Constructing and Understanding Social Identities and Attitudes: The Lifelong Journey

Carmela (age 4) asks, "Is Mexican my color?" Her teacher replies, "No, Carmela. 'Mexican' is not a color. It's the name of a big group of people to which your family belongs."

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Abby (age 3) puts on a hard hat and goes to play at the woodworking table. "Look at me!" she announces. "Now I am a boy. Later I'll be a girl again."

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Carly, a family child care home provider, notes, "First and foremost I am a Christian, a mother, and a teacher. But I'm beginning to understand I am also White and working class and able-bodied. I never thought about those things—but I've begun to see that they matter."

Throughout life, from early childhood on, all people actively construct a sense of self, a combination of social identities and individual, personal identities. This journey involves a continually evolving understanding of oneself and others and a recognition of how identity is impacted by how others see you and how you see others. Social identities are both externally imposed and internally constructed. They powerfully shape who you are, and you powerfully shape your response to them.

Personal and Social Identity

All people have multiple social identities, as well as individual, personal identities, each of which contributes to their sense of who they are. *Personal identity* is what most early childhood teachers think about when they consider ways to nurture children's positive self-concept. It includes factors such as a person's name, personality, talents, interests, age, and the specifics of and relationships with family members. These attributes are what give each person a sense of individuality. Personal identity is primarily fostered by a child's temperament, home, and extended family, and then by community and school experiences.

In contrast, *social identity* refers to the significant group categories that are created and defined by the society in which people live. These include culture, economic class, family structure, gender, language, race, religion, and more. In addition, societal attitudes toward physical attributes such as body size and shape make them part of people's social identities. For example, one child's *social identities* might include being male, East Coast urban, African American, Muslim, and from a two-parent, middle-class family. A second child's social identity might include being female, White, rural, Christian, English and Russian speaking, and from a working-class, grandparent-led family. A third child might be gender fluid, West Coast urban, Jewish, and from a professional, blended family. Some of these social identities receive support and approval within the dominant culture. Some are diminished and defined as "other." *Every* social identity has societal policies, stereotypes, and attitudes connected with it. These may affect how teachers view the children and families with whom they work as well as how they think of themselves.

At various times in one's life, some social identities may play a more important part than others. A person might also have shifting feelings about various social identities—being proud of some identities and downplaying or denying others depending on the circumstances of that person's life. Some social identities may shift throughout life: Economic class may shift. Marital status and family structures may evolve. Religious identities may change.

When one or more of a person's social identities are made visible in positive and powerful ways in classrooms, movies, media, and so on, that person may seem just to "be" and to be "normal" or "regular." It is not unusual to hear White adults say, "I don't have a culture. I'm just regular," or "I'm just human. I don't have a racial identity." Educators whose social identities are visible in society often find it easier to recognize their social identities by thinking back about times they experienced some doors being closed to them based on those identities or times they experienced feeling "different" in another country.

Why Social Identities Matter

Social identities carry various statuses, assumptions, and biases that affect how people are perceived and treated. These can powerfully enhance or undermine an individual's access to opportunities and resources. They make successful life outcomes easier or harder for a person. They also impact beliefs about a person's capacities and limitations (Derman-Sparks, LeeKeenan, & Nimmo 2015).

For example, a family with low income may have limited access to many of the resources children need. Their children may interact with teachers and other community services professionals who lack awareness of and sensitivity to their family's daily realities. It means children may grow up having to maneuver in a world where this lack of understanding is common. Here's a story from Julie's childhood:

> One of my earliest shaping memories was when I was in kindergarten. Dad was in the army overseas; my mom was working long hours. My sisters and I got ourselves up and out to school in the mornings, making our own breakfast and lunches. We often didn't do a great job of appearing clean and tidy. Valentine's Day was coming. I had laboriously figured out how to read the calendar so I could sign up to be the cookie monitor at school. When the day arrived, I proudly got ready to pass out the promised heart-shaped cookies. My teacher stopped me, took my hands in hers, and said in a shocked voice, "Your nails are filthy! You can't handle food with hands like that." I still remember staring at my hands, feeling like I had left my body and knowing a deep sense of shame and embarrassment. I also remember my determination not to let my mother know what had happened, so she wouldn't feel ashamed too.

How individuals feel about their various social identities may reflect or resist the social realities of advantage and disadvantage. Families and schools can have an important impact in helping children feel pride and strength about a social identity even when the society as a whole disadvantages that identity.

As an early childhood education student of Julie's explains,

> I grew up in a very poor family where money was an issue. I never had new clothes or new shoes. My parents would always shop at the flea market. Growing up was hard because I never had "cool clothes," and the other kids would make fun of me. Now I can

say, "That was classism." I don't know why having a word makes it easier to think about, but it does! And it has helped me feel pride in how well my parents managed despite the hardships they experienced.

The Beginnings of Identity

From their first year of life, children pay attention to differences and similarities among the people in their lives. They use these observations to make sense of the world, to identify what does and doesn't matter, and to construct their self-identity and their concepts about others. As young as 6 months, infants demonstrate that they notice differences in skin color (Bronson & Merryman 2009; Katz & Kofkin 1997). By age 2, children notice and comment on gendered differences (see Chapter 9) using gender labels assigned by society: "I a girl" or "Me boy." They also make observations about racialized differences (see Chapter 8), learning the names of colors and beginning to apply these to skin color: "He's brownish, but I'm browner!" (Ramsey 2015).

By age 3, children begin asking questions about their own and others' characteristics, including those related to gender, language, physical abilities, and racial identity (Derman-Sparks & Edwards 2010; Ramsey 2015). For example,

"Why is that man's skin dark?"

"Why is that lady getting pushed in a chair?"

"Why does she talk funny?"

"My skin looks like yours, Mommy."

"Why do I have freckles?"

"I have the same thing as Daddy."

By age 4, children begin to show awareness of family structure and economic class differences (Ramsey 2015; Tatum 2017):

"Why does Shoshanna have two mommies? Where's her daddy?"

"I want new Nike shoes like Matthew's."

Between ages 3 and 5, children also become very curious about what parts of themselves are permanent and will stay the same and what parts will change. They ask questions like the following:

"If I like to climb trees, do I become a boy?"

"When I play with dolls, do I become a girl?"

"Why is my skin this color? Can I change it? Can I make my skin pink like Toby's?"

"Will I always need a prosthesis on my arm?"

Constructing a Personal Sense of Self and Multiple Social Identities

The significant adults in children's lives play a major role in helping children feel either proud, shamed, or conflicted about their identities and about their attitudes toward human differences. Learning about both social and personal identities begins in one's family. However, messages from the larger society soon filter in and become a central influence. These messages come from many places: children's family members and friends, movies and television, books and advertising, and early childhood programs.

Some of what children learn about their own and others' social identities comes from *overt, direct* lessons. For example, adults sometimes explicitly declare their ideas about boys and girls: "Big boys don't cry," "Be careful. She's a girl. She can get hurt," "You're a beautiful little princess," or "What a strong boy you are!" Some people explicitly declare their attitudes about children with disabilities: "I do not want those kids with problems in the same classroom as my son. They'll take up all of the teachers' time." Or they make comments about same-sex parents: "Children can't have two fathers. One of them has to be the *real* father."

Children often experience conflicting messages about identities. This occurs when the behavior of families, teachers, religious leaders, or people portrayed in the media does not match their direct messages about people's social identities. For example, children may hear adults say that people are all alike and that they should treat all people with respect, yet they never see their family develop friendships with people different from themselves or even interact with other social groups in their day-to-day life. A teacher may do a "Who We Are" unit each year to support children's self-concepts yet use materials that show only White children, thereby making some of the children invisible. Or children may hear adults say that looks are not important, yet the same adults continually comment on children's height, attractiveness, and clothing. When such double messages are frequent and pervasive in a child's life, which message do you think the child absorbs?

In addition to explicit messages, much of what children learn about their social identities comes from *covert, implicit* messages. For example, children absorb the messages they see in advertisements about what a family is supposed to look like. They experience how their family is treated by others, whether welcoming or wary. Even before they have words, they notice when a family is treated poorly, receiving slow service in stores or restaurants, for example, or encountering rudeness from social agency personnel, as can happen all too often to children of color and children from families with low income.

Invisibility Erases Identity and Experience—Visibility Affirms Reality

Young children are learning about who is and who isn't important in society. When children see themselves and their families reflected in their early childhood setting, they feel affirmed and that they belong. When children's identities and families are invisible, the opposite happens. Children feel that they are unimportant and do not belong. They may develop a sense of shame about themselves and their families. They may start wishing to be like those who are in the visible social identity groups.

Messages of invisibility and visibility communicate who matters and who does not. When young children look at the books or posters in a classroom and find only two-parent families, they absorb the message that the images they see reflect the one right kind of family and that all other kinds of families are wrong. When the dolls in the classroom are all White, or the pictures on the classroom walls show only White children, children can conclude that White is normal and other colors of human skin are not as desirable. When the positive images they see in their early childhood programs or the media are portraying people only in professional careers, they may conclude that other kinds of jobs are not important or to be valued.

Those messages are particularly powerful coming from the people who teach children, provide their medical care, lead religious rituals, and act in other positions of influence or power. Children absorb these covert messages every day, often with the adults who care for them being unaware of what they are modeling.

Stop & Think: What Kinds of Messages Are Children Receiving About Their Identities?

- When looking at children's picture books, what family structures do children see? (This includes books that have animal characters as well as humans.)

- When children are taken shopping for clothing, what do the images on boys' and girls' clothing tell them about what it means to be male or female? How many items of clothing do girls "need" compared with boys? What messages does that teach children?

- In children's movies and videos, which characters use standard English and which do not? Who are the good guys and who are the bad guys?

- When you were a child, which of your social identities were visible in your school environment? Which ones were erased, made invisible?

Children Try to Make Sense of All They See and Hear

As in all other areas of learning, young children try to make sense of their world by creating theories from what they observe and their experiences. This is true for the everyday events of their lives, such as believing that if someone needs money, it comes from using a magic card that they stick into a machine on the wall, or that cars are alive because you have to feed them before they can go. This constructing of theories, or *schemas* (Piaget 1953), is also what children do to help them understand their observations of culture, disabilities, gender, skin color, and other identities. It is useful to listen to children's explanations because it helps you understand how young children are trying to make sense of great complexity. For example,

> After hearing about melanin and skin color, Robin asks, "If I eat melon, will my skin look brown like Leticia's [Robin's best friend]?"

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> Nathan looks at both sides of his hand and tells his mom, "This side is my Black part and this side is my White part."

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> "When I grow up, I'm going to grow a baby inside me," says Joon-woo, whose mother is pregnant. His friend Tad objects, saying only girls can have babies inside them. "That's okay," Joon-woo says cheerfully. "I'll tell my mommy to reborn me and I'll be a girl when I'm grown up."

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> "I want a button [hearing aid] like Francina has, so I can hear her Spanish words and talk to her," says English-speaking Juliette.

Listening to children's theories shows where they are confused. While working with children to expand and correct their ideas, be respectful of the remarkable intelligence that underlies their attempts to make sense of what they experience.

Young Children Form Pre-Prejudices

Pre-prejudice describes children's inaccurate ideas and feelings as they begin to build theories about human differences. Children pay attention to subtle cues from adults, and they draw conclusions even about issues adults may not talk to them about. They absorb inaccurate ideas, stereotypes, and attitudes about a wide range of human identities (Ramsey 2015). Consider these children's comments, overheard by teachers and families:

> At home after bathing, a 2½-year-old Asian child tells his mother, "Now my hair is white because it is clean."

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> A 4-year-old girl tells a male classmate during dramatic play, "You can't be the nurse. Only girls can."

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> Emily has a red birthmark along her forehead and over one eye. Ceci moves away from Emily, saying, "She has a mean face."

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> "You can't have two mommies," says a 4-year-old to a child who does. "That's bad."

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> A boy playing with hoses and fire hats says of another boy doing the same, "He don't got new boots like I do! So, he can't be fire chief."

These expressions of pre-prejudice are seeds that can grow into actual prejudice if a child's family or other important people in the child's life ignore or reinforce them. Even though many adults believe that young

children do not notice differences and are unaware of prejudice, research shows that this is not so (Clark 1963; CNN 2010; Lane 2008; Murray & Urban 2017; Ramsey 2015; Tatum 2017).

Young Children Develop Ideas and Feelings About Societal Power Dynamics

In addition to pre-prejudice, children's comments reveal their absorption of messages about the connection between social identities and who experiences power and position in their world. They pay attention to who is in charge, who is the boss, who gets to make decisions. While young children do not yet understand the full implications of power and resource differences, they notice them. Their observations can spark ideas that become the early steps of learning internalized inferiority or internalized superiority (Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001). For example,

> Four-year-old Liam's preschool program maintains two separate and unequal programs in the building—one privately funded for affluent, mostly White children, which has newer, more interesting climbing structures, and another with an older yard for children from families with low income, mostly Latinx. During the ride home one day, Liam suddenly says to his mother, "Mommy, I'm really glad that I'm White." (Adapted from Derman-Sparks & Ramsey 2011, 45)

All children, including White children, should feel good about their racial identity, and it is logical to be glad to be in a program with better equipment. However, making the connection between Whiteness and having better services is a seed that can blossom into a sense of entitlement based on racial identity. This will get stronger as a child observes and continues to encounter examples of more acceptance of and better resources given to White children.

This next example comes from Louise's family and became an instigator for her anti-bias work:

> "I don't want to be Black anymore," my 4-year-old son announced at dinner one evening. In response to our question about why, he said, "I want to be like the people on *Emergency!* when I grow up." (*Emergency!* was a TV program about paramedics and firefighters, none of whom were Black.)
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> It didn't seem that this was an issue of personal self-concept or that our son was saying he didn't like himself. Rather, it seemed to us that he was trying to figure out what to do with a media message about his racial identity. We immediately responded, "You can be a firefighter when you grow up if you want to. There are already many Black firefighters." We followed up with activities to reinforce this message, including visiting a fire station with an African American firefighter and buying a puzzle showing dark-skinned firefighters.

Observing young children reveals their ideas about power relationships related to such identities as gender, economic class, and culture:

> Jackson and Mia are playing in a truck they have made from the big blocks and cardboard boxes. "I'm driving," Jackson announces firmly. "I want to drive!" protests Mia. "I'm the Daddy Man, so I drive!" he replies. After thinking for a moment, Mia moves over to the passenger seat.
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> "How come we got a new car and Sophie's mommy brings her on the bus?" asks Olivia on the way to school. "Sophie's family doesn't have a car. Your daddy and I worked hard to buy our car," her mother replies a little defensively. Olivia thinks for a moment and then says, "I'll tell Sophie to tell her mother to work harder so she can have a car too."
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> Elena, a child from a Spanish-speaking family, enters an English immersion (English-only) program speaking no English. None of the staff speaks Spanish. As Elena picks up the new language, she refuses to speak in Spanish when her mother comes to pick her up. When her mother speaks to her in their home language, Elena firmly places her hand over her mother's mouth. She also begins to refuse to speak Spanish at home, much to the concern of her family.

Is this the beginning of Jackson learning about male privilege, or Olivia forming the stereotype that poverty is always a consequence of not working hard enough? Is Elena learning to hide, be ashamed of, or reject her home culture and language—and perhaps on a path to losing the ability to communicate with her family members?

Here is an example from Julie's family illustrating how bias issues beyond the family shape children's sense of self. In this case, both children deal with the same issue but with contrasting outcomes.

> When my son was young, he had wispy, white "dandelion" hair sticking up all over his head. Sometimes children at his nursery school teased him about his hair, which hurt his feelings and took some intervention from the teacher and support from us. A few years later, my foster daughter, who is African American, was teased for her large, fluffy Afro hair, and again, the teacher and our family intervened.

> During his kindergarten year, my son's hair became blond, straight, and very much like the hair he saw on boys in books and movies and on television. By the time he was 5, hair was no longer an issue for him. Indeed, others saw him as an all-American boy, and the many images of boys like him in school and in media reinforced this message.

> My foster daughter, however, picked up all the messages about the types of hair considered desirable or undesirable and the covert messages from movies, television, and books about who is beautiful and who is not. Such social messages repeatedly reinforced the early teasing, and try as we might, we were unable to protect her from coming to think of herself as funny looking. It was not until we moved to a community where there were many other African American people, and a favorite teacher with a wondrous Afro, that my daughter was able to see her own beauty.

The hurtful role societal attitudes play in shaping young children's thinking about their identities profoundly contrasts with teachers' and families' desire to encourage children to know who they are without feeling inferior or superior. This is one of the central challenges facing teachers and families.

You Bring to Teaching Who You Are

Deepening your understanding of who you are now and how you came to be that person is at the heart of becoming a skilled anti-bias teacher. As Rita Tenorio, an experienced anti-bias teacher and administrator, explains,

> This work is as much about changing your own perspective as a teacher as it is about what you do in the classroom. If you're not willing to make a commitment to the four anti-bias education goals for yourself, the rest is not useful.

As you recognize and better understand how your own experiences shape and strengthen or limit your social identities and your views, you can work on understanding the lives of the families and colleagues with whom you work. For example, if you were raised to believe that being prompt is a sign of responsibility and respect, and your family always had the income to buy a car (and get it fixed when a problem arose), then it might be hard for you to understand the experience of families who chronically drop off their children late because they must get to school by using unreliable buses or by depending on others to give them a ride. If you grew up in a family with a sibling who is disabled and came to understand how individual and unique each person with a disability is, you may be particularly skilled in working with families like yours.

Knowing yourself will also help you understand why some changes in thinking and perspective are easy for you and others are more difficult, as this teacher experienced:

> I teach in the child care program at my church on Sundays and have always planned an Easter curriculum, with eggs and spring flowers and baskets as well as telling the story of Jesus rising. I knew I couldn't teach the religious part of the curriculum at the public preschool I now work at, but I thought the eggs and baskets would be wonderful. I was so surprised that there were families who were offended! And I have to admit, I was pretty hurt. I hadn't realized how important those symbols are to me. It was a struggle to rethink my role as a teacher and find ways to embrace *all* the children I was responsible for.

While it is sometimes hard work to uncover your ideas and feelings about your own and others' social identities, it is also very rewarding. One of Louise's anti-bias students put it this way:

> Tonight was our last class. I've been thinking why it affects people so much. I think it's because, in untying the knot, you're unraveling the web of lies [about our identities] that each of us has inevitably experienced. . . . These have taken their dehumanizing toll, and in unraveling even a bit of the whole, we feel tremendously excited. We have only to unravel more of it to reclaim ourselves more completely (Derman-Sparks & Phillips 1997, 137).

How Do You Name Your Social Identities?

The words people use to describe their social identities may shift as their thinking about themselves shifts. It's important to let people know what terms you prefer and to learn how other people define their multiple social identities. Here are a few examples from Julie's students naming their social identities:

Luz: Culturally, ethnically, I'm Mexican American, and probably Californian. And definitely Catholic! But I'm also Mixtecan (the indigenous people of Oaxaca and Pueblo). I'm only beginning to learn about the Mixtecan part of my history. Here in the US, I'm also a woman of color.

Leroy: People see me and think, "He's a Black man." That's all they see. They're right, I am, because my grandfather was Black. But I think of myself as Louisiana Creole. That's the part of my identity and heritage that is alive for me. I guess my culture would be Creole, Californian, and Christian. My citizenship is American. I haven't figured out yet what my class is.

Mario: I'm Italian American, but I mainly live my day-to-day culture as a gay man. On my mother's side we're pretty much Choctaw and Cherokee—and I love learning about those lives. But I haven't lived my life as an Indian, so I guess it's my heritage, not my culture.

Miriam: I think of myself as White American. I also am hearing impaired and participate in the Deaf community and culture. I think of myself as an activist, which has its own cultural values.

1. In each row, read the social identity term in column 1 and write in column 2 whatever word(s) you used to describe yourself as a child and the words you use now. Then circle the identities in columns 3 and 4 that apply to your life.

   You may not always have words to describe these identities. That's okay. Write down your best thought at the moment. Don't leave a section blank. You can always redo this as time goes on.

Social Identity	Description of Self		Groups Defined as the Norm; Recipients of Societal Advantages	Groups that Are Marginalized and Targets of Institutional Prejudice and Discrimination
	Childhood	Currently		
Ethnicity or heritage			European American "melting pot"	All other ethnicities, including indigenous peoples
Place of birth			Born in the country you now live in	Immigrant
Language			English	Home languages other than English
Racialized identity			White	People of color; biracial; multiracial
Gender			Male	Female, nonbinary, transgender, etc.
Sexuality			Heterosexual	Asexual, bisexual, gay, lesbian, polyamorous, etc.
Religious beliefs			Christian or Christian tradition	Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, pagan, atheist, etc.
Age (currently)			Productive adults (ages 20-50 for women, 20-60 for men)	Children, adolescents, women over 50, men over 60
Education (currently)			College degree(s) Highly literate	High school education or less Struggle with literacy
Body type/size			Slim, fit Medium height for women Tall for men	Large, overweight Very short or very tall
Able self (physical, mental, emotional health)			Healthy, Functional No apparent disability	Any form of disability: physical, mental, emotional, learning, behavioral
Economic class			Middle to upper class	Poor or working class
Family structure			Male/female married parents with one to three biological children	Unmarried; single parent; gay or lesbian parents; no children; divorced; adoptive, foster, or blended family; more than three children

2. Look at the pattern of circled identities and think about the following questions, then discuss a few of your insights with a partner.

   In what ways have you experienced either prejudice and discrimination or privilege and visibility because of these identities? Which identities made life harder for you, and which ones opened doors?

   Which of your identities have had the biggest impact on you? In which identities do you feel the most pride?

Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves

Uncover Your Multidimensional Social Identities Portrait

One of the complicated aspects of thinking about social identity is that no one has just one identity. Everyone is a member of more than one social identity group. This means that each individual's package of multiple social identities carries a combination of societal advantages and disadvantages. For example, Luz's status as someone who is dark-skinned, a woman, and an immigrant makes her "other" to the dominant society, and she often faces social disadvantages. Simultaneously, in her status as highly educated and middle class, she has certain social advantages. Eddie, who is transgender male, White, and Christian, works as an aide in a child care program. He lives with prejudice as a person who is transgender and experiences suspicion about his motives as a man working with children. Yet, the color of his skin grants him societal advantages as well.

The "My Social Identities Portrait" exercise on page 32 is an opportunity for you to name and think about the multiple social identities that make up who you are and to look at how you have come to think about yourself over the years. There are no right or wrong answers. The more you understand these parts of yourself, the more thoughtfully you will be able to work with families and children of diverse backgrounds and social identities.

Guidelines for Heart-to-Heart Talking and Listening

Here are some guidelines to help you successfully engage in honest, respectful dialogue about one or more anti-bias issues in this book.

Agree to be talking/listening partners with one other person, each of you relating stories that explore who you are, what you have experienced, and how you feel in relation to the anti-bias issue you are discussing. *This is not a conversation.* One person talks, the other listens. Then change roles so the speaker becomes the listener and the listener becomes the speaker. Share equally the amount of time you have (e.g., two minutes each, five minutes each, an hour each). Keep each other safe by agreeing that you will not share with anyone what you have heard. Commit yourselves to respect the speaker's story as true for that person. Do not judge or interrupt.

Guidelines for the Speaker

- Speak from your heart. Provide enough details so that what happened and what you feel are clear.

- It's okay to cry, laugh, shake, yawn, or whatever while you are telling your story.

- Don't be embarrassed if you go quiet. Just wait until the words form in your mind and then begin again. It's okay to repeat yourself.

- Few of us ever receive the gift of someone deeply listening to us. This is your time, so take it!

Guidelines for the Listener

- Totally respect the speaker's confidentiality. (Do not share with *anyone* what you have heard!)

- Listen as a believer. This means you must listen to hear why the story is true from the speaker's point of view, even if you can imagine alternate perspectives.

- Stay out of the speaker's story: no questions, interruptions, distractions, advice, or recommendations.

- If strong feelings come up for the *speaker* while you are listening, remember that you do not need to come to the rescue. Your job as listener is to stay present and attentive and be confident that your conversation partner can work through those feelings.

- If strong feelings come up for *you* while you are listening, remember that the feelings are about you—not about the speaker. They are useful information for you to have about yourself.

- If you are having these conversations in a class or staff meeting, and afterward there is discussion, remember you can report back only on what *you* said and what *you* experienced. It is up to your conversation partner to decide to share or not share his story.

Communicating About Social Identities

An important tool for the personal work of ABE is learning to put words to your thoughts and history and opening yourself to truly hearing other people's thoughts and experiences. The exercises in this chapter, like all the Stop & Think reflection questions throughout the book, invite you to bring to the surface how your experiences have shaped your sense of yourself and others. These exercises also invite you to share and think with others who are going through the same process of personal and professional growth.

Engaging in such conversations deepens your insights about yourself and others. It requires you to find ways to openly describe what you have experienced and to develop the ability to deeply hear the experiences of others. Sometimes this may be difficult. People who carry deep injuries from experiencing prejudice and discrimination related to one or more of their social identities may fear reopening wounds. Other people may find it hard to examine social identities that connect them to the unfair treatment of others. Or, it may be uncomfortable for other reasons. Still, it is worth having conversations about your own and others' identities. Use the ideas in "Guidelines for Heart-to-Heart Talking and Listening" on page 33 to engage in these powerful conversations.

Culture, Ethnicity, Nationality, and Race: What Are the Differences?

The dimensions of ethnic, cultural, national, and racialized social identities are often confused with each other. However, they actually refer to different kinds of social group memberships.

Ethnicity, or *ethnic heritage,* is about the place of origin and cultural heritage of one's ancestors—parents, grandparents, and beyond. Ethnicity refers to a group identity rooted in common ancestry and common political, historical, language, and social experiences. Names of ethnic groups often, but not always, reflect the group members' place of origin, such as Mexican American, Italian American, and Chinese American. *Native Americans* is a term for numerous specific indigenous groups in the United States, each with their own languages, beliefs, and practices.

Individuals are born into ethnic group membership but can choose which aspects of its culture they make their own and which they leave behind.

Culture encompasses the specific rules and patterns of behavior, language, values, and world beliefs of various groups. People who share the same ethnicity share some but usually not all of these aspects of culture. While you may know the ethnicity of an individual, you may not necessarily know specifically how she practices the cultural patterns of her ethnic group. You have to find out! This point is particularly important when your job is to foster children's development and learning in the context of their home cultures as well as the larger culture of the country.

Nationality refers to the country of which you are now a citizen, the country (or sometimes countries) that provides you with a passport.

If your family originally came from Italy, your ethnicity might be Italian. If you were born in the United States, your nationality/citizenship would be American. How important your nationality is to you may well be based on how long ago your family lived in the country of origin. Many US citizens consider their primary national identity, American, also as their ethnic identity.

What Is Racialized Identity?

Race is *not* the same thing as ethnicity or culture or nationality. (See Chapter 8 for a discussion of what race really is.) Yet, in modern society, everyone is presumed to be a member of a racial group, so everyone's identity becomes racialized. Individuals do not choose their racialized identity. However, they *can* choose how to live their identity (e.g., rejecting societal messages of superiority and inferiority and choosing to work to end racism rather than accept its power relationships). Chapter 8 discusses racialized identity in greater detail.

Some but not all racial terms identify geographic places of origin. However, many *different* ethnic groups are often assigned to the same racialized identity group. For example, one term for White people is *Caucasian,* used by an 18th-century professor of medicine to refer to the people of the Caucasus Mountains in Eastern Europe, whom he believed were "the most beautiful race of men" (Blumenbach [1795] 1865). People designated as

Caucasian or White usually belong to one or more national/ethnic groups originally located only in Europe (e.g., English, Irish, French, German).

Africans who were kidnapped and carried to the Americas came from many different ethnic groups in Africa, with diverse languages, religious practices, cultural beliefs, and rules of behavior. Their enslavers grouped them into one racialized identity focusing on skin color, called at different times *Colored*, *Negro*, or *Black*. During the Civil Rights movement, the term *African American* emerged as one way to reclaim and make visible people's ancestry and place of origin and as a movement to claim their own cultural group name. African American culture was forged from the varying cultures brought to the United States by enslaved Africans and shaped by their subsequent experiences.

What's in a Name?

Sometimes people are confused or intimidated by the question of what terms to use for various social identities. This issue and its answers are rooted in US history and social and political dynamics. Many names for social identity groups came from people outside the group who had the power to give the group a name. As people think about how they understand themselves, their history, and their work for human rights, it is not unusual for groups to change their externally imposed social identity name.

For example, the original inhabitants of the Americas were named Indians because Christopher Columbus thought he had arrived in India. However, they called themselves by many different names, such as Arawak, Pequot, and Taino. In the 1970s, the Indigenous people of the United States began asserting their preference and right to be called by their nation or tribal names (e.g., Comanche, Diné, Ohlone) or by the group name Native American. The preferred group name for Indigenous people in Canada is First Peoples. These name changes have nothing to do with what is disparagingly called political correctness. They reflect groups of people deciding to name themselves rather than being named by others.

In 1970, the US Census began using the term *Hispanic* for people from Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean based on the assumption that Spanish is spoken in these regions. However, this term covers people who speak multiple languages and have highly diverse cultures and governments. More recently the group term has shifted to *Latino*, and there is a movement to restate that term as *Latinx* to emphasize that it is gender inclusive. Whether this term holds or not, almost all people much prefer specific words that identify their heritage countries (e.g., Costa Rican, Dominican, Peruvian).

The terms people prefer to use regarding disabilities have also changed. The term *handicapped* is now considered a disrespectful way of describing a person with a disability. Other terms considered disrespectful include *disabled person* and *wheelchair bound*, because both make a person's disability the overriding definition by putting the disability first. Phrases have evolved that instead emphasize the person first: *a person with a disability* or *a person who uses a wheelchair*. (See Chapter 11.) However, some people do not prefer person-first language for themselves; being referred to as an autistic person or a Deaf person is a recognition that being autistic or deaf is an integral part of their identities. If you are unsure, as noted elsewhere in this chapter, always ask.

Names and pronouns for gender are also in the process of change as newer thinking about a gender continuum and the fluidity of gender identity becomes more common (see Chapter 9).

Names matter. No one likes to be called a social identity name they have rejected. It can be hurtful to continue to use particular words simply because it is what you grew up with or are used to using. Leslie Cheung, an early childhood anti-bias teacher, put it this way: "My parents are from China. I am Chinese American. If you have to put me into a larger group, say 'Asian American,' but don't ever call me 'Oriental.' Oriental is a rug, not a human being."

It is always respectful to learn the current preferred ways groups name themselves. In addition, you need to know how the *individual* members of a social identity group choose to name themselves. As you develop relationships with children's families, you might learn that one family describes themselves as Mexican American, another as Chicano, and another as Latina. This means you have to ask. Ask, listen, acknowledge—and follow the family's lead.

You may worry that asking about identity terms might offend someone. But it is deeply affirming to people to be called by the name they feel is most rightfully theirs. It is helpful to talk with families about children's curiosity regarding the differences among themselves and tell them that you want to know what words a family would like you to use in the classroom when children ask questions. It helps if you have included the four core ABE goals in your program's philosophy statement so families are familiar with your vision. And it is essential that you ask all families, not just those you presume are somehow different.

Social Identities Create Complex Feelings

Feelings of being "less than" or "more than" or of being an outsider are among the harmful psychological effects of the isms and biases about social identities. These messages teach members of advantaged groups to believe that they have a right to and are more deserving of society's benefits. At the same time, these messages convey to marginalized groups that they are less worthy in the eyes of society, which can result in the undermining of self-belief and confidence.

Learning to Feel "More Than"

One aspect of being a member of an advantaged group is presuming that your social identity is the normal, ordinary, and correct way to be (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey 2011). If you grew up in a reasonably happy and well-functioning two-parent (mother and father) family, as did your parents and most of your cousins, and this is also the image of families you see in popular culture, books, and so on, it's easy to assume that two-parent families with a mother and a father are the best for everyone and are the definition of normal and healthy. This may lead to the assumption (and bias) that single-parent families are by definition lacking, stressed, and unhappy. (This is where the derogatory term *broken family* comes from.) This bias also tends to disguise the reality that some two-parent families with a mother and a father can be seriously unhappy, struggling, and dysfunctional.

Messages of entitlement come along with being a member of an advantaged group. These messages frequently block people from seeing the world as it really is. For example, some White people might assume that if a person of color is admitted to a desired college to which they themselves were not accepted, it must be because the college extended preferential, unfair treatment to the person of color. They may not consider that the admitted person had exemplary qualities or skills that led to their acceptance. They also may not consider the fact that many high-ranking universities save spots for the children of alumni and big donors—regardless of the individual students' qualifications. Rather than recognize this as preferential or privileged treatment of wealthy families, it is thought of as normal and acceptable for children of wealthy families to go to the best schools.

An entitlement viewpoint, sometimes called *internalized privilege* or *internalized superiority,* also prevents people in advantaged groups from seeing the obstacles faced by people in other groups (Barndt 1991; William 2012). For example, it does not occur to some men to think that earning more money than a woman doing the same kind of work is a form of male privilege, or that being able to stand at a bus stop late at night without fear of rape is a form of male privilege. Most Whites assume that a police officer will pull them over only if they have done something wrong, which is a form of advantage that many racial groups do not have. Some straight, or cisgender

(see *gender* in the glossary), people may not notice that LGBTQ (an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and more) people may pay a high social price if they display a picture of their loved one in their workspace. These blinders of internalized privilege lead to incomplete and inaccurate pictures of what is going on in one's own life and community and in the lives of others.

As a result, group privilege is often invisible to the members of the group. As an economically struggling early childhood teacher, Julie did not consider herself privileged. However, an article by Peggy McIntosh (1989) opened up a whole new way of thinking about her whiteness. At the time, Julie wrote in her journal about the privileges she had taken for granted:

o If I am hired at a new center, or receive a promotion, I do not have to wonder if other staff assume I got the job only because of my skin color.

o If I mess up at work, it is unlikely people will presume it is the nature of my entire racial group to make that error.

o If I speak up at work, chances are people will credit my ideas to the quality of my individual experience and intelligence rather than presuming that I am a spokesperson for White folks in general.

o If my kids get into trouble, their behavior is unlikely to be attributed to their skin color, and my parenting is unlikely to be called into question due to my skin color.

The problem with systemic advantage is not the good a person with that advantage gains. The problem is that people in other social identity groups are systemically kept from realizing the same benefits and experiencing the same rights. On an individual level, even when specific social identities give a person societal advantages or privileges, life can still be hard. For example, one can have White privilege *and* have a hard life. But that person's skin color is not one of the characteristics that makes life hard.

If you identified one or more advantaged identities in "My Social Identities Portrait" in this chapter, it is a useful exercise to select one and consider, as Julie did above, what privileges come with that identity. *Learning to recognize your privileges is not for the purpose of feeling guilty or shamed but to work toward ensuring that everyone is respected and treated with the same rights.*

Learning to Feel "Less Than"

The harmful effects of "less than" messages that individuals may experience because of their social identity groups may include shame, having to be constantly alert, unsure of what might happen next due to one's perceived social identity, self-limitations, setting oneself apart, and self-rejection. Sometimes called *internalized oppression* or *internalized inferiority* (Barndt 1991; William 2012), these negative effects may also include behaviors such as rejecting one's natural physical characteristics, name, language, cultural traditions, or values. It can mean believing stereotypes about one's own group. For example, children from families with low income may absorb the social message that intellectual careers are not for them, that they just aren't smart enough for academic work. Some people may choose to deny their racialized identity as they begin to recognize the prejudice and discrimination their group experiences. As one college student wrote when asked to reflect on childhood messages:

> I remember always wanting to have straight hair and being jealous in a way of my sisters because our mother used to straighten their hair. . . . Really, it just made you more like White people. Nobody ever said that—but we were all thinking it. (Derman-Sparks & Phillips 1997, 59)

And, as one female teacher learned, it can be startling to realize you are operating from hurtful mistruths:

> I was so excited when I found out our new director would be a man. It's very important to have men in early childhood programs. But then I heard myself saying, "Besides, men make better bosses." I couldn't believe what I had just said! I realized that, somehow, I believed the stereotype that women could not be good bosses—that we would be gossipy and untrustworthy or pushy and aggressive. In reality, the last two directors I had worked with had both been women and had been fine at their jobs. I guess this is an example of my internalized gender oppression.

To greater or lesser degrees, everyone is affected by the psychological dynamics of who belongs and who is an outsider. Thinking about structural classism,

racism, sexism, and other isms with classmates and colleagues offers many opportunities to uncover and critically examine the messages you have absorbed and their impact on your life. Ridding yourself of their influence on your sense of self can open yourself up to more authentic work with and for children and families.

Intersectionality

In this book we discuss different arenas of social identity in separate chapters, yet in real life children are always developing in the context of many identities simultaneously and will experience social advantages or disadvantages based on their *multiple* social identities. The experience of multiple identities is called *intersectionality*. The concept of intersectionality deepens thinking about the dynamics of social identities. It explains how various systemic forms of prejudice and discrimination create multiple and overlapping levels of social disadvantage and social advantage (Collins & Bilge 2016; Crenshaw, forthcoming). Intersectionality highlights the "complex and cumulative effects of different forms of structural inequity that can arise for members of multiple marginalized groups" (NAEYC 2019, 18). For example, many women of color experience a trio of societal disadvantage—racism, sexism, and classism—whereas White women experience the damage of sexism, such as generally lower wages than White men for similar work, but escape being the targets of racism.

In addition to shedding light on the impacts of the interconnections among an individual's social identities, the concept of intersectionality can also help you identify the potential connections between groups of people with different social identities. Early childhood teachers' different perspectives and experiences, based on their social identities, can lead to misunderstandings and disagreements, yet as you share your different life experiences you can work together to find solutions that work for everyone.

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When you achieve a deeper understanding of how young children actively construct their social identities and the damage that arises from stereotyping and bias, you can provide children with more effective support and education. Achieving a deeper understanding of how *you* came to be the person you are today, and how your identity influences your work with children and families, open the door to more authentic teaching and working relationships.

Anti-bias work with yourself and with children is a call to action. As you read the chapters that follow, keep in mind that becoming an anti-bias educator has a learning curve, as does acquiring any new idea or skill. It takes time, practice, and opportunities to do ABE effectively. Along the way, you are invited to compassionately, deeply, and truthfully learn about yourself and the children and families with whom you work.

Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and *Ourselves*