

Racial Equity and Anti-Racist Teaching in Early Childhood Education

We believe racial equity in early childhood education encompasses the following:

1. eliminating racial inequities related to *access* to high-quality early childhood programs;
2. eliminating racial inequities *within* those programs, including the nationwide push out of students of color to the Cradle to Prison Pipeline (Edelman, 2009);
3. ensuring all children are engaged with pedagogies that affirm and promote their sense of self-worth from a racial and ethnic standpoint;
4. challenging the Eurocentric nature of the curriculum by recognizing the history of colonizations that have silenced the heritage of particular groups of people (King & Swartz, 2015);
5. recognizing that young children are able to *both* recognize and speak out against racial discrimination absorbed in their social and cultural environments, as well as dismantle the construction of racism if they are explicitly taught how to do so by educators who intentionally take on issues of race and racism.

Children have differing levels of access to *high-quality* early childhood programming. By and large, poor children, children who speak languages other than English, children of color, and children with special needs do not have access to the same high-quality early childhood programs enjoyed by their White, middle-class counterparts. For example, Black children are much more likely than White children to be enrolled in low-quality day care (Cook, 2015). The Children's Defense Fund's 2014 report, *The State of America's Children*, documents that only 41 percent of eligible three and four year olds were served through Head Start (which predominantly serves low-income children of color) due to budget cuts.

We support policies that address these inequities; yet simply having access to high-quality early childhood programs does not ensure racial equity. Unfair practices have been widely documented *within* early childhood programs. For example, it is widely known that children of color are punished more severely and more often than their White counterparts. Research shows that Black preschoolers are 3.6 times as likely to receive one or more suspensions relative

to White preschoolers, and while they make up only 19% of preschool enrollment, they comprise 47% of preschoolers suspended one or more times (Gilliam, Maupin, Reyes, Accavitti, & Shic, 2016). While we often think of boys when we consider this data, it is true for girls, too, meaning that African American girls are pushed out of preschools nationwide. We support recommendations made by organizations such as Black Girls Matter that call for more equitable approaches to supporting the needs of young Black girls.

A long-held view by many in the general public is that young children are not capable of thinking racially or behaving in discriminatory ways to people outside of their own racial group. Common assumptions are that young children do not see race yet or that they are color-blind and have not absorbed society's racial cues unless they have been explicitly taught to do so by their families. Yet there is a wide-reaching history of research studies that have demonstrated the contrary (Aboud, 2003; Averhart & Bigler, 1997; Banaji & Gelman, 2013; Feagin & Van Ausdale, 2001). That is, children at very young ages and independent from the racial attitudes of their parents categorize themselves and others into racial hierarchies and adopt attitudes of racial prejudice and/or discriminatory behavior to people outside of their own racial groups.

From a developmental standpoint, the research is clear that young children have the capacity to notice race from as early as three months of age (Sangrigoli & De Schonen, 2004). By age 2.5, children are becoming aware of their gender and ethnic identity (Quintana & Vera, 1999). Between 3.5 and 5.5, race and ethnicity have been shown to be a salient part of children's sense of their bodily selves and, while young children at this age are capable of positive cross-racial relationships, they are also capable of demonstrating patterns of color-experienced exclusion (Park, 2011). Some research has shown that children between the ages of 3 and 4 routinely categorize themselves and others into racial hierarchies, leading to verbally, physically, and emotionally aggressive behavior toward peers who are not in their own racial group. As early as age 5, children become aware of stereotypes about the academic ability of members of particular racial groups. By the time children have entered middle childhood, they have been shown to routinely act upon and endorse stereotypes about others.

Having derogatory attitudes and beliefs about others or about oneself can become an integral aspect of a child's disposition toward racism. Biases that begin small become larger as children develop a greater memory capacity for racial stereotypes. Early childhood is a crucial period of development when stressors such as racial discrimination affect a person's long-term well-being. However, research has shown that racial biases may be largely under environmental control, and thus might be shaped via educational, social, and legal policies. Being able to talk about race and racism leads to less prejudice in children; furthermore, avoiding conversations about racism does not help in preventing racism.

The Equity and Early Childhood Education Task Force supports efforts to ensure equitable access to high-quality programs for all young children and the elimination of discriminatory practices within those programs, such as those concerning discipline. We also believe early childhood is *the* most crucial time to address racial inequities by explicitly teaching children about race and racism. To aid this work, we make three recommendations:

1. Take advantage of the plethora of resources provided by groups such as the Early Childhood Education Assembly (ECEA) of NCTE to support these endeavors (see <http://www.earlychildhoodeducationassembly.com/resources-for-educators-focusing-on-anti-racist-learning-and-teaching.html>).
2. Seek out members of the ECEA's Anti-Racist Consultants Network to learn more about how to make changes in individual settings (<http://www.earlychildhoodeducationassembly.com/anti-racism-educational-consultants-network.html>).
3. Consider adopting the position statements of the ECEA in your organization, particularly the 2016 Call to Action for Schools and Teacher Education programs (http://www.earlychildhoodeducationassembly.com/uploads/1/6/6/2/16621498/early_childhood_education_assembly_response_to_the_orlando_shootings_and_the_anniversary_of_the_mother_emmanuel_church_murders.pdf).

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