playing with Dolls

Both girls picked up many dolls—Black, Hispanic, White, and Asian, little and big—and added them to the house to eat dinner. Eva declared that a Black baby doll and a White little girl doll were sisters and also said that the Asian woman was the grandmother. All the dolls sat down and ate dinner together.

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## A Child's View of Poverty

**Billy:** He has no bed because he does not have enough cash to buy a bed.

**Teacher:** Why does he not have enough cash?

**Billy:** Because he is not a rich man . . . because he just got fired. That's the only job he liked. He has no money left. He used the money up and got all the food he can. He eats just one bite of everything. He only has \$1 and they [the beds] are usually \$25.

children continued to form multiracial families and moved them in and out of the houses as they had before. None of the children's actions or comments suggested they were making any connection between race and social class. However, the houses did evoke a few conversations about economic disparities.

For example, Billy and the teacher talked about a man living in the small house (see "A Child's View of Poverty"). For Billy, the variable sizes of the dwellings triggered a vision of what poverty entails. Because the teacher supported but did not lead the conversation, Billy could express his own ideas about the concrete

**One child simply focused on the sizes of the houses and put all the children in the smallest house because it was the “baby house.”**

effects of poverty—limited access to food, possessions, and jobs.

Not all children had such a sophisticated economic interpretation. One child simply focused on the sizes of the houses and put all the children in the smallest house because it was the “baby house.” Other children’s responses revealed the standard of affluence in this middle-class group (for example, pointing to the large house and saying, “I want that regular house”). Likewise, the children showed little experience with apartments, often turning the apartment house into a school or even into a jail. The house and family role-playing activity sparked only a few conversations about social class. We wondered, if we had involved the children in building the houses (perhaps providing different amounts of materials to construct them), rather than just inviting children to paint them, would the children have talked more about the concrete implications of having varying amounts of resources?

In an effort to draw children’s attention more explicitly to the impact of economic disparities, the teachers set up a store in which items had specific prices. The children went shopping

### Reflecting on Money

Kyle, Ashley, and Billy suggested sharing the food with the group after each shopping trip. Eva, Jake, and Corey argued that the group should redistribute the money more evenly. Jake was adamant on this point, saying, “Everyone should have two [dollars]” and “I want to play the fair and square way.”

in small groups, and individuals received different amounts of play money for their purchases. It didn’t take the children long to discover the consequences of having more or less money, and several announced that the situation was “not fair.” During small group follow-up discussions, the children expressed indignation and offered a number of solutions. (See “Reflecting on Money” for the teacher’s field notes.)

More general discussions about economics and social class developed from the store activity as children shared their ideas and questions about where money comes from, how it relates to having a job, and what happens when someone has zero dollars.

### Responding to biased comments

When children make comments based on stereotypes, teachers want to jump in immediately to correct them. Such comments can hurt or cause discomfort for other children or for the teachers themselves. However, these moments are opportunities to start conversations if teachers can give children room to explore and express their ideas without censoring them or questioning them too vigorously. For an example, see “Responding to a Child’s Racial Comment.”

### Implications for teaching

The children’s responses to this antibias/multicultural curriculum support previous research findings; the children noticed differences and

### Responding to a Child’s Racial Comment

As the children were choosing between chocolate chip and Oreo cookies, Silas said in a joking tone to Alan, who is Korean American, “You can only have that one (*pointing to the Oreo*) because you’re black.” Alan replied, “No, that’s not true.” Silas quickly showed a look of discomfort and apologized, saying, “I didn’t mean it.”

I held back the urge to jump in to tell Silas he was wrong and instead gently asked him why he had said that and encouraged both children to talk about differences in skin color. Instead of “pouncing” on Silas’s comment, I tried to use it as a way to help both children express their confusions and feelings about race.

expressed a range of ideas about race and social class. The fact that their responses varied across situations suggests that specific activities and teaching practices induce different types of inquiry and learning. The visually oriented activities (such as the art projects and concentration game) led to the most conversations about physical attributes—including race—while the role-play activities (particularly the store) generated the most discussions about discrimination and inequity.

In a few cases, children did challenge the status quo (for example, questioning why the box of skin-tone crayons included black and white crayons, discussing the unfairness of the store activity). Not surprisingly, children talked more when actively engaged (for example, while drawing and painting, enacting roles, or playing games) than they did when they were in more passive roles (such as listening to a story in a large group).

## Recommendations for Activities and Teaching Practices

- Provide a wide variety of materials and activities that appeal to both boys and girls and to different interests and learning styles
- Balance familiarity and novelty to stimulate curiosity and questions
- Use active, hands-on experiences and open-ended activities to encourage children to express their own ideas
- Develop materials and simulations that elicit surprise, curiosity, and disequilibrium
- Encourage dialogue among children with novel materials and open-ended questions
- Observe children's responses closely, and continually modify activities and approaches to encourage their emerging interests and to challenge misinformation that they reveal
- Use small groups, rather than large circle times, for in-depth conversations
- Facilitate rather than direct discussion, and encourage free flowing conversations and interactions among peers
- Balance imparting values with encouraging exploration—avoid moralizing
- Develop themes that encompass books, songs, puzzles, and classroom displays
- Involve families in activities in order to mutually support home and school efforts



The observations also suggest that materials such as puzzles and books stimulate more discussion when they are connected to ongoing and familiar themes.

Gender seemed to play a role because the activities appealed more to girls than to boys. Girls more often volunteered to go to the areas with the art materials and dolls, whereas the boys had to be encouraged to participate. However, once boys became engaged in the activities, they tended to be more outspoken than the girls. This pattern may be a function of the individuals in this particular class, but it also suggests that the girls have begun to absorb the gender-typed role that females should “be polite” and not mention differences. Thus, a challenge for teachers is to develop activities that appeal to both boys and girls (such as building different types of dwellings) while simultaneously

encouraging girls to be more forthcoming about their thoughts, feelings, and questions related to differences and inequities.

The level and type of teacher involvement was also critical. As found in previous research (for example, Day 1995; Aboud & Levy 2000; Lee & Lee 2001), simply providing multicultural materials did not stimulate that much conversation or challenge children's ideas. Conversely, if teachers were too directive, then children were less engaged, as we saw in the book illustration project. The children explored issues in greater depth when the teachers created situations that evoked curiosity and/or disequilibrium and then facilitated, rather than directed, the discussions. Sometimes the teachers could not take advantage of teachable moments because, at the time, they were preoccupied with time constraints or logistics. They either

did not see a particular question or action or were not able to shift gears quickly enough to respond. Thus, one future priority is to organize activities so that teachers can closely observe children's behaviors and have the flexibility to pursue unexpected questions and comments.

Overall, this study shows that anti-bias and multicultural activities do have the potential to raise questions and stimulate meaningful conversations among children and teachers and that specific materials and teaching practices evoke different types of inquiry. Given the small size of this study, we cannot generalize these patterns to a wide range of children and classrooms. However, the study indicates that when teachers closely observe their particular children's interests and responses, they gain rich information to use in the development of meaningful activities. We hope this



project will encourage teachers and researchers to collaborate to study the effects of particular antibias and multicultural activities and practices so they can plan and implement them in nuanced and effective ways.

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