
Focus—Both / And: Recognizing Diversity and Affirming Roots

Toward a Kinder, More Compassionate Society: Black Lives Matter and Waldorf Early Childhood Education

~ Notes on a Presentation by Laleña Garcia

“Toward a Kinder, More Compassionate Society—Black Lives Matter”—was the topic of the 2021 WECAN continental conference, held online from February 5-7, 2021. The keynote presenter was Laleña Garcia, early childhood educator of 20-plus years’ experience, who teaches at the Manhattan Country School, a progressive independent school in NYC. In her classroom, she brings the principles of Black Lives Matter to young children and offers workshops and presentations to encourage other professionals to do the same. She has adapted the thirteen principles of Black Lives Matter into simplified language that she uses with her class of children.

The topic of this conference was historic, as was the decision to bring Laleña as a colleague from outside of Waldorf education. This move confirmed WECAN’s commitment to establish wider contact with mainstream educational streams and to explore how other approaches are bringing consideration of racism, diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice to the children in their care.

The following is a summary of the main points in Laleña’s presentations over the three days of the conference.

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The fundamental question before us is, “How can we move toward a kinder, more compassionate society?” What does a kinder, more compassionate society look like through the principles of Black Lives Matter? Laleña teaches little children about Black Lives Matter and enjoys sharing how she does this with other teachers.

Before proceeding into the actual content of these principles, she stated that conversation with Waldorf early childhood educators always brings up a discussion of “implicit vs. explicit.” Waldorf holds a deep and passionate respect for early childhood as a distinct phase of life, a time which deserves protection from premature awakening consciousness about matters of the world. She agrees that it is different from being a grownup. Little children are filled with delight, zest, and curiosity for life. She, herself, feels that she was allowed a magical childhood that has benefited her always. We see this joy and wonder in young children in our classrooms and want to protect this for them

for as long as possible, using imaginations as food for mind and soul. At the same time, our children live in a world that is shaped by systems and stories of race, gender, and class every day. These stories are harmful to all children. If we are committed to keeping children safe, then we have to explicitly interrupt the implicit messages these narratives impose on children.

These stories influence children from a very early age. By three months, babies notice race. By age two, children have already learned that some groups are considered to be better than others. Race and gender stereotypes are implanted very early on. We have to continually offer an alternative narrative.

Laleña referred to Dr. Ibram X. Kendi, who is teaching anti-racism. Between nine months and three years of age, children are learning all the racial attitudes. It is important that there is nothing special or superior in having white skin or inferior because of dark skin color. We adults have been taught these stories our whole lives, which we now have to unlearn.

We want children to be released from the burden of these thoughts so they do not have to unlearn them. To do this, we have much self-work to do to uncover what lives implicitly within ourselves.

She remembers when the ideas of racial values first awoke for her as a six-year-old. She had heard that some people were treated differently and badly because of the color of their skin. She thought that she would have to marry a white boy so her children would have lighter skin to avoid discrimination. She remembers that she had had no experience of racism, *per se*. But from somewhere she had internalized ideas about power and status and race.

We are here in this conference together to learn how to talk about race. As a country we are trained to not talk about race. We are not comfortable with this topic, avoid it, and don't get any better at it. We are at about age five in talking about race, but racial ideas have penetrated us much more deeply. Using Black Lives Matter as a framework is one way we can begin to talk about race. We do this by interrupting the implicit lessons society imposes by using explicit language. This is a way to move toward a kinder, more compassionate society.

When we look at the title of this conference, we already know about kindness. We teach this every day as a virtue. Kindness is a step toward compassion. Compassion is defined as having sympathetic consciousness of others' distress *together with a desire to alleviate it*. When we see someone in distress, we want to respond in a helping way. Children already have this inclination and need tools to deal with it.

To understand compassion in the larger society, we also need to talk about equity and fairness. Children can understand equity and fairness if we give them a good example. Three children of different heights are pictured standing on uneven ground while trying to look over a fence. The shortest child cannot see over no matter what. But if positions are shifted and the smallest child has something to stand on, everyone can see over the top. Their situations are not equal, but by some shifting and accommodating, everyone gets a chance. Children depend upon the grownups to make sure things are equitable. When things are fair, this is justice. Everyone gets what they need to have a fair chance to participate. To have no chance is oppression, which hurts those who have too little and those who get more than they need. Compassion is what results when kindness and equity are combined.

There is a misunderstanding that to speak about race is exposing children to racism. They know about racism already. There are systems and stories that expose children to this all the time.

If we do not talk about it, children internalize that the stories are true. Persistent stories say that white is more valuable than black, a story that is harmful to all human beings. Racism must be confronted so it can be exposed.

Racism can be defined as a system of power that values everything associated with white people over things associated with black people. We often think that racism is only individual people being unkind to others. This is one type of racism. But racism also has institutional forms.

A "system" is a set of rules and practices that people put in place to support the stories that they tell and want others to believe and to tell as well. Systems are made and put into place by people—not some universal order—to perpetuate certain ideas about themselves and others. Institutional systems protect the advantages of the institutions.

Black Lives Matter (BLM) provides another structure in order to propose a new, compassionate system. Compassion is the starting point and arises when kindness is connected to a fiercely held belief in the importance of equity. If we see someone else in distress, we are responsible to respond. We need to tell different stories and create systems that do not depend upon systems of white supremacy. The principles of BLM are visionary, and state what we do want, not just what to stop.

The 13 principles of BLM follow:

- ❖— Empathy—Different people have different feelings. We want to care about and respect these differences.
- ❖— Diversity—We acknowledge and celebrate the many ways in which we are different from one another. Differences enrich our lives. We want everyone to feel safe in being who they are.
- ❖— Loving engagements—We want our communities to be places where everyone is seen, safe, and loved.
- ❖— Restorative justice—We focus on solving problems and not punishment. We take responsibility if we have solved a problem and find a way to heal any harm. Children always deserve a second chance.

- ❖ Black Women—All people are important and everyone has the right to be safe and have their feelings. Women are important.
- ❖ Transgender affirming—Everyone gets to listen to their own heart and mind to choose a word to describe who we are in terms of gender. Everyone has a right to feel loved, safe, and affirmed.
- ❖ Queer Affirming—Everyone has right to look into their heart and decide who they will love, irrespective of gender or gender expression.
- ❖ Black Villages—There are many ways to make a community. Everyone in the community has responsibility to take care of all the others in the community as well.
- ❖ Collective Value—Everyone is important and has the right to be safe and happy no matter what differences they have.
- ❖ Unapologetically Black—Everyone should feel proud of what/who they are and should be treated respectfully.
- ❖ Black Families—A family is a group of people who love and take care of each other. There are lots of different kinds of families and they all matter.
- ❖ Globalism—There is a global black family from all countries with different kinds of experiences. Black people live all over the world in villages, cities, and beyond.
- ❖ Intergenerational—It is important to have spaces where people of different ages can come together and learn from each other.

All of these principles are based on compassion. All of these together make a template for a more compassionate society.

Laleña elaborated upon some of these points in conversation with WECAN representatives Keelah Helwig and Juliana Pinto McKeen.

Laleña came into this work from a family heritage affirming that we each have responsibility to make the world a better place. When she began working with young children, she felt responsible to counter injustice. When she started working with BLM with children, they already seemed very familiar with these ideas. BLM provides a shared language that helps the children see themselves as members of the community. Every year the children demonstrate to her that they are ready for this work. Others say that kids don't understand, but she thinks that this sells young children short.

Not everyone has awakened to doing this work. To introduce BLM principles, she has written a book which breaks the principles down very simply: *What We Believe: A Black Lives Matter Principles Book*. In the US, we live with ideas of scarcity. People are afraid that if someone else has something, it may take something away or detract from what we have ourselves. We need to build connections so we can begin to have conversations. A leading question can be, "Do you really believe that skin color makes people more or less valuable?" Most people will say no.

Both parents and teachers have responsibility to teach about race. Families of color have to do this all the time. Now we all need to do it. To facilitate this, the teacher's special responsibility is to create a classroom community who can speak and understand each other through a shared language.

Everybody has a gender, not just women; everyone has a racial identity, not just black people. We have to learn to recognize and celebrate differences of all kinds. It is our ethical responsibility as educators to teach about differences. Otherwise, we perpetuate the implicit message that one culture or race is more important than another.

There is racism, discrimination, and oppression in the world. There is also goodness, beauty, and truth. These are not mutually exclusive. We affirm truth when we teach that no race is superior to another. This is a true. There is racism and also goodness and joy in the world. When people care about and for each other, there is beauty and goodness. When we counter the untrue stories, we are affirming goodness, beauty, and truth through that very deed.

For classrooms to welcome more diversity, we need to make classroom spaces representative of every kind of child and family whether they are there or not. Acknowledge differences in the environment. Make sure the class knows that there are children like this in the world.

If a child is the only child of color and they do not see themselves reflected, this a big problem.

A new family needs to see itself reflected in the environment. When you are welcoming a new child, find out about their family. Ask the family what makes them feel welcome and provide that. Minority families have broad spectrum of experience. Do not assume that all are the same. Even if the child feels welcomed, if the parents do not, the family is not likely to stay. Be attentive to what the parents tell you. We are not

going to be perfect at this. If we cause harm, we have to work through it. Ask, make mistakes, learn from it, and move on.

It is important to work with our families, not just the children during school time. Weekly notes to families can let them know how we are thinking about and working with issues of diversity, equity, inclusion and social justice.

Getting more people of color in our schools will not solve the racism problem. If we eliminate racism in our practice, then we will attract more diversity.

BlackLivesMatter.com has resources. There is a starter kit available to everyone.



So far the content had been about the “what and why” of speaking about racism. Laleña concluded by going on to the “how” we can speak.

To work intentionally and consciously with this difficult subject, it is helpful to begin community agreements. A list presented to the conference includes:

- **Humility** in approaching this work
- Willingness to **take risks**
- Building **community**
- **Stretching** beyond one’s usual comfort zone
- Accepting **accountability** for *impact*—being accountable is being responsible to repair
- **Restoring justice**
- Approaching issues with **Both / And** perspective (rather than either/or)
- **Speaking from your own ‘I’ experience**
- Expecting and accepting a **lack of closure**.

The systems and stories mentioned previously are often so invisible that we don’t think about them. Children internalize these stories all the time. We have to talk to them with alternative stories to counter the bad ones. We have to keep conversations ongoing all the time to practice replacing old and harmful narratives with new possibilities.

Here are some guidelines for speaking with children.

Be honest—If you don’t know something, say so.

“That’s a great question, I don’t know the answer. I’ll see if I can find about it, and then I’ll get back to you. Make sure you ask me again.”

We have to treat children with respect and honesty. Make sure that we say is true and not avoidant.

In talking to kids, **be interested**—It helps to discover the context out of which the child is asking. “Can you tell me more? What makes you think that?”

Be clear and objective in how we respond. For example, if an offending or indelicate remark is made about skin color, a possible response could be, “Oh, I see that you are noticing that skin colors are different.” Acknowledge the remark. If we cannot talk about it right then, say that we will talk about it later and come back to it. Ask the child to remind us. We have to be accountable.

Giving an objective response is a way to give an explicit response without prematurely awakening the child’s awareness. When a child asks a question, it signals that the child has noticed something and is aware enough to ask about it. We can talk about what children are seeing with their eyes. Respond to children’s observations. When children are noticing things about themselves and skin color, they are probably noticing skin color in general. We need to respond objectively and acknowledge: “Yes, that person’s skin is brown.” We respond in a matter-of-fact, objective way.

Stepping into the future with our Waldorf curriculum, changes must be authentic, not token adjustments. To protect the future children of color, different ethnicities, and racial backgrounds who will enter our classes, we must begin now and practice. Make sure diverse expressions and materials are available now. The things that we do to support people outside of the white majority are good for everyone. Festival celebrations should be accessible to all peoples. Make sure that all families, all children are welcome. Use inclusive pictures in our classroom *before* we have a non-traditional child and family. Intention is everything. We do things because they are right for everyone. We need to be able to explain why we do what we do.

We do not jump in with both feet before doing our own preparation and inner work. We need to get ideas and motivation straight and be able to explain why we do what we do. We need to keep striving and keep questioning. ♦