ELEVATING EQUITY

Advice for Navigating
CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS
in Early Childhood Programs

Angela Searcy, EdD

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my family. The reason I am an author today is because my mother, Mathrell Nelson, called my teachers to make sure I did my homework and because my father, Freeman Nelson, Jr., laughed out loud when I told him my stories as a preschooler.

This book is also dedicated to all the children and educators of the world and to anyone who elevates equity.

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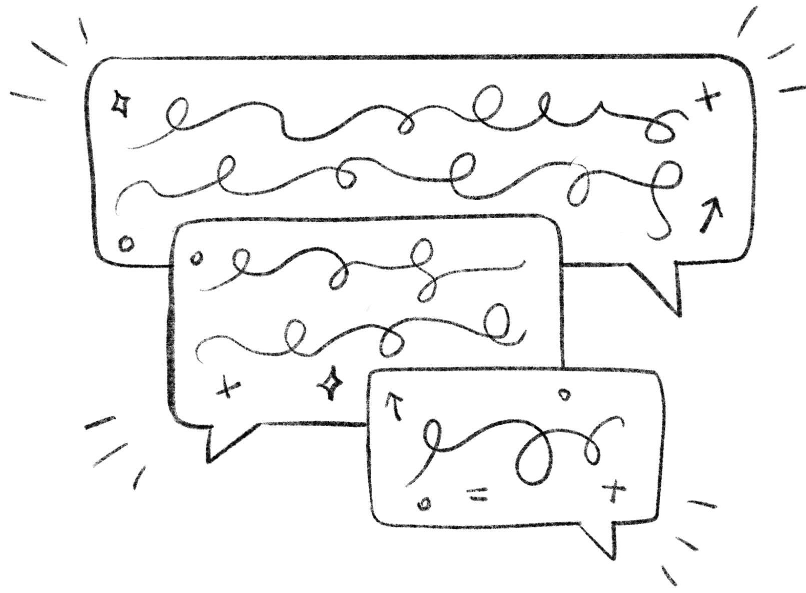
I wrote this book for my ancestors, who weren't allowed to.



Introduction

I started my career as a preschool teacher in 1990 in the yellow room. Who better than a former preschool teacher who grew up constantly navigating statements like "You're not my friend" and "You can't come to my party" to write about equity?

I continued my exploration of equity during my doctoral studies, and my dissertation on behavior provided alternatives to exclusionary discipline to ensure equity and inclusion for young children. That research grew into my first book, *Push Past It! A Positive Approach to Challenging Classroom Behaviors*, which provides a laundry list of steps for dealing with challenging behaviors in young children. The first steps include sorting out personal feelings and identifying any implicit bias. In that book, I introduce research showing that high levels of emotional support result in positive changes in child behaviors. After my doctorate, my action-based research project for my infant and early childhood mental-health certificate explored the efficacy of tools created in *Push Past It!* that focus in mindfulness and empathic responses when intense challenging classroom behaviors occur. My research fits within a body of scientific literature demonstrating the power of positivity.

Since then, I have developed "What Is Said in the Teachers' Lounge," a tool to help educators identify bias. In this book, I use the same positive approach as I sharpen my focus and broaden my audience on typically divisive social topics. Often topics of race, language, gender, class, immigration status, sexual orientation, religion, or ability are framed as "difficult" or "uncomfortable." While this perspective acknowledges the feelings of discomfort these conversations might evoke in adults, it might inadvertently miss the opportunity to acknowledge the discomfort, frustration, confusion, or awkwardness that silence on these topics might evoke in children or adults.

I am not calling anyone out. I am calling you in, with love.

Okay, before we dive in, I want you to keep in mind that this book is a gathering place for all of us to learn together. Yes, when I appear on a morning news show, the commentator will call me an "expert" on child development or equity. And yes, I have been working in the field of education since I was a nap-time teacher. I moved on from teaching to experiences as a child developmental specialist, pediatric neurodevelopmental therapist, educational consultant, and researcher. But I am not going to sit here and pretend I am some sort of vessel of wisdom who knows everything there is to know about equity and who is now going to teach it to you. I may sound smart, but to be honest, I can't even remember all my passwords.

CULTURAL HUMILITY IS . . .

- **active, ongoing engagement in a lifelong process.** For example, engagement happens every month at your equity affinity group at work.
- **continuous self-reflection and critique.** For example, using journaling to reflect on your experiences around equity or having an equity committee to reflect on the policies at your business.
- **acknowledgment of power imbalances.** For example, "I am this person's boss, and even if I consider them my workplace BFF, I have to admit there is a power imbalance when I lead a staff meeting."
- **a modest view of oneself and respect for others.** For example, saying, "I could be wrong."

What This Book Is About

This book is grounded in the principles of cultural humility. Originally developed by medical doctors Melanie Tervalon and Jann Murray-García (1998), *cultural humility* is defined as follows:

> [It] is best defined not by a discrete endpoint but as a commitment and active engagement in a lifelong process that individuals enter into on an ongoing basis. It is a process that requires humility as individuals continually engage in self-reflection and self-critique as lifelong learners and reflective practitioners. It is a process that requires humility in how [we] bring into check… power imbalances… And it is a process that requires humility to develop and maintain mutually respectful and dynamic partnerships… (Tervalon and Murray-Garcia, 1998; Chávez, 2012).

When it comes to cultural competency, social worker and educator Ruth Dean (2001) argues we are constantly learning about culture because it is continually changing. Dean asserts that our differences, beliefs, and biases are inevitably active. In other words, equity is an ongoing conversation that is always evolving. Just like my hairstyles and fashion choices, the limit on those changes does not exist. A study by researcher Kiara Sanchez and colleagues (2021) found that having these discussions may lay the foundation for making relationships between friends and colleagues stronger. Another study by Jocelyn Glazier and colleagues (2000) even showed that once participants started talking about a topic such as culture, they wanted to keep talking about it and continued to have literacy circles on the topic after a course on the subject had ended.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, call-out culture can potentially create resentment and embarrassment instead of engagement in conversations that could lead to learning. The Urban Dictionary defines *call-out culture* as "a group of people, especially on social media, who ridicule others for real or perceived words or actions that go against their beliefs." Drawing attention to a problem is one facet of activism. And not having difficult conversations does not mean there is no discomfort; it only means no one is talking about it. It is also important to acknowledge that the reason we often avoid these conversations is because we care so much about others and don't want to make a misstep. However, author Cheryl Richardson once said, "If you avoid conflict to keep the peace, you start a war inside yourself." No matter where you are in the discussion, when we elevate equity, the discussion is always a safe space in which we practice humility

and don't silence anyone or call anyone out. Instead, as professor and activist Loretta J. Ross (2021) suggests, we call people in, with love, to learning.

This book is based on the premise that no matter how many times someone encounters the topic of equity, they have the opportunity to expand their competency. Throughout the book, I offer exercises to encourage reflection and discussion. My reflective questions are as much for my learning as yours. I supply tools to help you elevate equity in your home, at school, with the children and families you serve, and with your colleagues.

How to Use This Book

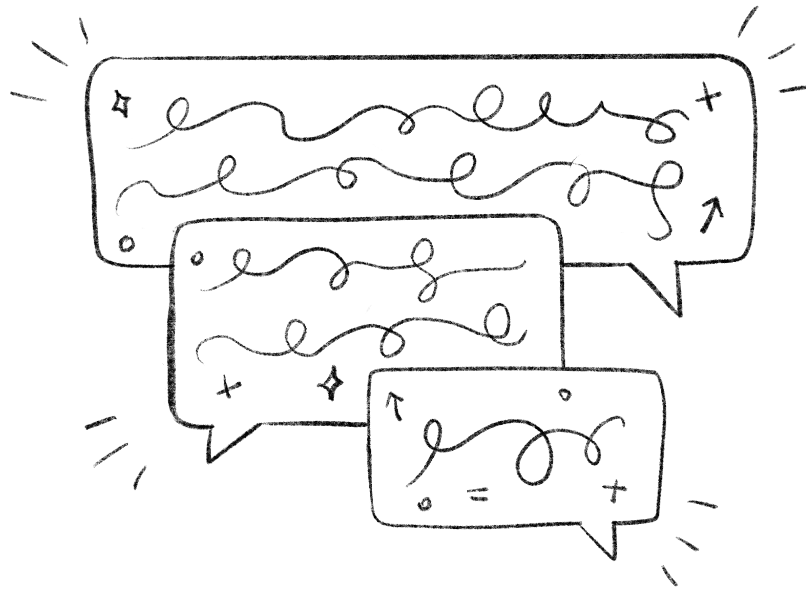
This book provides evidenced-based strategies for elevating equity and navigating challenging conversations that occur in early childhood programing. Chapter 1 helps us to understand more about ourselves and makes a case for why it is important to elevate equity. Chapters 2 and 3 discuss what very young children know about equity and what this means for early childhood educators. Chapter 4 addresses issues of equity and the families of young children. Chapter 5 looks at historical trauma and how to respond as educators to children and families. Chapters 6 addresses equity and the professional environment, and the last chapter helps us to understand how to deal with conflict at work when it arises.

When researching for this book, I was surprised to discover that conflict is a part of the human condition, and even in the best of circumstances, it is inevitable. So, instead of "burning that bridge when we come to it"—a saying attributed to German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and set to music by American artist Jimmy Buffet (1984)—this book gives professionals the skills that help them elevate equity and turn conflict in to collaboration. Each chapter provides reflective questions and activities for a book study, training, or consultation. My goal is to help improve relationships among the adults who work on behalf of young children. To elevate equity for children, we must first elevate ourselves. Equity is not something we just talk about but is something that must be experienced and executed intentionally every day. As a result, the following chapters also provide concrete tools that help bring equity into action and flip the script on conflict.

This book also builds on information from my previous book *Push Past It! A Positive Approach to Challenging Classroom Behaviors* (2019). You can find it by using this QR code:

My author page on the Gryphon House website includes worksheets and other useful information from that book that will help you elevate equity. You can find them using this QR code:

Together, we will learn, reflect, and grow. This is a lifelong process. American psychologist Jerome Bruner suggested that learning is one continuous, ongoing spiral. If you prefer to learn life lessons from rock and roll, a saying attributed to singer Maynard James Keenan stated, “A circle is the reflection of eternity. It has no beginning and it has no end—and if you put several circles over each other, then you get a spiral.” My hope is to keep that spiral going.



CHAPTER 1

Labeling, Bias, and Empathy

"Colorblindness"

I remember my first-grade teacher saying, "I don't see color." I thought, "Well, if we aren't supposed to see it, and I am the only girl in this classroom that has it, having color must not be a good thing." As a result, at six years old, I began to feel shame about my color. I had the thing we were not supposed see or talk about. And since my teacher said good character was measured by not seeing color, I began to actively suppress anything associated with it. The good character of other children was also measured by how much they were able to actively ignore it. I got the message that I could talk about race only with my family or other people of color. But I was the only Black girl in my class until fourth grade, so this took a lot of effort on my part. At times, I felt lonely and isolated. It was alluded to that I should be grateful the school was so kind to ignore my imperfection. My family told me that, in the past, a Black girl going to a white school had led to

violence. I felt I would be ungrateful to complain because people had died for me to have this opportunity. But I still felt sad at times because I couldn't share large parts of who I was as a person.

Right or wrong, I also never told anyone when other children said racist things to me, because all the adults in my school had made it clear race should be ignored. I still remember feeling very alone because it also didn't seem socially acceptable to share any burdens or fears I felt. I was raised in a largely white, upper-middle-class community, and looking back, I guess I thought it was a measure of kindness for me to not make anyone else feel uncomfortable. I took on the task of adjusting myself to make adults and children feel comfortable. I remember feeling great fear that my family would not be welcome in places due to our race and the fact that my father was in a wheelchair. I felt a burden that I could never share with the majority of my friends from school.

Years later, I was inspired by the death of George Floyd to start having conversations about race and equity with people outside of my community of people of color—for the first time in my life. It seemed that that moment, occurring during a global pandemic, grabbed everyone's attention and resulted in people seeking conversations about race and equity. My family and I have lived in a majority-white neighborhood for the last fifteen years, and the summer of 2020 was the first time my very close friend and neighbor Jodie asked me what it was like living someplace that has so few Black people. I didn't end up sharing any of our challenges in our community, but her comment made me feel seen and cared for, and it deepened our friendship.

One of my best friends from high school, Kathy, and I also had our first conversation about race that same summer. We have been friends since we were fourteen. When I told her how I felt about the term *colorblind*, she said something that surprised me: "Ang, if I had known you felt this way, I would have supported you." She went on to share a similar situation about a friend who was gay. She said she wished I would have shared this part of my life with her. There was a whole context surrounding why I hadn't shared any of this with Kathy and which I now realize had nothing to do with her. Because adults and children had always seemed uncomfortable when I mentioned race, I learned by what *wasn't* said not to bring up the subject. Now, I understand how not talking

about race diminished our relationship. I wish I had taken a chance on sharing, and Kathy wonders if she could have done more to make me feel safe enough to do so. Don't worry—we are still life-long friends. (We even rehabbed a house together!) But I learned a valuable lesson: If your friend never talks about all parts of their identity, do they feel safe sharing everything with you?

If you live by the seemingly harmless mantra, "I don't see color," consider what Dr. Bernice King, daughter of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., shared about the term *colorblind* in an interview with the host of *The Tonight Show*, Jimmy Fallon: "People are always saying Dr. King was for a colorblind America, and nothing could be further from the truth… He was basically explaining that, no, there's a beauty in who I am as a Black person, but I should not be judged by those standards. It's not that you don't see my race. You see my race. You acknowledge my race. And you accept everything I bring along with that" (King, 2020).

In her TEDx Talk "Color Blind or Color Brave?" finance executive Mellody Hobson (2014) acknowledges that even though talking about race can be "the conversational equivalent of touching the third rail," she thinks it is "time for us to be comfortable with the uncomfortable conversation about race." She elaborates, "We cannot afford to be color blind. We have to be color brave. We have to be willing—as teachers and parents and entrepreneurs and scientists—we have to be willing to have proactive conversations about race with honesty and understanding and courage, not because it's the right thing to do, but because it's the smart thing to do, because… all… will be better with greater diversity."

Turns out talking about all aspects of children's identities might actually be the secret to ending inequity. Researchers Sarah Gaither, Samantha Fan, and Katherine Kinzler (2020), set out to explore just that idea. They looked at a diverse set of school-age children. Those who were reminded of their multiple social identities (sons, daughters, readers, friends, and so on) were more likely to show advanced problem-solving. For children, something as simple as thinking about their identities from multiple perspectives could potentially decrease rigid thinking and increase the open-mindedness needed for equity. The book *The Development of the Social Self*, edited by Bennett and Sani (2004), discusses that having a positive view of one's identity is important for children's healthy development. Researchers Ana Marcelo and Tuppett Yates (2019) found having a positive identity can be a protective factor that lowers the impact of adverse experiences for children who are part of groups marginalized by the dominant society. Another study showed self-identification and knowledge of one's ethnicity is related to positive

functioning at home and at school (Serrano-Villar and Calzada, 2016). If you still aren't convinced that talking about children's social identities is important, another study by Andrei Cimpian and colleagues (2012) found that when children mistakenly believe their performance is due to an uncontrollable part of their identity and internalize stereotypes such as "Boys are good at this game," it can negatively affect their performance.

The colorblind approach could shut down conversations that children of color might have around a salient part of their identity and could distort the reality for white children who want to know about their friends and support them. Moreover, clinical and community psychologist Riana Anderson states that adults talking about their own experiences and improving racial-socialization competency could help prevent negative psychological outcomes in children (Anderson, Saleem, and Huguley, 2019). "Some educators [and families] believe that it is noble to avoid looking directly at race, arguing that if we do not introduce youth to the concept, they will maintain a naturally unbiased stance toward others. However… evidence suggests that the real damage occurs when we choose not to talk to our students explicitly about race and racism (Hughes et al., 2006)."

Silence Is Not Always Peace

Even though many of us have been raised to believe "… ignoring race is… a graceful, even generous… gesture" (Morrison, 1992), American poet and National Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman reminds us in her poem "The Hill We Climb" that silence does not mean peace, and injustice is occurring whether we discuss it or not. We cannot fight injustice with more injustice through silence or inaction. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., told us in his book *Strength to Love* (1963), "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." This book offers some tools to apply those principles. Keep in mind that injustice is interconnected, and if we are all acting in a spirit that elevates equity, we are elevating not only ourselves but society. We all have a shared experience of oppression, and if your friend is not sharing their experiences around this topic, then I hate to break it to you, but you don't know your friend. We are all sending messages each day about equity—whether we are conscious of it or not.

My Story

As I tell my story, I want you to write down all the feelings you are experiencing as you read. This isn't a debate, so you don't need to choose a side or pour any energy into deciding who is right or wrong. Instead, focus on what you are feeling and the intensity of those feelings. Keep in mind all feelings are welcome—including ones that contradict mine. This isn't an "I believe ______ and therefore you should" kind of book. Each of my stories is meant to lovingly call everyone into learning and help you to reflect on your own story.

Let's go back in time to the fall of 1981, when Rick Springfield was topping the charts with a song about Jessie's girl, and there was a new show on TV called *Dynasty*. We had just moved into our new house, and I was excited to have one of my friends from school over. I don't remember who that friend was, but I do remember more than forty years later that her parents never found our house. Keep in mind that GPS and cell phones didn't exist back in 1981, and I just remember sitting there waiting for what seemed like hours thinking about my friend's visit with anxiety. Unfortunately, she didn't make a visit to my house that evening. What I didn't know was this would be the first of many "lost" friends, not because our house was hard to find but because the adults driving already had an image of what the house of the only Black family on the block should look like. If they finally did find our home, they would always say, "Oh, we passed the house so many times." It was not lost on my nine-year-old intellect that Black people or anyone working at our house always found the house with no issue.

To shed further light on the situation, I was the only Black girl in my class until the fourth grade. (My classmates were mostly white and Asian.) I will never forget one of my friends telling me they thought I lived in the brown house with shutters or the green house without any landscaping, and how it never looked like we were home and had no furniture. I told my friend that was because that brown house with shutters was an empty house that was for sale and the green house was a new house still under

construction. How are you going to make my house a vacant house? How could I live in a home not fully constructed? How can you see an address and still not believe your own eyes when you see a beautiful house with well-manicured grass greener than Wrigley Field? (My parents loved our automatic sprinkler system).

My parents just laughed at how ridiculous that was, and I took their cue and joined them. Then my father would begin to tell a barrage of jokes about people and their assumptions. This put into place my coping mechanism going forward, and I began to use humor to think about how my race affected my friends' and their families' behavior: "Now you know my house isn't going the look like a project from the show *Good Times*, right? Your mother isn't the only one who reads *Better Homes and Gardens*!" The funny thing is, I never said these jokes out loud. The behavior of adults showed me that I could only share these humorous moments with other people of my race. Way before the age of nine, I had already internalized that it was impolite to talk about race among mixed groups. As a result, I learned to endure any upsetting feelings about race alone in silence until I felt better.

Psychiatrist Bruce Perry and colleagues (1995) describe how the temporary emotional states children experience can become enduring traits. Although Perry and his team look through the lens of trauma, this approach also gives great insight into how these states of mind become states of being and how injustice can endure generation after generation. (My story highlights an implicit-bias action, but my silence didn't draw attention to that action. As a result, my silence helped maintain it.)

Now look at the words you wrote about my story. Are your words positive, negative, or a mix? Do you feel hot? frustrated? indifferent? How strong are your feelings? After reading my story, some of you might think, "Here we go again!" or "Aren't there two sides to every story?" You might think, "There could've been many reasons they couldn't find the house! Why is everyone so obsessed with race?" or even "What about when people of color…" Still, some might be having a "me too" reaction or even feelings of anger, sympathy, or sadness.

Whatever words you wrote down or feelings you experienced, that is what your brain and body *should* be doing. The intention of my story is not to cancel or call anyone out. I am not angry at anyone, and I'm still connected to all my childhood friends—even the ones who couldn't find my house—on social media. If you have had a similar experience to mine, you might be thinking about that. If your experience was different, you might be thinking about that.

The purpose of this story and this book is to get you thinking about equity and actions that might uplift equity. All experiences and ideas are welcome here. Different perspectives and stories are not in conflict with one another. We are often so preoccupied with picking a side that we forget equity is about listening to someone else and actively eliciting a variety of perspectives (Zhou, Majka, and Epley, 2017). Everyone on the same page makes for a short book of knowledge. Unless it is violent or hurtful, every idea has a space in our ongoing elevation of equity.

Empowering with Equity

Don't get me wrong. I do understand how these types of discussions can be awkward, painful, and even gut-wrenching, but characterizing our conversations only by their potential problems is a narrow discourse that can lead to what is termed in education a *deficit lens*. A deficit lens involves viewing a person, group, or topic primarily in terms of their perceived deficits, dysfunctions, problems, needs, or limitations. If you focus only on what's wrong with something, you aren't going beyond the surface far enough to understand how to make things right. It is important to use a strength-based lens when describing individuals or ideas to discover the potential problems along with the potential possibilities. I want to get you excited about equity!

A deficit lens can conjure up feelings of sympathy, which involves viewing an idea through your own lens. Framing the topic this way also runs the risk of alienating those who might already feel marginalized by associating their identity with something negative and might provide yet another roadblock toward engaging in conversation. Empathy and a strengths-based lens, on the other hand, involve understanding the meaning behind an idea from the perspective of others.

Simply put, as a Black woman, it sometimes becomes tiresome that parts of my identity are being associated only with negativity, pain, or trauma. Historical injustices are one part of my experience. While these are important to understand, I also crave discussions

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LOOKING. LISTENING. LEARNING. LEADING.

Elevating equity requires adults to be mindful of how to include children, families, and colleagues in all parts of early childhood programming. Elevating equity is all about creating systems that celebrate everyone!

Elevating Equity: Advice for Navigating Challenging Conversations in Early Childhood Programs meets readers where they are by taking a positive approach to embracing differences.

- Learn how a person's identity influences growth and development.
- Discover strength-based, evidence-grounded techniques that lead to growth, ongoing learning, and improvement in your early childhood program.
- Find out how to have healthy, respectful, and productive conversations on challenging topics.
- Explore unique ideas for developing and deepening your understanding of equity.

With practical examples, research, tips, advice, self-reflections, and real stories—shared with Angela Searcy's warm humor—you'll discover how to find common ground and truly elevate equity.

Angela Searcy, EdD has more than 25 years of experience in education, providing services to children and families as a teacher, child-development specialist, and independent consultant. A former neurodevelopmental specialist, she is the founder of Simple Solutions Educational Services, a professional development company. Dr. Searcy is a trainer and speaker on a range of topics, including the CLASS (Infant, Toddler, and Pre-K), challenging behaviors, and response to intervention (RTI). She is a member of the adjunct faculty at the Erikson Institute.

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