Kevin’s classroom dilemma

A White second grade teacher at a predominantly White university campus laboratory school contacts an African American mother to request a meeting to discuss her son Kevin’s behavior. When Kevin’s parents arrive for the afternoon meeting, they can see that their son is visibly upset. To calm him down, Kevin’s father walks him to the boys’ restroom while his mother remains in the classroom with the teacher to discuss what happened.
The teacher tells Kevin’s mother that her son got out of his seat without permission. When he was told to sit back down, he insisted he needed to sharpen his pencil. “When I told Kevin to use another pencil, he slammed his pencil on his desktop in defiance.”

When Kevin and his father return from the restroom, they join the conversation. Kevin’s mother turns to him and states, “Your teacher told me that you have been disrespectful.” Kevin says, “No, Mama, you don’t understand.” She responds, “I’m not going to tolerate your being disrespectful.” He says, “I raised my hand holding my pencil because I needed to sharpen it. She told me to put my hand down. I then raised my hand again and propped my knee on my chair and said, ‘I need to sharpen my pencil.’ She told me to sit in my chair and put my hand down. I slammed my hand down [in frustration] holding the pencil and it rolled off my desk.” Kevin’s mother repeats, “It doesn’t matter. I’m not going to tolerate your being disrespectful.”

Again Kevin says, “No, Mama, you don’t understand” and starts crying. His mother pauses, looks at her son with great concern, and says, “What is going on?” Kevin continues, “Mama, she treats Black kids and Mexican kids differently.” With a son growing up Black and male in the United States, Kevin’s mother and father have engaged in ongoing conversations about race and discrimination, always reassuring their son that he has the same rights as other children who do not look like him. His mother reminds him, as she has done many times before, “What have I taught you? We all bleed the same blood.” Her son says, “Yes, Mama. We all bleed the same blood,” as he continues to cry. His mother comforts him by saying, “We’re many members, but one body.”

Kevin’s mother turns to the teacher and asks, “Is this true?” The teacher says, “Oh, Kevin, I am so sorry you feel that way. I’ve heard this from other students, and I hate that you all feel that way.”

While this incident could happen to a child from a different cultural group, the frequency with which African American boys experience such treatment in schools (not to mention outside of school) far exceeds that of children from other racial and ethnic groups (see Barbarin & Crawford 2006; Davis 2005; Wright 2011). The unique challenges and complex ways in which structural racism, including both implicit bias and explicit forms of racism, shapes the experiences and well-being of African American males must be considered and understood.

**A Closer Look at Black Boys**

The opening vignette exemplifies the running narrative of the educational experiences of many Black boys in US classrooms, past and present. Research shows that, all too often, boys are viewed as problems in school (Barbarin & Crawford 2006). In another study spanning the primary school years, Barbarin (2013) found that boys of color (specifically African American boys) are subject to disproportionately high rates of disciplinary action, such as suspensions and expulsions. These actions, combined with the ways that Black boys are socially and culturally misunderstood, result in misguided school practices that often disadvantage African American boys in punitive ways (Barbarin 2010; Wright 2011).
Beginning in preschool, some teachers tend to stigmatize African American boys, giving them negative labels, such as “bad boy” or “troublemaker,” that are often passed along from teacher to teacher throughout a child’s schooling. Labels such as these lead to isolation and exclusion from classroom activities. Disturbingly, they are also picked up by other children and perceived as truth (Barbarin & Crawford 2006). Over time, the impact of these labels affects societal expectations of African American boys and, at times, expectations they have for themselves, both social and academic (Harper & Associates 2014). In contrast to these trends, positive racial identities among African American boys contribute strongly to high academic achievement (Wright 2011). Unfortunately, too many boys do not find the needed encouragement to develop healthy identities, self-esteem, and social competence in early childhood settings.

Some African American boys’ styles of communication and interaction in learning environments are at odds with mainstream discourse and interaction. For example, children may bring different dialects and languages (e.g., African American English, Spanish, American slang) to the classroom that are not aligned with Standard English. Such linguistic practices intersect race and gender in ways that tend to limit the educational experiences and opportunities of African American boys (Wright 2011). As noted by Barbarin and Crawford (2006), “When African American children in general, and boys in particular, are stigmatized, it seems imperative to consider the role of race” (82). Healthy relationships between teachers and students support the development of positive identities, self-esteem, and social competence in and outside classrooms (Hamre & Pianta 2001).

**Self-Identity, Agency, and Community**

Self-identity answers the question “Who am I?” Who we are distinguishes us from everyone else in the world. Children learn about themselves and construct their own self-identity in the context of their families and communities. Tennessee’s academic standards for second grade social studies suggest the role of the teacher is to help students understand their self-identity as American citizens (Tennessee Department of Education 2013). Students explore the ways “we are all part of the same community, sharing principles, goals, and traditions despite varied ancestry” (p. 1) while also identifying the rights and actions of citizens of the United States. For example, second-graders in Memphis could research the community decision to dedicate art murals at the Willow Park and Pine Hill Community Center. The mural “This Is My Song,” by Kyle Taylor and Chad M. Irwin, represents the generations—youth, adulthood, and the elderly—in their journey to live life well and in pursuit of education (Urban Art 2014). Similarly, a second grade teacher could designate a classroom bulletin board for student-selected topics and themes. Every month, children could vote on a new topic, theme, or purpose. Students might vote to use the bulletin board to showcase an “I Have a Dream” theme with real-life neighborhood parks in the surrounding community, proposing project ideas for how to make them better. Students could then vote on which community project they want to complete as a class.

Applying these academic standards to the early childhood classroom supports the development of a democratic learning community in which each child’s self-identity is recognized, valued, and reflected. Moreover, in such a classroom community, children are granted choices and are encouraged to responsibly make decisions that consider the
Individual and collective good of the group. These kinds of activities provide students with firsthand experiences in a deliberative, decision-making process (agency). According to Howard, Rose, and Barbarin (2013), when children experience healthy environments and positive relationships, they see themselves as important members of a community that values, cares about, and respects them, thus creating a sense of belonging.

Agency answers the questions “What actions can I take?” and “Will my actions make a difference?” Children’s ability to act upon their cultural worlds of home and school is one example of agency. Agency is a child’s ability to construct and co-construct his environment by negotiating different courses of action. For example, when children choose among different learning center activities or negotiate parts in a skit, they exercise agency by problem solving to satisfy the needs of individuals and of the group as a whole.

Guided by questions of self-identity and agency, how can teachers engage young children, especially Black boys, in the development of a positive self-identity? To begin to answer this question, we turn to the work of Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2010), who state that in their vision of anti-bias education, “all children and families have a sense of belonging and experience affirmation of their identities and cultural ways of being” (2). To help African American boys experience affirmation of self-identity, we recommend an authentic social studies teaching approach from a “history and me” perspective. This curriculum approach should be one that reflects, represents, and celebrates a vision for social change in America forged historically by all Americans, with a particular emphasis on African Americans.

The Tennessee social studies academic standards for second grade include a focus on government, civics, and history (Tennessee Department of Education 2013). Children study who they are as Americans, including the rights and privileges guaranteed to all US citizens. Second-graders are expected to develop an appreciation and respect for different cultures, and to explain the ways in which we are all part of the same community. Children’s understanding of community includes both the neighborhood in which they live and the learning community they experience at school.

In alignment with the Tennessee social studies standards, we provide strategies to promote self-identity, agency, and a sense of classroom community. We do so with the understanding that to interpret and/or reduce the experiences of Kevin and many children like him into a set of best practices may undermine the complexity of the issues. We begin with ways to promote self-identity and agency with children in general and with African American boys in particular, followed by approaches to creating a democratic classroom using “Kevin’s Classroom Dilemma” as an example.

**History and Me**

Applying the “history and me” perspective, teachers provide curricular materials that expose Black boys to a rich and diverse African American history that, for example, focuses on identities of Black boys and men. Such exposure is critical to the boys’ development of a healthy sense of self and their ability (and that of other children) to challenge stereotypes such as troublemaker and bad boy, which have become a stable part of the self-identity of African American boys. Reading and discussing picture books that focus on African American males—for example, the biography *Richard Wright and the Library Card* (1997), by William Miller, and the historical fiction *Sit-In: How Four Friends Stood Up by Sitting*
Down (2010), by Andrea Davis Pinkney—fosters the development of positive self-identity and agency.

**Mirror Books Versus Window Books**

Teachers can contribute to African American boys' discovery of who they are, both historically and culturally, by designing a celebration of self-identity through African American children's literature that ensures that Black boys see themselves in books that introduce them to “mentors on paper” (Thompson 1996). African American boys, perhaps more than any other group of children, need access to what Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) calls *mirror books*. Currently, children of color have far too many *window books*, looking into an all-White world, and far too few mirror books reflecting who they are. Books such as *Freedom Summer* (2005), by Deborah Wiles, and *Delivering Justice: W.W. Law and the Fight for Civil Rights* (2008), by Jim Haskins, provide examples of young African American men whose actions challenged racial discrimination in the South by helping members of their community register to vote and protest peacefully in order to declare that all American citizens are equal.

**Belonging and Affirmation**

While story time and independent reading are essential parts of daily classroom routines, these alone do not accomplish a sense of belonging and affirmation for African American boys. In other words, “it is critical for children of color to see themselves, their culture, and their perspectives in the books they read” (McNair 2014, 69). For this reason, we recommend active, interactive, and gregarious ways to talk about history and to share mirror books with all children, and Black boys in particular.
Teaching social studies using children’s books can include pantomime, choral readings, readers theater, mask making, puppetry, storytelling, and improvisation (Gangi 2004; Rasinski 2010). In addition to being kinesthetic and visual, these arts-based approaches encourage the development of children’s self-identity and agency. For example, the children’s book *Junebug* (1995), by Alice Mead, is about a young boy who lives in a housing project. At the age of 10, every boy in this housing project is forced to join a gang for “survival.” Junebug does not want to join a gang; instead, he wants to move away with his mother and sister to have a better life. Junebug refuses to give up on his dream for a better life. As a motivation, he celebrates his 10th birthday with a collection of glass bottles filled with notes about his dreams and wishes. Teachers can highlight Junebug’s determination to hold on to his dreams and explain how his bottle collection represents agency—a child’s ability to construct and co-construct his environment through the practice of negotiating different courses of action.

**Developing an Empowerment Club for Boys**

African American boys can and do benefit from a variety of African American male mentors who offer exposure to a broad range of possibilities. For example, meeting African American men involved in caring professions, such as nursing or teaching, can help boys expand their ideas of what is possible for them. Ongoing exposure to positive male mentors could also result in the design and creation of a boys’ empowerment club. Ideally, such a club would be developed collaboratively by teachers and students. The club can serve a variety of purposes. It can take place in different parts of the school (inside and outside) and at different times and even after school. For example, devote a small segment of recess to structured learning games or quick science experiments. The club would be open to all boys, and certainly could be replicated with girls.

Boys might set up ramps of different heights and use toy cars of various sizes. Teachers could ask them to predict how far certain cars will travel on each ramp, and then boys would test their predictions (DeVries & Sales 2011). Teachers also can encourage boys to create other outdoor learning games and science experiments with instructions for other children to follow. Teachers can engage boys in writing and directing a play. This can be a confidence builder and connect to their study of history and exposure to mirror books that authentically reflect and represent African American males. The club can serve as a safe place and space for boys to discuss and share their feelings about school, family, and their community and their hopes and dreams. Finally, a club can provide opportunities for boys to meet and spend time with Black males who are in middle school and high school to learn what to expect when they are in these grades, as well as activities and interests they might like to pursue in and outside of school. The club can also serve as an opportunity to educate boys about college and career opportunities. Clubs can plan a Dress for Success Day, a Father–Son–Mentor Day, or a Boys Reading Day. Implementing these suggestions can contribute to African American boys’ sense of self and agency as valued members of their classroom community (see Kafele 2009).

**Sense of Community and the World**

A South African proverb states, “I am, because we are. And because we are, I am.” In the tradition of many African societies, there is an emphasis on the collective more than on
the individual. Thus, in a democratic classroom community, “Who am I?” and “What is my purpose?” become “Who are we?” and “What is our purpose?” in order to reflect community and affirm the claim made by Kevin's mother that “we’re many members, but one body.”

When teachers actively listen to, openly acknowledge, and value children's prior knowledge, learning interests, agendas, and ideas, teachers become “fellow travelers” who co-construct meanings with children through a shared learning journey of growth and empowerment. As fellow travelers in the creation of a democratic learning community, teachers and children work together to define how they want to think, speak, act, learn, and grow together.

Democratic classrooms, as described by Kohn (2006), view all students as community members with the opportunity to (a) have a voice in what happens; (b) help shape the course of study; (c) help decide when, where, why, how, and with whom learning takes place; and (d) help decide how progress will be assessed. The learning environment is then designed so young children can explore what interests them, and direct their own activity and decision making (empowerment and agency) by selecting materials and participating in activities in a variety of social arrangements (independent, pairs, small group, and large group).

As an evidence-based teaching strategy, the classroom meeting is a specific learning activity that embodies and promotes self-identity, agency, and democratic learning communities. Teachers use class meetings to give children opportunities to identify issues, reflect on their choices, consider the outcomes that resulted, and make better decisions that value and respect everyone (DSC 1996; Vance 2015). These meetings demonstrate to children that their individual learning, opinions, feelings, concerns, beliefs, and ideas matter (are legitimated) to everyone—especially the teacher. According to the Developmental Studies Center's (DSC; 1996) research, class meetings with young children are generally used
As classroom leaders, teachers can—intentionally and unintentionally—send devastating messages that negatively impact children’s self-identity (how the children see and value themselves and each other in the learning community). It is important for teachers to continually contemplate whether they afford all children equal agency for having their voices, feelings, and perspectives respected and valued by the teacher and peers. Reflective practitioners examine (and reexamine), on an ongoing basis, personal and professional values and attitudes that underlie teaching practices. They make a full commitment to promoting and supporting democratic learning communities that grant and guarantee full membership to all children through equal participation, which serves to eliminate classroom stratification based largely on children’s race or gender.

Democratic leaders
In light of what Kevin and his classmates could discuss during a class meeting, reflective practitioners would rethink and rework all practices that have resulted in unfair treatment of children based on race. They would need to adopt a positive problem-solving stance in order to come to terms with their own racial and ethnic understanding of others. This requires an honest self-appraisal through examination of personal and professional values that underlie this kind of practice, and a resolve to change their practices in ways that will increase community participation, active decision making, and access to learning opportunities and classroom resources. It is vital for teachers to critically examine their treatment (conscious or unconscious) of children who look like them versus those who do not.

A reflective response
Kevin’s teacher could have responded to him in this way: “Oh, Kevin, when I didn’t let you [a non-White child] sharpen your pencil, even though I let other children sharpen theirs, it was wrong and unfair. My decision prevented you from having equal access to our class supplies and resources. I should have let you voice your frustration [self-agency] so that you could have problem-solved the situation as a valued community member [deliberative process]. I will work harder to recognize students’ pleas to be heard, understood, valued, and appreciated.”

Democratic learning environments are considered an essential component of early childhood practice. However, we believe that power dynamics such as race, class, gender, ability, disability, inclusion, and exclusion can directly impact some teachers’ ability to create democratic communities. This means that early childhood teachers must look deeper into the ways that power relationships play out in classrooms, for both teachers and children. Unjust treatment of students is unacceptable in a democratic learning community, just as it is unacceptable in a larger democratic society. Kevin’s class (like the United States) will not become a united community (a collective we) as long as individuals fail to grant every student (and every citizen) full and equal membership and agency. To become a truly democratic learning community (and country), we must deliberate together as fellow travelers. All voices must be heard, valued, and respected before we can begin to define “Who are we?” and “What is our purpose?” as a class, a community, a country. Only then can we fulfill the claim to achieve social justice for everyone.
Define the Problem

Kevin states (verbally or in writing): “Yesterday, I needed to sharpen my pencil. I saw Dylan, Remi, Kimberly, and Shaila [White boys and girls] get out of their seats to sharpen their pencils. When I asked to sharpen my pencil, I was told to sit down. That’s not fair. It made me angry and I didn’t like it.”

Generate Possible Solutions

Children take turns brainstorming possible solutions.

Kevin: I think everyone should be allowed to sharpen their pencil whenever the point breaks. It’s not fair when I see some people sharpening their pencils and I don’t get to sharpen mine. Everyone needs to be treated the same.

Dylan: Kevin’s right. We all need to sharpen our pencils when they break.

Remi: You can’t do your work without a sharpened pencil. If only some of us are allowed to sharpen our pencils, that’s not fair. Our class could make a pencil bank with two baskets, one with sharpened pencils and one with unsharpened pencils. Every time someone breaks a pencil, they place it in the unsharpened pencil basket and take a sharpened pencil.

Kimberly: Whenever people break a pencil point, they tell the teacher. That student can ask to sharpen anyone else’s pencil as well.

Shaila: Kevin can’t get his work done with a broken pencil. If he doesn’t get his work done, he gets in trouble. That is not fair to Kevin. We could create a class job. Every week, we have someone who will sharpen all the unsharpened pencils. Each week, a student’s name is drawn to do the job. Everyone gets a chance to do the job.

Discuss Solutions

The teacher encourages the children to tell what they think and how they feel about the possible solutions. It is important to extend children’s thinking about the nature and consequences for each proposed solution.

At this juncture, an authentically reflective practitioner confronts and reexamines her treatment of individual children and how that treatment impacts all children in the learning community, individually and collectively (see “Reflective Practitioners” on p. XXX).

Reach Consensus

Reaching consensus on decisions or solutions can be the most challenging aspect of class meetings. Fulfilling a deliberative process in which all voices are heard is as important as the final decision itself. In this instance, the children would need to decide what is most important: the act of sharpening or having access to a sharpened pencil.

Kevin states, “If I raise my hand with a broken pencil, I need to either sharpen it or get a pencil that is sharpened.” Everyone agrees.

The class could decide to combine solutions. They could create a pencil bank and appoint a pencil banker whose weekly job is to maintain the pencil supply. Anyone who needs a
sharpened pencil raises her hand with the broken pencil, and the teacher will let everyone replace their pencil with a sharpened pencil. Everyone has equal access to the sharpened pencils. When there is only one remaining pencil in the basket, the banker sharpens all the broken pencils.

Evaluate

At a later time, the class can revisit how well the pencil bank is working. The teacher and students can ask, “Does everyone have equal access? Is there anything we can do to improve the system? Has it created any problems we need to resolve?”

Conclusion

Kevin's classroom dilemma and what it means for his self-identity and agency is part of an emerging set of discourses about children that recognize them as active citizens with rights (Corsaro 2014; Mayall 2013), as competent beings (Smith, Duncan, & Marshall 2005), and as having unique voices and the ability to shape their own identities and create their social worlds (Christensen & Prout 2005; Greene & Hill 2005). It is important that such practices be understood as fundamental to the design, creation, and implementation of early childhood curricula and learning environments. Kevin is now a young man, and his mother reminds him to this day, “We are many members, but one body.”

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