

## When White Professionals Hold the Power<sup>1</sup>

Particularly in the health, education, and human service systems, most leaders at the administrative and policy levels are both white and professional. Opportunity structures create more natural pathways and expectations and fewer barriers to achieve professional credentials for those from white, middle-class families and communities (e.g. “white privilege” – structural and institutional racism). I often say, since both my parents were (white) college professors, I took the path of least resistance in going to college and graduate school.

In early childhood, while the workforce itself is diverse (largely because it is generally low-paid), the actual positions of authority and many of the governance structures are largely white, non-Hispanic. Those Hispanic and non-white individuals who do secure authority and credibility generally do so in no small measure through being the exceptions to the rule in acquiring professional credentials and standing.

Obviously, this needs to change if the early childhood system is to be one that models diversity and inclusion and counters biases and discrimination. There is nothing wrong with being a professional. Over time, there need to be increased avenues and pathways so those with professional backgrounds better represent the diversity of the cultures, races, and communities they serve – and white professionals have a responsibility to open those pathways. But we cannot wait to take action until this is realized.

In today’s reality, this also means that white professionals who currently hold positions of influence and are committed to equity and inclusion take responsibility for using their influence to promote changes, even when they operate within largely white, non-Hispanic decision-making structures.

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<sup>1</sup> I, myself, live a pretty comfortable, well-remunerated life (both economic and status-wise). I may not have been born, as Ann Richards said of George W. Bush, on “third base” (“and always thought he hit a triple”, she concluded); but I at least was born on first, with a good lead and good hitters coming up behind me. That doesn’t make me bad or wrong – and the skills I have acquired through my efforts have value. Yet, if I am to contribute to developing a more egalitarian society, I cannot just assume that my well-meaning actions (or those of other white professionals) lead in that direction. Race is sometimes considered the “third rail” of American politics, and the discussions can be uncomfortable and overwhelming. I wrote this advotorial after a discussion with concerned white professionals who grappled with how to even start the dialogue. They know the facts about disparities and inequity and even have a good working definition of structural as well as personal racism, but that didn’t lead them to what they might do to combat it. “Blunder in,” was my initial response (what I have done), but here is a little more extended advice.

I find the literature on “liberation theology” helpful in describing three things leaders need to do in pursuing this course: (1) a preferential option for the poor and excluded, (2) an imperative to ending structural violence, and (3) accompaniment.<sup>2</sup>

As applied to me as an early childhood systems builder, these say the following:

- *A preferential option for the poor and excluded.* As a participant in planning within my sphere of influence, I need to continuously raise the question of how proposed actions, policies, and practices are going to move toward ensuring that we are reaching and serving those who have traditionally faced the greatest barriers to success, and that we are reaching and serving them through a lens that values them as individuals. This applies to any endeavor undertaken around early childhood systems building. The tenets of our democratic society rest upon openness and inclusion, and to realize those tenets requires continuous and preferential attention to those who are not included.
- *An imperative to ending structural violence.* This, to me, is a more forceful statement than, “Do no harm,” in that it also includes “oppose harm, when harm is being done.” As a participant, I need to articulate how exclusion and its resultant marginalization cause stress and harm, representing violence to the individual harmed. I need to continuously work to ensure that discussions are respectful but oppose and counter statements which, knowingly or unknowingly, reinforce inequities.
- *Accompaniment.* Both as an individual and in proposing group policies or actions, I need to stress the need to be at the ground-level with those families and young children most likely to be excluded and marginalized in order to understand how systems do or do not help them. Most professional training does not include this accompaniment and, in fact, can produce a professional level of hegemony that works against inclusion and voice from those who do not come from similar professional backgrounds.<sup>3</sup> In many instances, this requires me to be an initial translator and a persistent door opener from the learning that occurs through accompaniment and the individuals I accompany.

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<sup>2</sup> See: Farmer, P. A Secular View of Liberation Theology. essay retrieved at: <http://www.pih.org/blog/dr.-paul-farmer-how-liberation-theology-can-inform-public-health>

<sup>3</sup> The language used by professionals itself can be excluding of others and create an artificial fiefdom for knowledge. The relationship between professional and community knowledge can be bridged, but it takes intentionality to do so. See: Bruner, C (ed.) *Wise Counsel: The Role of the Professional, Community Worker, and Family in the Helping Process.*