



early risers

Waking up to racial equity
in early childhood.

Discussion Guide

Season 5, Episode 3: *Making the Classroom Reflect the Community* - released February 7, 2024

Learning Goal: How to ensure every child feels visible, valuable, and validated in your classroom

Suggested Conversation Length: 60 minutes



Early Risers is a podcast focused on how to talk with young children about race. Hosted by Dianne Haulcy, the podcast invites early childhood experts into conversations about how parents, caregivers and early childhood educators can tackle this big topic with the little ones in their lives.

Background

[Theressa Lenear](#) was practicing anti-bias education long before it was widely known as an approach to early learning. As a young Black teacher in Alaska, she tapped into her intuition to guide her practices with young children. She created a classroom-wide deep respect for her students' cultures. She shares her perspectives on how to support BIPOC children in underserved communities.

Guest Bio

Theressa Lenear is an early childhood education instructor at Goddard College. She has worked with young children and their teachers for nearly 40 years. She is profiled in the book "Stories of Resistance: Learning from Black Women in Early Care and Education."

General Facilitator Tips

- Read through all the questions first.
- Reiterate that the purpose of the discussion is to learn from each other.
- Create an agreement with everyone in the discussion group that helps create a safe, nonjudgmental atmosphere—talking about race can be difficult.
- Be sensitive as to how people identify.
- Be prepared for a response to any remarks that might be offensive. The person saying it may not be aware that it is offensive, so be gentle in pointing it out.

Group Agreements

Ground rules and group agreements are a way to respect safety. Ask members to brainstorm and collectively determine group agreements. Here are some agreements tools to use as a reference:

- [Group agreement information from Seeds for Change](#)
- [Community Agreements tool from Just Lead Washington](#)
- [Sample group agreement from GSAFE](#)

Questions for Discussion

- Theresa started her work in early childhood as Head Start was forming in the 1970s. How do you think the events of that time affected the egalitarian nature of Head Start? What is happening now in our current context that we can use to make positive change in early childhood?
- Theresa talks about how she ensured her classroom represented the culture of each child in her classroom and represented their community. How does your classroom represent the culture of each child in your classroom? If it does not, what are some things you can do to ensure everyone's culture is represented?
- Before anti-bias approaches were even a thing, Theresa started to record herself in the classroom to review the language she was using in the classroom. Have you as an educator ever tried that? If you were to record yourself in your classroom, what do you think you would hear?
- Theresa talks about having read the works of several authors of color as she was building her career, including Paula Freier's [Pedagogy of the Oppressed](#), where he argues that educational pedagogy should treat the learner as a co-creator of knowledge. How do you think this framework could help create a safe space for young children to talk about race?
- Theresa recounts an incident that happened at a school where she worked, where the white parents wanted the Black parents to tell them how to solve the situation. Why do you think Theresa and the other Black parents said no to that?
- Try the [Nine Dots Puzzle](#) and see if you can solve it. Remember that thinking outside the box is a plus here! How did this exercise help you to let go of preconceived notions and be creative? ([Click here to find solutions](#) to the Nine Dots Puzzle!)
- As an early childhood educator, have you reached out to the people who live and work in the students' neighborhood? If not, how can you go about doing this? Why is it important?
- How can you do more to welcome the community into your classroom? What resources might you use to determine what is important in the community where your classroom or program resides?

Closing the Discussion

As you close your discussion, encourage people to access the additional resources and to think of a change they can make right now to make sure everyone feels welcome in their classroom. Acknowledge key points and lessons learned during the discussion. Finally, share additional resources participants can use to continue learning.

Additional Resources

- Theresa Lenear's profile in the book "[Stories of Resistance: Learning from Black Women in Early Care and Education](#)"
- Theresa Lenear's [personal statement](#) about her insights from her career in early childhood education.
- Theresa Lenear's [article in Exchange magazine](#) about the conflict between two young students, which she discusses in the episode. (Paywall)

Early Risers is a podcast from Little Moments Count, produced by Minnesota Public Radio (MPR). This discussion guide was created by Little Moments Count and MPR, 2024.

