

Creating Anti-Racist Early Childhood Spaces

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The focus on racial equity following the murder of George Floyd has resulted in conversations about racism that were unheard of less than a year ago. A critical examination of race, bias, racial inequity, and racism is taking place at every level in our society, and researchers, educators, and advocates have proposed anti-racism strategies for a variety of settings, including in early childhood spaces. To enact and sustain an anti-racist approach, early childhood educators need to understand the racial history of early childhood programs and the racism in current early childhood programs. In this article, we outline the past and present along with strategies for creating anti-racist early childhood spaces.

Racial History of Early Childhood Programs

The history of early childhood education is vast and varied, and the Perry Preschool Project ([part 1](#) and [part 2](#)) stands out as a seminal program and longitudinal study in its history. Many early childhood advocates, supporters, and professionals tout the benefits of the Perry Preschool Program as an investment in the future of America, noting a 13 percent return on investment for every dollar invested in high-quality early childhood programs (Heckman 2006; Heckman & Karapakula 2019). The program also provides a key example of the racial history of early childhood programs, as it was designed to increase the IQ test scores of children from disadvantaged families (Derman-Sparks & Moore 2016).

In essence, the goal of the Perry Preschool Project was to address what were considered Black children's inherent deficits and to create better Americans. Initiated in the 1960s in a climate rife with civil unrest and overt racism, Black children were viewed as culturally, socially, and economically "deprived" and living in a culture of poverty. The term



disadvantaged—and a viewpoint now identified as a *deficit perspective*—emerged around the time of the Perry Preschool Project, and it was code for being poor and Black. More specifically, Black preschoolers were identified as a population that could be fixed, whose deficits could be corrected, and whose future lives could be improved (Jackson 2014). Black families, especially Black single mothers, were viewed as pathological, inept, and incapable of providing an optimal environment for their children (Moynihan 1969; Jensen 1984). It was believed that Black families needed to be taught how to parent their children by the White teachers in the program (Derman-Sparks 2016). The fear of unruly, uneducated, and socially deviant children led to the implementation of preschool curricula focused on improving IQ scores, learning socially “appropriate behaviors,” and responding positively to those in authority.

In addition, the focus on psychopathologic outcomes such as criminalization and teen pregnancy contributed to this deficit lens of Black children and communities. Weikart (1971) described the Perry Preschool Project as an experiment to enable culturally deprived children and children testing in the range of “educable mentally retarded” to enter into a regular classroom. From the onset, the Perry Preschool Project and other programs of this time—coupled with the War on Poverty—sought to fix children from families with low income rather than address the structural racism that led to the disproportionate numbers of Black children living in poverty and being labeled as “deprived.”

Noticing Racism in Your Program

Some of the ways in which racism is evident in early childhood organizations include when

- › most of those in leadership positions are White, and people of color are not invited to serve on committees, boards, or to take on higher level duties (Austin et al. 2019)
- › most of the teaching staff are Black or Brown and are rarely promoted within the organization (Austin et al. 2019)
- › employees of color experience closer, more intense examination of their work and behavior; are more frequently reprimanded, especially Black staff members; may have their hairstyles banned in dress codes; and may be discouraged from speaking their home language at work (Griffin 2019)
- › mispronouncing, making fun of, or shortening names that are not traditionally “White” names are accepted practices (Marrun 2018)
- › Black men are expected to be the disciplinarians, and White teachers send Black children to Black teachers for discipline because “they know how to handle them” (Brockenbrough 2015)
- › people of color are excluded from outside-of-work activities attended by White staff
- › no equity-focused discussion, strategy, or focus area exists

While the Perry Preschool Project (and similar studies, such as the Carolina Abecedarian Study) did not significantly improve scores on measures of intelligence, children who participated in the program were more likely to graduate high school and have greater earning capacity as adults (Campbell et al. 2002; Schweinhart et al. 2005). They were also less likely to become teen parents and become involved in the justice system.

Although the Perry Preschool Project resulted in positive outcomes for children, such as increased parent engagement over time, employment stability, positive multigenerational effects, and positive adult health outcomes, its effects must be considered in light of its limitations too (Heckman & Karapakula 2019). A key limitation was that researchers failed to interview the teachers or gather a range of information from the families and children who were involved in the program and study. They did not investigate the attitudes of the teachers toward the children, nor the relationships between the home and school (Derman-Sparks 2016). As Derman-Sparks and Moore (2016) wrote: “Most Perry Preschool teachers—including the two of us—held the empowerment perspective, while administrators mostly took the cultural deprivation perspective. The teachers’ empowerment beliefs shaped actual practice with the children and families, although publications about the program reflected the administrators’ cultural deprivation thinking” (85). Such qualitative information could have informed and improved the practices not only of the Perry Preschool program, but of many early childhood education programs that came after.

Racism in Current Early Childhood Education Programs

More often than not, early childhood educators and programs think or teach about race, bias, and equity from one of two approaches: “the color-blind approach” or the “celebration of differences approach” (Doucet & Adair 2013). These stem from beliefs that if educators teach love, kindness, and fairness only, then they do not need to point out or discuss racial bias or inequities with our young learners.

These more common approaches fail to acknowledge that everyone has lived their lives in a system that is racist; that we all come with and act on biases, especially when unchecked or monitored; and that we

are inundated with images and messages that influence how we think about and respond to one another. This has resulted in racist perceptions and beliefs that are embedded within the very fabric of our existence (Staats 2014). The system is designed for some to rise at the expense of others, and loving all children equally is not enough. Frankly, it is not the reality in our early childhood classrooms.

Statistics consistently show disparities in young Black children's experiences in early learning settings and in how teachers perceive and respond to children's behaviors based on race. For example, in one study, educators were asked to be on the lookout for challenging behaviors in a video clip. The video clip showed two Black children (one male, one female) and two White children (one male, one female). Researchers found that participants watched the Black boy more than any other child. Forty-two percent of the participants reported that he required more of their attention, despite the fact that no challenging behaviors were demonstrated in the video and that all children were involved in the same level of play (Gilliam et al. 2016).

Research also shows that teachers tend to perceive Black children as older, less innocent, more culpable, and more criminal than other children (Goff et al. 2014). This *adultification* may contribute to the bias teachers hold, expecting negative behavior from Black children more than others (Gilliam et al. 2016).

National data find the following regarding disproportionate rates of preschool suspension and expulsion:

- › Preschool children are expelled more than three times as often as children in all of K–12 combined (Gilliam 2005).
- › Black children are three-and-a-half times more likely to be suspended than their White counterparts, despite the fact that they make up less than 20 percent of the population (OCR 2016).
- › Black girls account for only 20 percent of the female preschool population, yet they comprise 54 percent of preschool girls who are suspended (OCR 2016).

These facts are significant indicators of the ways that early childhood classrooms contribute to societal racism and anti-Blackness, or the belief that “Black bodies become marginalized, disregarded, and disdained” (Dumas & Ross 2016, 417). Indeed, if

Noticing Racism in Your Classroom

Racial bias and inequity show up in various ways. Here are some examples of how racism might show up in early childhood settings:

- › mispronouncing, making fun of, or shortening children's names that are not traditionally “White” names
- › assuming a Spanish-speaking Latino/a child is undocumented
- › assuming children eat only foods that are stereotypically assigned to a specific culture or ethnicity
- › favoring one group of children over other groups, such as calling on some children while ignoring others based on race, gender, language, class, etc.
- › treating a child differently because of their hair style, language, style of clothing, or other cultural ways of being
- › assigning roles based on gender or race, such as boys and White children being assigned leadership roles and girls and Black and Brown children being relegated to subservient roles
- › stereotyping Black girls as too loud, too angry, or too sassy and assuming big Black boys are aggressive
- › misinterpreting or inaccurately labeling children's actions and ways of being as defiant
- › assuming families of color don't care about their children (Iruka et al. 2020)

teachers are not actively working toward an anti-racist early childhood space, then they may be teaching children to be racist by their own behaviors and words in the classroom.

Children in the preschool years are inquirers by nature. They are constantly observing, collecting information, analyzing, and trying to make sense of what they see and hear. For instance, they know who it is that teachers look at when something goes wrong, who is being held more accountable, who is granted second chances, and who is reprimanded most often in their

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classrooms. They notice the actions of teachers. They detect the implicit biases and unconscious prejudices, which come through in displays of favoritism and privileging of some children over others based on gender, race, and culture (Allen 2016). What children tend to observe, from early ages, is that boys get into trouble more than girls, that the darker-skinned children are more likely to be held accountable than the lighter-skinned children, and that White children are given the opportunity and time to share about themselves and their lives more often than darker-skinned children. In addition, the quality of interactions differs too: the more Black and Latino/a children there are in a classroom, the more teachers talk *at* them and not *with* them (Early et al. 2010). In current early childhood spaces, children seek and gain an internalized sense of how things are in school and in the world. In many early childhood spaces, racism exists as part of the early childhood experience.

Creating Anti-Racist Early Childhood Environments

In order to learn about race, children need the time, space, curriculum, and supports to talk about and make sense of what they are seeing and noticing. It requires teachers to embrace the conversation, even if they experience uncertainty or discomfort while doing so. (See “Taking Steps Toward Anti-Racism” on page 53.) Teachers must talk about race every day because race exists every day. Children deserve mirrors that reflect themselves and windows to peer into other people’s experiences (Wright with Counsell 2018). They deserve the opportunity to ask the questions that form in their minds about differences and similarities as they learn to categorize the world around them.

Unlike the more common approaches taken, being anti-racist is more than loving all children the same or teaching children more generally about kindness and fairness. It is more than celebrating diversity during special events and then moving on with the curriculum. Anti-racist teachers teach about racism throughout the day and the curriculum. They point it out and acknowledge it, and they invite children to discuss race, racism, and inequity when they see it. When teachers invite the conversation about how everyone is learning about race and that racism is all around us, we give children the space to name it and to become anti-racists themselves.

Committing to Become Anti-Racist

The journey toward becoming anti-racist is not a check-the-box activity. (See “Journeying Together: How My Program Addresses Race and Anti-Bias” at NAEYC.org/yc/summer2021.) Many organizations include diversity, inclusion, and equity in their mission statements. *Diversity* is the effort to increase the number of people of color, and *inclusion* (in this context) is the effort to incorporate the input of people of color. *Equity* is the relentless focus on eliminating racial inequities and increasing success for all groups (Nelson & Brooks 2015). To evaluate whether an organization’s reality is aligned with its written statements, an equity audit should be conducted on a regular basis. It can reveal if equity is indeed valued in early childhood classrooms, administrations, and organizations.

Fundamentally, to create anti-racist early childhood spaces, early childhood educators must embrace the concepts of anti-racism. They must take direct and intentional action against racist behaviors, practices, policies, and beliefs to dismantle and interrupt racism. (See “Noticing Racism in Your Program” on page 50 and “Noticing Racism in Your Classroom” on page 51.) Anti-racism posits there is no middle ground. There is no such thing as “not a racist.” One is either anti-racist and fighting against racism, or they are racist by default. Racism is not defined by who you are but by your actions. It is what one does or fails to do that makes a person racist (Kendi 2019).

Taking Steps Toward Anti-Racism

Becoming anti-racist is an ongoing, continual commitment that is grounded in education, listening, self-reflection, and healing from the trauma of slavery and racism. Given our history and the present, how can people begin their journey toward becoming anti-racists? Here are specific actions that teachers, administrators, and others can take as daily practice.

1. **Educate yourself through intentionally selected materials.** Read books on racism and the true history of our country. A few include:

- *The 1619 Project*, by Nikole Hannah-Jones (2019)
- *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015)
- *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent*, by Isabel Wilkerson (2020)
- *How to Be an Antiracist*, by Ibram X. Kendi (2019)
- *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, by Bryan Stevenson (2015)
- *Stamped from the Beginning*, by Ibram X. Kendi (2016)
- *Waking Up White: And Finding Myself in the Story of Race*, by Debby Irving (2014)
- *White Fragility*, by Robin DiAngelo (2018)
- *White Rage*, by Carol Anderson and Pamela Gibson (2017)

Consider the perspective of the authors. If you are beginning this journey as a White person, reading White authors may be helpful, but don't stop there. Read authors who bring a different perspective and experience to the work. There are Black authors who write for White audiences, and Black authors who write for Black audiences. These approaches present different entry points depending on where you are in your journey and include readers who want to continue being agitated in their complacency. Watch documentaries, such as *13th*, *When They See Us*, and *American Son* with Kerry Washington. Seek out presentations, webinars, and other multimedia materials.

2. **Follow Black men and women on social media, particularly Twitter.** Bree Newsome Bass, Bakari Sellers, Jamil Smith, Clint Smith, Yamiche Alcindor, Zerlina Maxwell, Karine Jean-Pierre, Goldie, Joy Reid, Nikole Hannah-Jones, Ice-T, Soledad O'Brien, BrooklynDad_Defiant, BeAKing, Roxane Gay, Brittany Packnett-Cunningham, and Jonathan Capeheart are a few examples.
3. **Reflect.** Take time to journal your own experiences growing up within our racist society and how this has influenced how you operate in the world—where you live, where you send your children to school, and with whom you socialize. Do you self-isolate, and if so, is it out of fear or comfort? How have your experiences and your worldview contributed to how you understand what it means to be part of a high-quality early childhood program? Self-reflection and a thorough understanding of our history ensure that we begin to see how White dominance is the norm and racism is endemic within early childhood education.
4. **Commit to undoing your color-blindness.** We often say some version of, "I choose to see the content of your character, not the color of your skin." This may be true; however, color-blind ideology is harmful and counterproductive to the cause. If you do not see your color, you also do not see the reality of others' experiences as different from the White experience. This leads to normalizing the White experience as a definition of "acceptable," "normal," or "typical." Gaining a better understanding of Black existence and the existence of other historically marginalized groups is critical to committing to being an ally in the cause of social justice.
5. **Stand beside, behind, but never in front of Black people.** An essential step toward equity is to actively listen, learn, and let Black people lead the way forward. Rather than look for solutions at this time, White educators, administrators, researchers, and policymakers should strive to be an ally to their Black peers. Be ready to give up privilege in the service of anti-racism so that others who have experienced more oppression than you can lead you.

In early childhood classrooms are future doctors, police officers, government officials, and teachers who will live in a racial society. Creating an anti-racist early childhood program is essential for their survival and will ensure that today's young children are not tomorrow's protestors, demanding justice and chanting "Black Lives Matter."

Now is the time to make this commitment. True equity work cannot begin until we are grounded in a common understanding about the unique realities and brutalities in our history and present, particularly the structures that have been put in place over time to benefit White people and to simultaneously oppress others. We must all be involved in the cause; however, educators need to take these steps toward anti-racism before that can happen.

References for this article can be found online at [NAEYC.org/yc/summer2021](https://naeyc.org/yc/summer2021).

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Recommendations for Everyone

Item 6: Recognize that the professional knowledge base is changing.

Recommendations for Early Childhood Educators

Create a Caring, Equitable Community of Engaged Learners

Item 4: Consider the developmental, cultural, and linguistic appropriateness of the learning environment and your teaching practices for each child.

Observe, Document, and Assess Children's Learning and Development

Item 3: Focus on strengths.

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