

***Don't Look Away:
Embracing Anti-
Bias Classrooms***

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Institutional racism has a tremendous effect on Black communities in the United States. For centuries Blacks had no legal rights, were considered property, and were seen as non-human. Blacks did not fully experience legal access and benefits until equal rights laws were passed just over 50 years ago. This foundation of racism still has deep ramifications today. As the authors of this book share, “It is the reason why people wonder whether black lives matter as much as others’—when for centuries it was clear to them they didn’t matter at all.”

Part of this terrible injustice lives in the realm of education. The public school system in the US was designed to exclude Black children. From the opening of the first school in Boston in 1635 until 1852, Blacks were explicitly excluded. After the Civil War, Black children continued to have extremely limited access until after schools were integrated in 1954. Even today, schools tend to be racially and economically segregated and Black children are still at a disadvantage compared to their White peers. Research demonstrates that teachers have different expectations for children based on their race and that the people who have power and influence over the educational lives of children in public schools are largely white (81%) and female (80%). I would venture to guess that educators in WECAN programs have even higher white and female representation. The history of education and the current data make clear why it is so critical for all educators, Waldorf early



childhood educators included, to actively work toward the protection and empowerment of children of color today.

This slim but powerful book speaks to the importance of recognizing and addressing racism, bias, trauma, low expectations, and segregation, to provide an equitable early childhood education. It demonstrates how teachers can actively engage in anti-bias education with children in early childhood. Its authors explain the difference between equity and equality and that it is our role to recognize and meet the unique needs of each individual

child for the sake of equity in education. Peppered throughout the book are definitions of terms that we are likely to hear, but may not fully understand, such as social justice, trauma-informed care, White privilege, institutional racism, and adultification bias. Each chapter also provides helpful reflective questions and activities to lead us to consider how our ways of working may be impacting the families we work with and the importance of taking up culturally relevant and anti-bias education. The book concludes with a list of over 200 helpful references and resources for educators.

In Waldorf schools, we are well versed in child observation and this puts us at an advantage in recognizing the needs of particular children. However, we may have misperceptions about racial awareness in our students. Preschool marks the onset of the awareness of racial identity and even the youngest children in our care likely have some awareness of racial differences. Observing how the children are understanding race for themselves is important in guiding them. This book provides clear questions to assist in our observations of the racial attitudes of the students in our care, so they can be addressed

appropriately. However, the authors stress that it is first critical to understand and address our own bias, and they provide resources for doing so.

One thing that particularly struck me in reading this book was hearing that when the idea of anti-bias education was introduced over three decades ago, many educators questioned whether it would do more harm than good to introduce “adult” topics to young children too early. This is exactly the dilemma I’ve faced as a Waldorf educator. I have to ask myself if my commitment to protecting childhood is actually serving all students or if I’ve actually unknowingly caused harm, especially to children of color. Sadly,

research shows the latter may be the case. It is with the utmost humility that I have embarked on the study of racism and anti-bias educational practices and I continue to discover ways in which I have fallen short.

Like many of you, my sincere interest in self-development makes it possible for me to embark on this somewhat painful journey. I encourage you to take up this book as a way to broaden your perspective and deepen what you already know. I think it would make an especially good resource to work with as a faculty or small study group. Ask yourself the hard questions, examine and adapt your practices; the children in your care, of every race, will likely reap rewards. ♦