

A Powerful Invitation to Reimagine Our Work

July 30, 2020

Courage is the most important of all the virtues, because without courage you can't practice any other virtue consistently.

-Maya Angelou

Please read these powerful words by Kristie Norwood, a member of the Reimagining Our Work Conveners Group. Then, use the link following to join the initiative and/or share with colleagues.

Kristie Norwood
My Truth 7/24/2020

I just left one of the best and most important conversations in my lifetime. I have had all types of conversations. I have spoken with Dick Gregory and Cornel West. I have talked to my grandmother and mother about sharecropping in the South. I have had confrontational conversations. I have yelled, scream, laughed and cried. But today, I have been transformed.

Today, we had our weekly call for the Reimagining Our Work (ROW) Initiative Conveners. We had checked in with each other, laughed heartily and focused ourselves through a story about a little boy that made his friends laugh over and over through his intentional action of dropping a toy log from a toy moose's head. As we moved into our agenda, we started with the recent updates on the ROW Initiative sign up. One of our conveners and usual meeting facilitator Pam said, "We have 111 cohort members. That's exciting." Margie replied, "I think we need to say out loud that all of them are white. Maybe we don't need to proceed until we can really draw in people of color." I sat with that for a minute. My reaction was not a quick one. It built like the flames of an open fire. 111 people volunteered to be a part of the new opportunity to reimagine the field of early childhood education and craft a new vision for where we will be in the next 20 years. An opportunity to really use our voices to say, "We do not want to return to the normal that we have lived for the last 20 years. We want to move forward into something new!" and out of 111 people,

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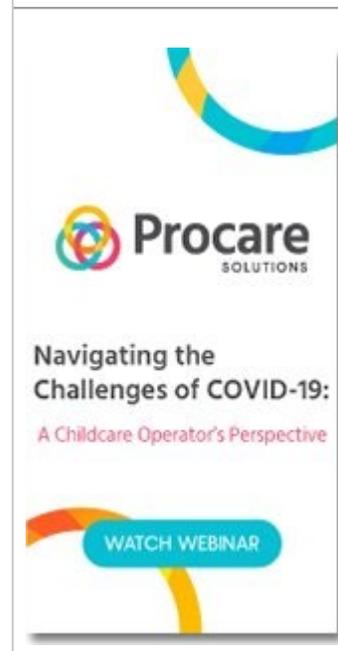
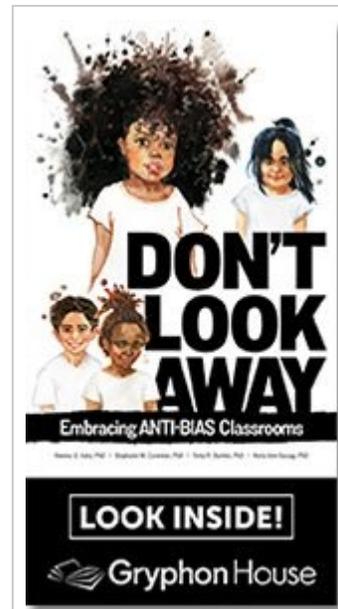
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there was not one person of color, not one Black person? How can this be, when the field of early childhood is built on the labor of women of color? What does that mean?

After reviewing the list again, we found that there were a hand-full of people of color and an even smaller section of those that identified as Black that had signed up. I am grateful for their act of courage. However, my initial question remained.

What does it mean? Why was there not an overwhelming response? On our call, we started to wrestle with this thought and the flood gates opened. I started to talk but the words came from my heart and not my head. I listened to Nadiyah Taylor bring up the notion of “centering Blackness” many weeks prior. Since she said that, it has stayed with me. It is like a fragrance that is strong at first, then becomes more subtle, but never fully leaves. The idea has settled in my heart and I realize that as a Black woman, I do not even know what it means to “center Blackness.” My life has never been lived with my Blackness in the center of anything. At home, we are all Black. We live, love and function without giving thought to Blackness. Everywhere else, the intention is on assimilation. How can I fit? How can I be part of the team? How can I contribute? But centering Blackness is the intentional thought of making Blackness the point. It is the intention that directs action that raises Blackness in every conversation and every platform, focusing on our culture, our desires, our progress, our history, and our future. I realized that I have never centered Blackness in my life. Yet, I find that in my heart, it is what I have longed for.

Initially, hearing that no Black people signed up for this initiative, bubbled up a well of suppressed anguish that I did not even know existed. Ever since 1619, when we were stolen from our land and forcibly brought to this country and violently subjugated into slavery, we have not had spaces to determine our own destiny. As a people, we have not been in position to discuss, plan and execute our futures. For sure, there were some glimpses of light in our history. There was Reconstruction Era, Black Wall Street, Rosewood and The Black Panther Party; where Black people had and executed some power over our destinies. These instances were short lived and led to years of harsher punishments. Knowing our history of striving for self-determination in this country, I wonder if many Black people felt that the invitation to join was



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a “set up”. I know that may be hard to think about. But in this country’s history, every time the Black community begins to engage in self-determination we are met with violence. What happens after years of organizing, planning, and strategizing, implementing those strategies and seeing success? Violence! We must ask ourselves, what happens to the soul of a people that lives with their dreams deferred? In *Harlem*, Langston Hughes wrote: “What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore—And then run? Does it stink like rotten meat? Or crust and sugar over—like a syrupy sweet? Maybe it just sags like a heavy load. Or does it explode?”

As I reflect, if I am honest, I can hear the questions from colleagues of color as they rise. The years of underlying distrust, that we can ever sit at a table and be seen, heard, and valued in our humanity. That our ideas about our profession, our children and our families will matter and make a difference. The questions sound like:

Will they ask me to be involved, get my hopes up and pull the rug from under me? Will I be worse off from participating? Is sharing my voice and including my ideas even possible?

I also know that living in this country as a Black woman is exhausting! I only have so much energy for the day. Many times, I work in a deficit. But I keep pressing and I have found spaces that replenish me so that I can have energy stored. I need that energy store to feed me when I am in spaces that take everything I have and do not give anything in return. This space that I exist in where I contribute from my Blackness, but my Blackness is not nourished. This concept of double consciousness or “twoness” as W.E.B. DuBois stated, is an ever-present element to the Black person’s life in this country. In *The Souls of Black Folks*, W.E. B. DuBois wrote: “One ever feels his two-ness, --an American, a Negro...two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” Then I thought about all the Black people that may have read the invitation to the ROW Initiative and did not have the energy to respond. The ones that are thinking, that sounds great, but I could not. I do not have the energy to give to one more thing; especially, to talk. Who has time for that? I understand the fatigue. I understand the hollow in your soul when hope has been deferred on so many fronts. But I also understand the words of Frederick Douglass, “Power

concedes nothing without demand.” This invitation, the responses, the lack of responses and the emotions are all about power.

Why power? It is about power because power is all about access. Power creates and controls access. The ROW Initiative is focusing on redefining power roles and structures. Equity and social justice are part of our guiding principles. When we say we want all voices at the table, we mean it. Our ROW Conveners are made up of 3 Black Women, 1 Latina and 4 White women. Our voices are equally heard and valued, and we have made a commitment to learn from and with each other. Look, I get it. It looks like a group of white women that mixed in some diversity for credibility. I promise you; it is not! I am nobody’s token and I would not be in this space if I did not believe it was transformative. I know that building this initiative is about building trust. It is about being able to find yourself in a community where you can bring your authentic self. It is about being someplace where you are investing your time, not wasting it. I promise you; this is the place.

Early in my career, it was a white woman that gave me access in the field. She opened the doors for me and made space for me at different tables. She brought me along and put me on different platforms. It was a Black teacher that gave me skill, training, and courage to walk through those doors, sit at those tables and stand on those platforms. If I am honest, my entire career has been this way. There was always someone white that gave me access and a person of color that encouraged me and nurtured me and built my skill. I was asked by Chris, another one of our Conveners, “how do we lay the planks on this bridge of trust?” I say we need both the white ally and the person of color. We need the access and the courage to go through the door. Simply put, in this journey of reimagining we need each other. But we need to deconstruct and reconstruct what we look like when we are together. What would the table look like if power were not the construct?

I wrote a chapter in *Reflecting Children’s Lives* that came from a little self-published book I wrote about a little boy named Endrick. Endrick wanted to build a castle. He was fascinated with castles. I was doing my student teaching and I observed Endrick building castles in the block area every day for two weeks. I focused my intention on supporting Endrick. For one

year we went through the process of him making his dreams a reality. He researched castles, drew them, and created Styrofoam models. Finally, he built a castle that was placed on the playground. That castle was there many, many years after Endrick left the center. I got to be a part of supporting this human being in having a vision, making plans, and then executing those plans. He literally made his dreams come true. And his dream benefitted so many others that got to play in that castle for years. So now, I ask the question; What if you are Endrick? Or, what if you are me? What if you can find someone that will listen to your dreams and support you in making them real? Or what if you are a person that can give their support to another? What if you can really make your dreams come true? Carlina Rinaldi said, "What could they do if...you are the if." You are the if! What can early childhood education be if? What can classrooms be if? What can teacher preparation be if? What can compensation in the field be if? What can children's experiences be if? What if you and your action are the if?

It is my hope that we all will join in this important reimagining work. We need each other. We need people of all colors, genders, and backgrounds in this work. As we talked on our ROW conveners' call, we came to a defining statement. We declared: Reimagining requires a reckoning with ourselves and our communities that ultimately leads to repair. However, to commit to and take this journey, we must engage in resistance. The courage to engage in honest and hopeful discourse is resistance. The courage to upset equations of power and reimagine our field is resistance. And that resistance leads to something new that will transform our lives and generations to come. This is an open invitation. Come...and let's transform this field and our lives!

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