Addressing race and racism in early childhood: Challenges and opportunities

Flora Farago
*Stephen F Austin State University, faragof@sfasu.edu*

Kay Sanders

Larissa Gaias

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Addressing Race and Racism in Early Childhood: Challenges and Opportunities

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Flora Farago1, Kay Sanders2, Larissa Gaias1

Arizona State University

Author Note

1 T. D. Sanford School of Social and Family Dynamics, Arizona State University, Arizona State P.O. Box 873701, Tempe, AZ 85287-3701

2 Whittier College.

Please address correspondence to Flora Farago, M. S., T. D. Sanford School of Social and Family Dynamics, Arizona State University, P.O. Box 873701, Tempe, AZ, 85287-3701. E-mail: flora.farago@asu.edu. Phone number: (469)-261-4051.
Abstract

This chapter draws on developmental intergroup theory, parental ethnic-racial socialization literature, anti-bias curricula, and prejudice intervention studies to address the appropriateness of discussing race and racism in early childhood settings. Existing literature about teacher discussions surrounding race and racism is reviewed, best practices are shared, and the need for more research in this area is highlighted. The construct of parental ethnic-racial socialization is mapped onto early childhood teacher anti-bias classroom practices to inform best practices. The chapter also outlines racial ideologies of teachers, specifically anti-bias and colorblind attitudes, and discusses how these ideologies may manifest in classroom practices surrounding race and racism. Colorblind ideology is problematized and dissected to show colorblind practice may harm children. Preschool children’s interpretations of teacher discussions of race and racism in light of children’s cognitive developmental level are discussed. Additionally, findings from racial prejudice intervention studies are applied to teacher practices. Early literacy practices surrounding race and racism are outlined, with practical suggestions for teachers and teacher educators regarding best practices surrounding book reading discussions about race and racism. Additionally, implications of teacher practices surrounding race and racism for children’s development as well as for professional development and teacher training are discussed.
Keywords: Race; Racism; Early childhood; Preschool; Anti-bias; Racial Literacy; Colorblindness; Stereotype; Prejudice; Teacher attitudes; Teacher practices; Multicultural practices; Diversity; Developmental Intergroup Theory; Racial labeling; Ethnic-racial socialization; Parental ethnic-racial socialization; Prejudice interventions; Culturally sensitive teaching; Color-consciousness; Privilege; Children’s books (racism); Racial bias; Teacher Training

Addressing Race and Racism in Early Childhood: Challenges and Opportunities

Although the lay public typically perceives children as innocent and colorblind1, this could not be further from the truth (Katz, 2003). Young children develop racial2 stereotypes and prejudice between 3-5 years of age (for reviews see Aboud & Amato, 2001; Cristol & Gimbert, 2008; Cameron, Alvarez, Ruble, & Fuligni, 2001; Hirschfeld, 2008; Levy & Hughes, 2009; Nesdale, 2007; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Prejudice increases until about 7 years of age – then decreases in late childhood (Raabe & Beelmann, 2011). Children receive messages about race from a variety of sources, such as from parents, teachers, peers, and the media, and interpret these messages in a number of ways based on their cognitive abilities. Early childhood classrooms are children’s first encounters with school, and are potentially the first settings where children learn intergroup skills outside of their family environment. These settings may also be the first ones (for White children) or the first ones outside of the home (for children of color) where children receive messages about the meaning of race and racism. One important agent of

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1 “Colorblind” and “colormute” reflect terminology widely used in the literature. These terms are used for consistency’s sake with existing scholarship, however the authors acknowledge that such terms reflect ableist language and potentially perpetuate negative stereotypes about persons with disabilities. As suggested by Walton et al., 2014, scholars should explore the use of alternatives such as “racelessness” (Kempf, 2012) and “color invisibility”.

2 Although there are distinctions between “race” and “ethnicity” (Quintana, 1998), they have similar implications for young children’s stereotyping and prejudice who are not able to distinguish between these constructs; therefore, these concepts will be discussed together and used interchangeably (as in Levy & Hughes, 2009)
racial socialization in the classroom is the teacher (see Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Early childhood educators may inadvertently or advertently, verbally or non-verbally, implicitly or explicitly send messages about the meaning of race and racism to children (see Lesane-Brown, 2006).

It is particularly important to examine the messages teachers send children about race and ethnicity in the light of shifting demographics trends. Students and teachers in the U.S. are experiencing more diversity in their lives than ever before (e.g., Plaut, 2010). About half (49.7%) of children under 5 in the U.S. are from ethnic backgrounds other than European American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). These children of color often face the stark realities of an education system that does not serve their needs like it serves those of their White peers (see APA Presidential Task Force on Educational Disparities, 2012). One cause, among many, of the marginalization of children of color in academic institutions may be lack of adequate teacher training to teach in racially and ethnically diverse classrooms (e.g., Gay & Howard, 2000; D’Andrea, Daniels, & Noonan, 2003).

The overwhelming majority of early childhood teachers in the U.S. are White (67% of preschool/kindergarten teachers; 79% of elementary/middle school teachers, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010), many of whom are ill- or under-prepared to serve diverse student bodies. Teachers likely spend more time with children during the school year than any other adult figure, therefore to meet the diverse needs of the increasingly diverse student body of children under 5, teachers must develop racial and cultural competence. Further, examining teacher race-related practices in early childhood contexts is especially important because these are the environments in which children in the US have their first introduction to the school context. Additionally, anti-bias prejudice interventions seem to be most effective in young children (see Brown, 2011),
therefore teachers in early childhood contexts may be in a unique position to impact children’s racial stereotype and prejudice development.

However, questions remain about the appropriateness of addressing race in early childhood classrooms and about best practices to discuss race and racism with young children. Further, research is lacking on how young children in early childhood contexts interpret teachers’ race-related classroom practices. This chapter draws on developmental intergroup theory (Bigler & Liben, 2006; 2007), parental ethnic-racial socialization literature, anti-bias curricula, and prejudice intervention studies to address the appropriateness of discussing race and racism in early childhood settings, share best practices, and highlight the need for more research in this area.

**Developmental Intergroup Theory**

According to *developmental intergroup theory* (Bigler & Liben, 2006, 2007) explicit and implicit messages about social categories such as race, in combination with environmental factors such as segregation, group labeling, numerical representation of groups, and the child’s cognitive developmental level, contribute to stereotype and prejudice formation. Developmental intergroup theory (Bigler & Liben, 2006, 2007) posits that the *explicit and implicit* use of visually perceptible social categories contribute to prejudice development. Regarding race, research shows that both racial features (perceptual discriminability) and ethnic labels (explicit labeling) influence the development of racial bias in children (Kowalski & Lo, 2001). Although developmental intergroup theory does not specify an agent of ethnic-racial socialization, early childhood teachers may be important agents of ethnic-racial socialization who explicitly and implicitly communicate messages about race to children through their classroom practices. Discussions about racism and skin color are examples of explicit practices, whereas the display
of classroom materials and visuals representing diverse groups of people are examples of implicit practices. Teacher silence and silencing surrounding racial diversity may be a form of ethnic-racial socialization, communicating to children that race is a taboo topic to be avoided.

Explicitly racist comments in classrooms are likely less common today than in the past; however, in terms of implicit use, children may notice that their classroom is segregated by race and may infer that this segregation implies group difference (Bigler & Liben, 2006). In support of this supposition, Bigler (2004) demonstrated that children assigned to segregated, arbitrary color groups (i.e., designated by T-shirt colors) developed stronger biases than children assigned to integrated color groups. In the absence of explanations, children may construct their own stereotyped beliefs to explain group segregation (Bigler & Liben, 2006, 2007). For instance, when children observe that neighborhoods are segregated by race, they may infer that these social divisions were based on meaningful and inherent differences between groups. Therefore, as the research outlined in this chapter indicates, not discussing race and racism with young children likely does more harm than explicitly addressing these topics (see Boutte, Lopez-Robertson, & Powers-Costello, 2011). However, discussions surrounding race and racism should be developmentally appropriate, taking children’s cognitive abilities into account as the research reviewed indicates.

**Children’s Cognition and the Diversity Education Dilemma**

When discussing race and racism with young children it is important to consider that young children show rigidity in their thinking and view the world in mutually exclusive categories (e.g., Bigler & Liben, 1992, 1993). Children who routinely categorize the environment may be prone to developing rigid stereotypes because they may have difficulty understanding that a person can simultaneously belong to more than one category (i.e. low multiple
classification skills; Bigler, 1995). For instance, a young child may have difficulty understanding that a person may be both African American and wealthy, or a woman and an engineer. In one study, the routine labeling and categorization of children by teachers based on gender led to more stereotyping among children with less advanced multiple classification skills as compared to children with more advanced multiple classification skills (Bigler, 1995). Due to young children’s cognitive limitations, preschoolers may be particularly sensitive to the verbal labels supplied by adults as cues to the importance of social categories (see Gelman, 2003 for review). However, research also indicates that prejudice reduction interventions may be particularly effective with young children (see Brown, 2011), therefore discussing race and racism with preschool age children may be particular effective in changing their racial attitudes and setting a foundation for tolerance and respect.

The unnecessary labeling and managing of children’s environment according to group categories can lead to stereotype and prejudice formation in young children (Bigler, 1995; Bigler, Brown, & Markell, 2001; Bigler, Jones, & Lobliner, 1997; Brown & Bigler, 2002; Hilliard & Liben, 2010). However, the complete avoidance of discussion of social categories such as race is not feasible or desirable; it is important for children to learn about their own group identities, as well as about the oppression and marginalization of groups of people throughout history. Indeed, ethnic labeling is necessary for racial identity development (Aboud 1988). Avoiding the mention of social groups may trivialize the experiences and identities of historically marginalized groups, and may teach children that racism and sexism are no longer concerns in society (e.g., Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006). In a study with 8-11 year-old children, experimentally manipulated colorblind attitudes lead to lower detection of racial discrimination (e.g., Apfelbaum, Pauker, Sommers, & Ambady, 2010). Although this study did
not examine colorblind attitudes in early childhood, colorblind beliefs at any age may involve the trivialization of the importance of race and lead to the lack of detection of racial bias. If a child is unlikely to detect racial bias and discrimination, this child may also be less likely to intervene in real-life situations involving racism. Hence, colorblind attitudes may contribute to the maintenance of a system in which racial injustice is interwoven into the fabric of society and is made invisible early in life – maintaining the status quo.

The dilemma of how to best address diversity without inadvertently reinforcing stereotypes is referred to as the *diversity education dilemma* (Amoroso, Loyd, & Hoobler, 2010). This dilemma occurs when discussions of diversity-related issues in a classroom, such as discussions of racial categories and hierarchies, draw attention to group differences, and therefore reinforce stereotypes and prejudices they aim to debunk. However, if emphasizing social categories such as race can lead to stereotype and prejudice development (e.g., Bigler & Liben, 2006, 2007), whereas ignoring social categories such as race (i.e., colorblindness) can lead to racial bias (e.g., Apfelbaum et al., 2010; Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004), what is an educator to do? In some ways teachers must simultaneously notice and ignore race – if all they see is skin color, they will impose stereotypes, however if they do not acknowledge skin color, they will ignore children’s unique identities and heritage (Valli, 1995). Research is needed to explore ways in which educators can discuss race with young children without inadvertently reifying their stereotypes and prejudice. The answer may lie in *how*, not *if*, racial labels are used and *how* race and racism are discussed. For instance, if racial labels are used within the context learning about racial discrimination, they reduce racial biases (e.g., Hughes, Bigler, & Levy, 2007). However, if racial labels are used to segregate children from one another and explain inherent characteristics about them, stereotypes and prejudice likely ensue.
Although early childhood educators’ practices surrounding race and racism remain largely unexplored, decades of research indicates that parents, especially parents of color, engage in racial socialization practices that are beneficial for children (Hughes et al., 2006b). This body of work may inform potential teaching practices in early childhood classrooms. In the following section we review what is known about parental ethnic-racial socialization, with a focus on findings involving young children.

**Parental Ethnic-Racial Socialization**

Ethnic-racial socialization has primarily been studied in African American and, to some extent, Latino/a parents (e.g., Hughes, 2003; Hughes & Chen, 1997, 1999; Hughes et al., 2008; Hughes et al., 2006b; Lesane-Brown, 2006; Phinney & Chavira, 1995; Priest et al., 2014). The established dimensions of parental ethnic-racial socialization relevant to educational practices include (1) cultural socialization, or teaching children about their ethnic heritage and instilling ethnic pride (e.g., celebration of cultural holidays, reading books, teaching about cultural customs), (2) preparation for bias, or teaching children about racism and preparing them to face discrimination, (3) promotion of mistrust, or warning children about the need to distance themselves from other racial/ethnic groups, and (4) egalitarianism or promotion of pluralism, or emphasizing the similarities between, and equality of, all races (Hughes, 2003; Hughes & Chen, 1997, 1999; McAdoo, 2002). Egalitarian socialization can either involve exposure to history and traditions of many different groups or silence about race (Hughes & Chen, 1999).

The various dimensions of ethnic-racial socialization are not mutually exclusive and can co-occur (Caughy, Nettels, & Lima, 2011; Hughes & Chen, 1999). Overall, parents are more likely to engage in positive aspects of ethnic-racial socialization, such as teaching about cultural heritage and pride, than in negative aspects, such as teaching about discrimination (Hughes &
Chen 1997; Hughes, Hagelskamp, Way, & Foust, 2009; McHale et al., 2006; Phinney & Chavira 1995). Parents of older children are more likely to discuss discrimination and racial mistrust than parents of younger children (Hughes & Chen 1997; Hughes et al., 2006b). Parents of younger children are most likely to emphasize positive aspects of ethnic-racial socialization such as ethnic pride (e.g., Suizzo, Robinson, & Pahlke, 2008).

Although most studies on parental ethnic-racial socialization have involved older school-age children and adolescents, recent studies report that the majority of parents of color do practice at least one dimension of ethnic-racial socialization with young children, at times as young as 3 years of age Barbarin & Jean-Baptiste, 2013; Brown, Tanner-Smith, & Lesane-Brown, 2009; Caughy, Nettles, & Lima, 2011; Caughy, Nettles, O’Campo, & Lohrfink, 2006; Caughy, O’Campo, Randolph & Nickerson, 2002; Howard, Rose, & Barbarin, 2013; Hughes & Chen, 1997; Lesane-Brown, Brown, Tanner-Smith, & Bruce, 2010; see Priest et al., 2014a; Suizzo et al., 2008). However, others have found that only a small proportion of parents of young children engage in ethnic-racial socialization (e.g., Caughy & Owen, 2014; Katz & Kofkin, 1997; Kofkin, Katz, & Downey, 1995; Pahlke, Bigler, & Suizzo, 2012; Peters, 1985; Spencer, 1983).

A reason for these mixed-findings may be measurement issues, such as researchers assessing different dimensions of ethnic-racial socialization in diverging ways (Caughy & Owen, 2014; Priest et al., 2014a; Suizzo et al., 2008). These studies include different racial/ethnic groups in their analyses so the mixed findings could be a function of varying emphases on ethnic-racial socialization among European-American, Latino/a, or Black families (e.g., Barbarin & Jean-Baptiste, 2013; Caughy & Owen, 2014; Lesane-Brown et al., 2010; Phinney & Chavira, 1995). Mixed-findings could also reflect intra-ethnic variability (e.g., Brown et al., 2009; Caughy
et al., 2002) – low-income families and regional differences may explain why in some studies even parents of color show low incidence of ethnic-racial socialization (e.g., Caughy & Owen, 2014; Spencer, 1983).

Families caring for young children of color are more likely than families caring for White children to engage in ethnic-racial socialization (Barbarin & Jean-Baptiste, 2013; Lesane-Brown et al., 2010). Caughy and colleagues (2002) found that the majority of parents of African American 3-4.5 year-old children engaged all four dimensions of ethnic-racial socialization, with parents showing variability in practices such as having culturally appropriate toys, pictures of African American family members, and clothing/household items made of African fabrics. In a qualitative study of parents of 3-6 year-old African American children, Suizzo and colleagues (2008) found that parents engaged in practices such as reading books with African American protagonists, buying African American dolls, discussing African American history, celebrating cultural holidays, and teaching about racism. In contrast to these findings about parents of color, White parents avoid the topic of race and often adopt a colorblind approach to ethnic-racial socialization (Pahlke et al., 2012; Katz, 2002). The colorblind approach likely entails reading books with White protagonists, buying light-skinned dolls, and avoiding discussions of racism – practices that are not deemed to fall under ethnic-racial socialization, yet nonetheless likely send messages about race to White children.

Silence regarding race and racial diversity may be particularly harmful to the development of inclusive racial attitudes in European-American children. In one study, although definitive conclusions regarding the relationship between the colorblind ethnic-racial socialization and racial bias cannot be drawn, White preschoolers held racially biased attitudes regardless of their mothers’ racial attitudes. This suggests that a more active and explicit strategy
against racial bias than the colorblind approach is warranted, such as explicitly asking children how they feel about certain racial groups and countering prejudicial beliefs (Pahlke, Bigler, & Suizzo, 2012). The colorblind strategy is ineffective in modifying European American children’s development of racial bias as it does not allow for the discussion of race and racism. However, children whose mothers had a high percentage of non-European American friends showed lower levels of racial biases, which may indicate that children pick up on subtle, implicit racial cues that their parents are sending and are likely unaware of doing so. Indeed, another study indicates that preschoolers are sensitive to adults’ non-verbal racial cues (Castelli, De Dea, & Nesdale 2008).

**Messages Sent vs. Messages Received**

One consideration to take into account from a developmental perspective is that children’s level of cognitive development impacts how children interpret messages about race. Cristol and Gimbert (2008) reviewed the literature about the development of racial prejudice in children and concluded that social learning and cognitive developmental models need to be understood when designing curriculum interventions targeting racism. Similarly, advocates of anti-bias curriculum argue that it should be developmentally appropriate and take children’s level of understanding, cognitive development, interests, and life experiences into account (e.g., Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Ramsey, 2009; Swadener & Miller-Marsh, 1993). Children should be encouraged to ask questions, raise issues to be discussed, and engage in critical thinking and problem solving (Ramsey, 2009). In other words, children are not passive recipients of information; qualitative case studies of multicultural reading show that children are open to their racial attitudes being challenged and can challenge text read to them (Brown, Souto-Manning, & Laman, 2010; Hollingworth, 2009).
Children may misunderstand or be unaware of adults’ messages about race (see Hughes & Chen, 1999; Hughes et al., 2008). Hughes and colleagues (2006a) found that parents of 9-10 year-olds reported sending more egalitarian messages (e.g., “people are all equal no matter color of skin”) and less preparation for bias messages than their children reported hearing. In fact, parents’ reports of cultural socialization and egalitarianism correlated with children’s reports of preparation for bias (Hughes, Bachman, Ruble, & Fuligni, 2006). In general, parent-child reports of ethnic-racial socialization are only moderately correlated (Hughes et al., 2006a; Hughes et al., 2009). There can be a discrepancy between what messages parents intend to send about race and what children interpret—partly due to young children’s cognitive developmental level and partly due to the implicit, non-verbal racialized behavior of adults that they may not be aware of transmitting (Castelli, De Dea, & Nesdale 2008; Castelli, Zogmaister, & Tomelleri, 2009).

Overall, literature on parental ethnic-racial socialization practices is extensive. However, less is known about teacher ethnic-racial socialization practices, and what is known, is not linked to research conducted with parents. Potentially, both parents and teachers, as well as other adults caring for children, communicate messages about the importance of race (or about the lack therefore) to young children. To capture a holistic view of what kind of messages children receive about race and racism, and how children interpret these messages to generate their own understandings of these concepts, it is important to examine ethnic-racial socialization practices outside of the family context. Therefore the remainder of this chapter focuses on teachers as agents of racial socialization and connects parental racial socialization practices to early childhood education strategies.

**Teacher Ethnic-Racial Socialization: Anti-Bias to Colorblindness**

**Anti-bias Curriculum**
The key goals of an early childhood curricular approach called the *anti-bias curriculum* (Derman-Sparks, 1989 & the ABC Task Force; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010) closely align with messages about race that parents of color, particularly African American parents, convey to their children. The anti-bias curriculum advocates for classroom discussion of issues such as discrimination, privilege, oppression, and racism with young children so they can develop skills to identify and challenge unfairness, prejudice, and stereotypes (Derman-Sparks, 1989 & the ABC Task Force; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). Anti-bias practitioners view children as active participants who can confront sexism, racism, and other forms of oppression. Although the anti-bias curriculum does not solely focus on addressing racism, several of its key goals align with dimensions of parental ethnic-racial socialization.

The parental construct of *cultural socialization* aligns with the anti-bias goal of developing positive identities and pride in one’s heritage; the parental construct of *preparation for bias* aligns with the anti-bias goal of teaching children to recognize unfairness and speak up against prejudice; and, the parental construct of *egalitarianism or promotion of pluralism* aligns with the anti-bias goal of expressing joy and comfort with human diversity. In other words, both parental ethnic-racial socialization in families of color and anti-bias curricula in early childhood classrooms may teach children that they are simultaneously similar, yet different from one another. Anti-bias curricula avoid tokenistic or stereotypical representations of groups of people or cultures, and unlike some uncritical multicultural approaches, avoid viewing differences as exotic and “other”, approaches that may reinforce children’s racially biased perceptions. Additionally, anti-bias education is not just a set of activities for occasional use, but rather, is a curricular focus that should permeate all aspects of a program. However, unlike race-related
communication by parents, the types of messages early childhood anti-bias educators may convey to students specifically about race, culture, and ethnicity have been largely unexplored.

The anti-bias framework (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010) calls for planned and spontaneous activities and interactions that teach children to actively counteract discrimination and stereotyping, while celebrating diversity and identity. According to anti-bias principles, it is the teacher’s responsibility to initiate conversations surrounding diversity. Just like teachers do not wait for children to inquire about the meaning of letters or numbers before teaching about reading or math, teachers are urged not to wait with addressing topics like racial similarities and differences (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). There are very few studies that have examined anti-bias curricula in action. One of these studies investigated the anti-bias beliefs and practices of 6 directors and 20 childhood teachers working in rural areas with White children (Bullock, 1996). Teachers in this study struggled to address racial and cultural diversity in their classrooms and were unsure it was their responsibility to teach about these topics. Teachers mentioned that more training and education in this area would help.

**Colorblind Approaches**

On the opposite end of the spectrum from anti-bias curricula lies the colorblind approach. According to the colorblind approach diversity is a barrier, sameness is valued, and it is best if educators ignore racial and ethnic differences among children (e.g., Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Browne 2000; Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004). Colorblind ideology minimizes or ignores the existence of race and racism in contemporary society (Neville, Awad, Brroks, Flores, & Bluemel, 2013; Neville et al., 2000). According to this approach, talking about differences will turn children prejudiced. Some adults may actively silence children’s questions about human differences, which may send messages to children that curiosity about and noticing
human differences are socially unacceptable (Derman-Sparks, 1989 & the ABC Task Force; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). White teachers in particular, much like White parents, may believe that children are naïve and that race is irrelevant to children’s experiences (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). As a result, White parents and teachers may underestimate children’s knowledge of racial history and experiences, assuming that children do not understand racism, stereotyping, and prejudice when they are indeed quite eloquent about these topics (Hughes et al., 2008; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). These types of assumptions may lead early childhood teachers to altogether avoid the subject of race. In Van Ausdale & Feagin’s (2001) ethnographic study of multicultural preschool settings teacher-led activities often did not lend themselves to children explaining their ethnic-racial understandings, did not allow for elaborate stories or nuanced discussions surrounding race, and were limited to “yes-no” questions and answers.

Teachers espousing colorblind beliefs may avoid discussing cultural and racial differences altogether, and may emphasize that race and ethnicity are not important when understanding students (Hachfeld et al., 2011). Colorblind teachers may favor a common curriculum and give students’ cultural and racial background little consideration in their lesson planning (Hachfeld et al., 2011). What this means for the vast majority of children in the United States is that curricula that are perceived to be apolitical and racially neutral are ones that foreground the experiences and histories of European Americans. Indeed, a long-standing criticism of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), a set of early childhood curricular recommendations published by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), is that it is not culturally sensitive to the needs of diverse cultural communities within the United States and across the world (e.g., Bloch, 1992;

In one study, teachers’ colorblind racial attitudes were negatively associated with their multicultural teaching competence (Spanierman et al., 2011). Teachers can not address racial inequities if they see race as insignificant and position racism as a historical artifact (Ullucci & Battey, 2011). Walton et al. (2014) examined varieties of colorblind beliefs and practices among 27 3rd-6th grade teachers in Australia across three schools. Two schools encouraged colorblindness, and teachers in these schools discussed racism as it happened in the past, not as a current problem. When teachers discussed racial differences they “exoticized” other cultures by singling out students from particular groups as cultural ambassadors. Whereas some teachers did critically discuss racism and race, most teacher-led discussions did not help students understand the social construction and significance of racial differences (Walton et al., 2014).

Social psychological research on colorblindness indicates that for Whites, colorblindness appears to be the default diversity belief, and this belief has insidious consequences for the experiences of minoritized groups (see Plaut, 2010; Plau, Thomas, & Goren, 2009). Considering that the majority of the teaching force in the U.S. is White (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010), it is safe to assume that findings about colorblindness in White adults would extend to teachers. Thus far, one of the few quantitative studies involving teachers, albeit pre-service teachers, found that colorblindness predicts low levels of awareness of cultural diversity (Wang, Castro, & Cunningham, 2014). These pre-service teachers displayed moderate levels of colorblindness. There are a few qualitative studies that have examined colorblindness in elementary and middle school teachers and these studies document that White teachers claim not to see race and downplay the salience of race in the classroom (Lewis, 2001; Pollock, 2004; Schofield, 1986,
2007; Sleeter, 1992). In some studies, although some teachers were committed to addressing racial stereotypes, their colorblind ideology prevented them from engaging with issues of privilege and power, and lead them to discuss racism in ways that did not critique the status quo and positioned racism as a historical artifact (Hollingworth, 2009; Lazar & Offenberg 2011; Summer, 2014; Walton et al., 2014).

Several early childhood scholars, including the proponents of anti-bias curricula, argue that if adults do not acknowledge the meaning of race and racism publicly, children may draw conclusions privately and develop erroneous, stereotyped beliefs (Boutte, 2008; Boutte, LaPoint, & Davis, 1993; Boutte, Lopez-Robertson, & Powers-Costello, 2011; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006; Spencer, 1983). Children spontaneously notice racial differences and may generate stereotypical explanations for these, therefore learning about racism and discrimination provides children with alternative, non-stereotyped scripts (see Brown, 2011). In one study, lack of parental teaching about civil rights and discrimination was correlated with positive attitudes towards Whites and negative attitude towards Blacks (Spencer, 1983). In other words, lack of direct teaching about specific cultural values resulted in unchallenged, stereotypical beliefs (Spencer, 1983).

This argument aligns with developmental intergroup theory, which posits that in the absence of explanations behind phenomena such as the use of racial labels and segregation, children develop stereotypes (Bigler & Liben 2006, 2007). Children who hear racial labels without an accompanying explanation for why the label is being highlighted may conclude that people differ from each other in deep, stable, and innate ways (see Bigler, Jones, & Lobliner, 1997; Hirschfeld & Gelman, 1997), a type of thinking that is associated with stereotypes (Gelman, Taylor, & Nguyen, 2004). For children of color, colorblindness may be especially
harmful: A recent study showed that African American middle and high school students who heard messages from teachers about ignoring race, they felt less connected to others at school and held a more negative view of their academic abilities (Byrd, 2015). Research on young children’s understanding of colorblindness and how they may perceive colorblind teaching practices is lacking.

Some scholars argue that colorblindness fuels modern racism – being taught that race does and should not matter but then noticing that it does play a role in who gets disciplined at school, who lives in impoverished neighborhoods, and who serves in prestigious occupational positions leaves children in a quandary (Taylor & Quintana, 2003). Children may resolve this dissonance by attributing inferior characteristics to certain groups (Taylor & Quintana, 2003). Bonilla-Silva (2001) argues that if Whites believe that discrimination and racism are historical, and not current, realities, they may quickly conclude that the cause of poverty, unemployment and other disadvantages disproportionately impacting communities of color are a result of cultural deficiencies and not structural and societal inequities.

Silence around race may teach children that this topic is taboo and does not allow teachers to teach children how to recognize and challenge racism (Boutte, Lopez-Robertson, & Powers-Costello, 2011). Boutte and colleagues (2011) argue that it is the moral imperative of teachers to address racism in the classroom, lest they “threaten the full humanity of all and violate the professional code of ethics” (p. 341). Put simply, not discussing racism harms children (even if unintentionally). Therefore, it is important for adults, such as teachers, to find out what children know about race and directly challenge children’s misconceptions (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Grieshaber, 2008), such as that drinking chocolate milk will turn one’s skin brown (Tatum, 1997). Children may assume that people with different skin tones have
different blood types (Hirschfeld, 1996). White adults may view children as colorblind and naïve, and discourage children from labeling skin color; however, this goes against what children observe (e.g., Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Children observe that White skin is highly valued and accords status and privileges to certain groups of people (e.g., Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Avoiding addressing these racial realities that children observe likely allows children to generate prejudicial understandings of the world – and this way, colorblind teaching practices allow prejudice and racism to flourish in the hands of well-intentioned teachers.

**Why Teachers Resort to Colorblindness?**

Teachers remain uncertain whether addressing race is developmentally appropriate and remain largely uncomfortable addressing race in the classroom (Bullock, 1996; Desai, 1997; Priest, Walton, White, Kowal, Fox, & Paradies, 2014b). Fear may stand in teachers’ way of addressing race and racism (Copenhaver, 2000). Early childhood teachers, who are predominantly White, may fear offending children and families, fear drawing attention to children’s differences, fear appearing racist, and fear instilling prejudice and racism in young children (Copenhaver, 2000; Gay & Howard, 2000; Marshall, 1998). Early childhood educators may also believe that children are simply too young to engage in discussions about race (e.g., Boutte, 2008; Boutte et al., 2011; Gay & Howard, 2000; Husband, 2012; Ramsey, 2004). Additionally, early childhood teachers, who are overwhelmingly White and presumably largely colorblind, may be unlikely to view racism and discrimination as salient concerns in today’s world. Some teachers teaching predominantly White students may believe that addressing diversity or multicultural education is irrelevant for White student bodies (Wall-Lucas, 2006). However, scholars argue that multicultural and anti-bias education should be part of the school.
curriculum in all schools, regardless of the ethnic composition of the student body (e.g., Gay & Howard, 2000).

As discussed previously, remaining silent about issues of oppression may connote agreement with racism; “although we are not teaching children prejudice, we are not teaching them not to be prejudiced” either (Boutte, 2008, p. 171). The most pernicious silence in schools is the silence surrounding race, a silence that can contribute to the normalization of racism in society (Polite & Saenger, 2003). As Derman-Sparks and the ABC Task Force (1989) reinforce, “children are as vulnerable to omissions as they are to inaccuracies and stereotypes” (pg. 5). Whereas scholars of social psychology and educational theory have widely published on the topic of colorblindness, researchers have not linked colorblind beliefs and practices of early childhood educators to classroom practices and child outcomes. This type of research is sorely needed to better understand how teacher attitudes and practices surrounding racial diversity impact children.

Blindness to race remains a “privilege” available exclusively to Whites and relieves individuals from fighting against the impact of racism. Instead of color-blindness, color-consciousness should be the collective goal of classrooms (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Kemple, Lee, & Harris, 2015; Ullucci & Battey, 2011). At times, teachers espousing colorblind ideology may discuss race with children, however in ways that avoid the critical examination of privilege, oppression, and structural racism (e.g., see Hollingworth, 2009 for a discussion; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Discussing issues of privilege and oppression are particularly important for White children – lack of discussions surrounding these topics may lead to the development of racial superiority and to the maintenance of a system of White privilege. In a qualitative investigation, Priest, Walton, White, Kowal, Fox, and Paradies (2014b) found that 3
out of 4 primary school teachers in Australia (teaching 8-12 year-olds) focused on culture rather than on race or ethnicity, and glossed over racial differences. Teachers remained silent around issues of skin color and racism even though they used highly relevant curriculum content (e.g., that covered White Australia Policy and Stolen Generations) (Priest et al., 2014b). The authors highlight the need for professional development support and training, as even when teachers recognized the need to discuss racism they do not feel confident in doing so (also see Bullock, 1996; Desai, 1997).

Discussing race and racism, and promoting cross-racial friendships, may be particularly important for children in the dominant group. In one study, White parents deferred to the school for these aspects of ethnic-racial socialization, and said they did not take an active role in addressing these issue at home (Hamm, 2001). This study indicates that if White children are not exposed to these topics in school settings, chances are they will not be exposed to them at home either (Hamm, 2001).

**From Theory to Action: How to Discuss Race and Racism with Young Children?**

As discussed earlier, if no specific reason is given for the use of a social category, children may assume that people vastly differ along this category dimension and may develop stereotypes and prejudice (see Hughes & Bigler, 2007). However, if a specific reason is given for the use of a social category (e.g., use of race when discussing racism), children may not develop broad stereotypes about the group's attributes (Hughes, Bigler, & Levy, 2007; Pahlke, Bigler, & Martin, 2014; Lamb, Bigler, Liben, & Green, 2009). Overall, researching how teachers discuss social categories such as race with young children and how young children perceive and reproduce these discussions is important to inform anti-bias teaching practices.
The anti-bias curricular approach recommends that teachers create a classroom environment that sets the stage for children and teachers to have conversations about topics such as skin color and racism (Derman-Sparks and the ABC Task Force, 1989). Much like teachers create learning opportunities for academic content, they should design learning opportunities where children can discuss topics and enrich their thinking surrounding race. The visual environment that includes images and photos of diverse groups of people and classroom materials such as dolls, dramatic play materials, and books can help teachers introduce activities and conversations surrounding racial diversity (see Lee, Ramsey, & Sweeney, 2009). Of course, the mere presence of multicultural classroom materials is not enough; even in classrooms filled with multicultural materials there can be a culture of silence or “colormuteness”, which may send the message to children that racial diversity is seen, but not heard (Park, 2011). Therefore, the anti-bias framework (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010) calls for activities and interactions that teach children to actively counteract discrimination and stereotyping, while celebrating diversity and identity (for examples of preschool activities surrounding race see Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Lee, Ramsey, & Sweeney, 2009; and Pelo, 2008). Although anti-bias frameworks for teaching young children have been developed, research is needed to investigate how children interpret race-related messages or silence of messages in classroom settings.

Teachers may claim that they have no time to address topics such as race and racism. Although we agree with Van Ausdale and Feagin’s (2001) claim that teachers are highly constrained by time and resources, and as a result do not deeply delve into in-depth discussions surrounding race, this does not have to be so. NAEYC program standards advocate for developmentally appropriate practices that are culturally appropriate (Lee, Ramsey, & Sweeney, 2009. Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009) advocates for
teachers to promote the social, emotional, moral, physical, and cognitive development of children. Further, the professional code of ethics of NAEYC heed that teachers should engage in practices that do not harm children (see Boutte, Lopez-Robertson, & Powers-Costello, 2011). Teachers who aim to meet these professional development standards have no choice but to address race and racism – and become the intentional teachers who purposefully create a caring community of learners as recommended by DAP (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

Addressing race and racism can and should be interwoven into early childhood programs to meet the professional guidelines outlined. The development of cooperative and prosocial behaviors, empathy, conscience and sense of fairness, and pre-academic goals such as early literacy must be met according to DAP (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009) – and the themes of race and racism touches on all of these skills and developmental milestones. In other words, addressing race and racism can easily be made a top priority when teachers are already designing activities to promote various aspects of child development – instead of viewing these topics as “extras”, teachers can ask themselves, for instance, how they can address race and racism in ways that promote empathy or pre-literacy skills. Much like a teacher would not argue that she has no time to address the development of empathy or reading in children, once addressing race and racism is viewed as a top professional goal, colorblind practices will fall by the wayside and be deemed developmentally inappropriate.

**The Use of Early Literacy to Address Race and Racism**

One method of discussing race and racism with young children involves the use of books (e.g., Copenhaver, 2000; Copenhaver-Johnson, 2006; Hollingworth, 2009; Kemple et al., 2015; Kemple & Lopez, 2009; Lazar & Offenberg, 2011; Rogers & Mosely, 2006). Children are naturally curious and may ask questions about physical differences and other issues related to
racial diversity. Book sharing practices are excellent for engaging children about these topics (Kemple et al., 2015). Kemple and colleagues (2015) argue that with young children, a developmentally appropriate way to discuss diversity is to focus on physical differences, such as skin color, hair color, and facial features.

In one study, teachers teaching 9-year-olds as part of a summer literacy program read books about historical figures such as Ruby Bridges and Benjamin Banneker to students. Teachers tended to focus on the perspectives, feelings, and traits of the story protagonists and shied away from discussing racism as a system of White advantage, power, privilege, and oppression (Lazar & Offenberg, 2011). Teachers engaged in “White talk”, which insulates Whites from taking responsibility for racism (Lazar & Offenberg, 2011; McIntyre, 1997). White talk involves not identifying those engaging in racist acts as White. For example, teachers used the terms “they”, “other people”, and “townspeople” when describing the perpetrators, however did not connect this to Whiteness. Also, some of the teacher discussions indicated that teachers viewed racism as a thing of the past and did not connect the content of the books to racism today.

If children do not understand the underlying roots of racism and discrimination and recognize that these are contemporary problems impacting communities of color, their views of race and racism may be distorted (Lazar & Offenberg, 2011). In other words, just exposing children to multicultural literature is not enough. We need to understand what kinds of conversations teachers are having when discussing these works of literature with students and how children interpret and are impacted by these conversations.

In Hollingworth’s (2009) case study of an elementary school teacher teaching 4th and 5th grade students revealed that the teacher’s colorblind ideology surrounding race influenced how she moderated classroom discussions surrounding race and racism. Although the teacher was
intentional about addressing racial stereotypes, she believed the best way to do this was to make race invisible and teach children not to judge people based on their skin color. She did not engage in discussions surrounding privilege or power, normalized Whiteness, and discussed racism as the historical past. She politely chose to be blind to race, which is understood to be a “…graceful, even generous, liberal gesture. To notice it is to recognize an already discredited difference” (pp. 9-10, Morrison, 1992 as cited in Hollingworth, 2009).

One of the few studies examining children’s discussion of racism found that White children in a 2nd grade classroom engaged in White talk which included reinforcing White privilege, denying racism, as well in some instances apologizing for racism and interrupting it (Rogers & Mosley, 2006). In a discussion about segregation some children expressed that laws requiring African Americans to be sitting at the back of the bus were not that bad since “they” at least did not have to walk. One White child mentioned that he would not have minded to have to sit at the back of the bus and another added on that “cause my feet could get tired”. Children also mentioned the desire to steal a slave masters’ whip so he could not hit the slaves.

Rogers and Mosley (2006) note that few White allies or anti-racist activists make their way into literature for children (and adults). They suggest that these examples of Whiteness are important for children to see so they can see ways that Whiteness can be used to benefit society (Rogers & Mosley, 2006). However, teachers rarely discuss White allies (Lazar & Offenberg, 2011) and since White allies are missing from most books, children rarely have opportunities to understand this concept.

Multicultural educators may address race and diversity without ever addressing White privilege or interrogating the benefits White skin has conferred on groups of individuals (e.g., Hollingworth, 2009; Lazar & Offenberg, 2001; Rogers & Mosley, 2006). McIntosh (1988) in her
seminal paper “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” argues that it is critical to examine the unearned privileges White skin confers on White people. Racial privilege is unearned entitlement which confers dominance over other groups. When White folks work to benefit others they usually focus on allowing others to be more like them, not changing themselves. White privilege plays out in the classroom, via classroom materials such as books, which either ignore or can stereotypically represent children of color. White parents likely never have to be concerned about whether their children will be reflected in classroom materials. As Peggy McIntosh argues, White parents can be sure that curricular materials (e.g., books) for their children testify to the existence of their race. Whites can also decide whether to engage with the topic of privilege, or to altogether avoid addressing this issue. Fostering an understanding of White privilege in young children may help them empathize with the racial discrimination that their friends of color face – and may urge preschool children, who already have a developing sense of right and wrong in preschool, to interrupt racism.

It is not surprising that how children engage in discussions surrounding race may depend on their racial background. For instance, Copenhaver (2000) found that White 1st graders tended to withdraw from discussions of picture books with African American themes, whereas African American children responded enthusiastically. If ethnic-racial socialization, especially in Black families, begins young, whereas in White families the topic of race is avoided, it should come as no surprise that children of color are more prepared to handle discussions of race than White children. The challenge facing teachers teaching in diverse settings is to discuss racism with children who have differing levels of comfort and knowledge about this issue. Yet another challenge teachers face is that there is a dearth of books representing children and families of color in children’s literature and a dearth of books for children that explicitly address racism.
Race and Racism in Children’s Books

Children’s literature strongly underrepresents children of color (CCBC, 2015). Of the 3,500 children’s books reviewed by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center (University of Wisconsin-Madison) in 2014, only 180 (5.1%) were about African-Americans, 112 (3.2%) were about Asian Pacific Americans, 66 (1.9%) were about Latinos, and 38 (1%) were about Native Americans (CCBC, 2015). When children’s literature does feature characters of color, they are often represented in stereotypic ways (see Mendoza & Reese, 2001). For example, in an analysis of 23 children’s books depicting African or African American characters, Smith-D’Arezzo and Musgrove (2011) found that many of the books depict stereotypical messages and overemphasize the ability of characters to overcome hardship as opposed to recognizing the role of privilege and racism in character’s lives. The authors also found that few master themes recurred in the books (i.e., slavery & oppression, happy Black families) -- the books were not representing the heteronormativity within the African American population. This reflects the findings of Smith (1979) who showed that the majority of Black families in children’s literature focused on hardships the families faced without discussing the root (i.e., racism and discrimination) of these hardships and empowering families to imagine a better future for themselves. Smith (1979) argues that children construct perceptions of reality from books at a young age -- without emphasizing positive characteristics and interactions of Black families, African American children are not receiving self-enhancing messages that accurately reflect their communities. Upon reading these books, children’s rudimentary stereotypes about particular groups of people may be reinforced, therefore careful planning must be put into selecting books.

Teachers have the opportunity to increase the complexity of children’s schemas regarding race through planned and spontaneous classroom activities and interactions. However, teachers
should ensure that they carefully select books and screen them for stereotypical representations by relying on established guidelines (e.g., D’Angelo & Dixey, 2001; Glazer 1997; Mendoza & Reese, 2001). There are numerous scholars who have outlined guidelines that can help teachers select and discuss books about race and racism (e.g., Boutte et al., 2011; D’Angelo & Dixey, 2001; Glazer, 1997; Kemple et al., 2015; Mendoza & Reese, 2001; Smith-D’Arezzo & Musgrove, 2011). For instance, Boutte and colleagues (2011) share steps (p. 340) teachers can use to engage young children in conversations surrounding race and racism. The authors recognize the discomfort early childhood teachers may face in doing anti-bias work and urge teachers to continue doing this work until it becomes the routine, not the exception (Boutte et al., 2011). Similarly, Kemple and colleagues (2015) urge teachers to use the “Question with CARE” approach when reading to children about race and racism. This approach consists of using a variety of questions, correcting of responses, modeling language use, and affirming as well as expanding children’s responses.

Glazer (1997) recommends six steps teachers can use to evaluate the cultural content of books, including checking for accurate a) information and illustrations, b) portrayal of the names and language of characters, c) non-stereotypical illustrations, and d) positive depictions of diversity. Overall, the books should elicit favorable responses from readers and help readers view diversity as an asset to society (see Glazer, 1997 as cited in D’Angelo & Dixey, 2001). Mendoza and Reese (2011) outline common pitfalls in selecting multicultural children’s books that on the surface may appear to be high quality, widely available, and popular, yet misrepresent people of color. The authors provide extensive information about how teachers can ensure that the books they select are up-to-date and accurately reflect people of color (Mendoza & Reese, 2011). Smith-D’Arezzo and Musgrove (2011) suggest (p. 199) that teachers vary the stories
presented to children, use books with different plot structures, help children see hidden messages in stories, and help children seek out different interpretation of stories.

Boutte and colleagues (2011) also urge teachers to use both fiction and non-fiction books to make sure that race and racism are not represented as imaginary and unreal. This can particularly be an issue when selecting books for young children – some books may use imaginary colors and animals to address themes of exclusion, unfairness, or racism, reflecting society’s unease in addressing these topics with its youngest members. One issue to note here is that although books addressing race and racism are critical, classrooms should have a wide variety of books representing children and families of color dealing with everyday routines such as going to school, playing, and more. If books about children and families of color are only used in the context of addressing racism, teachers run the risk of perpetuating stereotypical and limited views of communities of color. Similarly, Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) suggest that teachers use books on common, everyday people, not just ones with a happy endings. Another body of work that may inform best practices for discussing race and racism with young children is based on prejudice reduction interventions primarily in the fields of developmental and social psychology. The major take-home points from this body of work are discussed next and applied to teacher practices.

**Practical Lessons from Prejudice Intervention Literature**

When designing early childhood activities and curricula aimed to tackle racist beliefs and attitudes, drawing on the extensive developmental and social psychology literature about racial-ethnic prejudice reduction in young children can be helpful. In general, most scholars agree that early interventions targeting preschoolers are more effective than those targeting older children (Brown, 2011). This may come as good news to early childhood teachers who can play a role in
shaping the malleable racial attitudes of young children. Reviews of prejudice reduction interventions suggest that discussions have to be explicit and tailored to children’s cognitive abilities (Aboud & Fenwick, 1999; Aboud et al., 2012; Beelmann & Heinemann, 2014; Bigler, 1999; Brown, 2011). In other words, positive talk focusing on treating others kindly and fairly is not enough. In fact, a recent intervention designed to address sexism in 4-10 year-olds found that the intervention was more effective when children learned about gender bias (e.g., gender-based teasing) as compared to when they learned about unfair behaviors with no mention of gender (e.g., teasing) (Pahlke, Bigler, & Martin, 2014). This work suggests that general anti-bullying interventions, such as reading books about bullying, are not likely to be effective in reducing racism, unless learning about racism is an explicit and salient aspect of the curriculum. If teachers hope to tackle racism, they have to be intentional about designing activities that render race and racism salient.

Intervention programs using teacher-led discussions and storybook activities can be successful in reducing prejudice in young children (Aboud & Fenwick, 1999; Aboud et al., 2012). For instance, anti-bias instruction that exposes children to incidents of exclusion and provides specific emotional and behavioral responses can reduce prejudice (Aboud et al., 2012). Storybook tasks can encourage perspective taking and empathy, skills tied to reduction of prejudice (for reviews see Beelmann & Heinemann, 2014; Paluck & Green, 2009). Overall, the most effective intervention programs discuss discrimination explicitly, give children an opportunity to practice anti-bias responses, and involve explicit discussions of how stereotypes are inaccurate (see Brown 2011). Concrete, specific, counter-stereotypical examples are needed to accommodate young children’s cognitive developmental level (Aboud et al., 2012; Bigler 1999).
Teachers have to be vigilant that the messages they intend to send children are what children take away. Multicultural curricular interventions can increase children’s stereotyping (see Bigler, 1999), therefore it is important for teachers to critically examine their strategies for addressing race and racism and closely monitor what children are learning. Further, repeated exposure to anti-bias messages is needed, as often the effects of multicultural interventions are short-lived (see Bigler, 1999). In other words, in line with what anti-bias scholars advise, anti-bias curricula needs to be interwoven into the everyday fabric of classroom interactions and activities. Discussing race and racism on special holidays or during specific times of the year (e.g., Black History Month) is at best ineffective and at worst can reinforce stereotypes (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). Experimental work in psychology and anti-bias scholars suggest the need for teachers to emphasize ways in which social groups are similar and different (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Levy et al., 2005; Pedersen, Walker, Paradies, & Guerin, 2011; Ramsey, 2009). However, research is needed in this area, as little is known about how young children interpret messages about group similarity and group difference, and in turn how these understandings are linked to prejudice development.

Although much is known about experimental work on prejudice reduction, few of these findings ever reach teachers and teacher educators. Teachers need support to be equipped with skills to build an inclusive school culture and practice anti-bias curricula (Dessel, 2010). Educators and researchers must collaborate, and draw on theories of prejudice development and intergroup relations to effectively evaluate how their curricula impact children’s perceptions of social groups such as race (Cameron & Turner, 2010). In general, lab and field research are rarely coordinated and many intervention approaches are never evaluated (Aboud et al., 2012; Paluck & Green, 2009). It is important to understand how different racial socialization practices
of teachers in the field impact and are perceived by children, hence further research is needed in this area.

**Effects of Discussing Race and Racism with Young Children**

Teachers’ fears and trepidation about broaching the subject of race and racism with young children may be put to rest by studies showing that teaching children about racism and discrimination does no harm, and in fact, can have positive consequences for intergroup attitudes. In one study, after receiving history lessons about racism, 6-11 year-old White children showed less biased attitudes towards African Americans (Hughes et al., 2007). Although negative emotions, such as guilt and defensiveness, increased, these emotions remained at low levels. For minority children, the negative effects of learning about racism, such as racial stereotypes, may include being concerned about differential treatment because of group membership (McKown, 2004; McKown & Weinstein, 2003). Also, when children develop knowledge of broadly held stereotypes, they may attribute discriminatory intent to people in interracial interactions (McKown & Strambler, 2009). Possibly, raising children’s awareness of societal inequities such as racial disparities, discrimination, and racial barriers without ensuring they have effective coping strategies can be harmful, as some of the parent ethnic-racial socialization literature with older children indicates (see Lesane-Brown, 2006). Prejudice interventions can increase prejudice, particularly for children who are highly biased to begin with, as they may distort or misremember counter-stereotypical information (e.g., see Bigler 1999; Bigler & Liben, 1993).

Although there are some negative effects of learning about racism, the benefits outweigh its detriments (see Bigler & Wright, 2014). The benefits of learning about racism include making extrinsic, rather than intrinsic, explanations for group differences, detection and rejection
of discrimination, and protection of self-esteem (see Bigler & Wright, 2014). Learning about racism likely reduces stereotyping and prejudice, and is beneficial for intergroup attitudes (Hughes et al., 2007). Positive discussion of racism is part of parental ethnic-racial socialization which has been linked to positive ethnic identity development in adolescents (Hughes et al., 2006b). Preparation for bias facilitates coping with prejudice and discrimination, and is linked to higher grades among adolescents (Hughes et al., 2006b). Although expectations for racial discrimination and mistrust can result in undesirable outcomes, prejudice and discrimination are unfortunate realities that children of color face in the world, and that are unlikely to disappear in the near future. Therefore, an early understanding of these realities and how to cope with and counteract them likely benefits all children, and particularly children of color. Racism is the problem, not discussing it – therefore research is needed to better understand how we can effectively train early childhood teachers to view anti-bias education as a priority and to better equip them with strategies to practice anti-racist education.

Boutte and colleagues (2011) argue that the effects of not discussing racism are likely more detrimental than the discussing it. If teachers do not name and acknowledge racism, they cannot teach children to recognize and challenge it (Boutte, Lopez-Robertson, & Powers-Costello, 2011). Without active countering of racism and colorblindness, children are likely to develop misconceptions, stereotypes, and discriminatory behavior (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). Further, the lack of discussion of racism may cause White children to internalize ideas about racial superiority, and children of color to internalize some of the negative messages society is sending them (internalized domination vs. internalized oppression, see Tappan, 2006). Although all children can be prejudiced, in Van Ausdale and Feagin’s (2001) study no children of color used racist epithets to control White children; however, White children used racist
epithets toward their peers of color. As Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) note, racist actions by White children reflect what children and families of color face in larger society. In contrast, White children and families are not likely to view racist actions as part of lifelong struggle against exclusion and marginalization (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Learning about racial privilege starts early, therefore it is important for teachers to address race and racism through anti-bias curricula, particularly because not addressing these issues likely has a disproportionately negative impact on children of color.

**Implications for Teacher Training and Professional Development**

As emphasized in the introduction, one cause of the marginalization of children of color in academic institutions may be lack of adequate teacher training (e.g., Gay & Howard, 2000; D’Andrea, Daniels, & Noonan, 2003). Indeed, some of the studies reviewed indicate that even teachers who are motivated to address racism express lack of confidence and uncertainty about how to do so (e.g., Bullock, 1996; Priest et al., 2014b). Becoming a culturally and racially competent teacher is not an easy task. Teachers must reflect on their own prejudices and biases before they can address these issues with children (e.g., D’Angelo & Dixey, 2001). Developing a “critical cultural consciousness” (Lin, Lake, & Rice, 2008, p. 189) entails honest self-reflection that challenges one’s assumptions regarding race, privilege, power, and cultural norms (Milner, 2003; Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006). The question becomes, then, how can professional development and teacher education programs create change at as deep a level as critical cultural consciousness requires?

According to Garmon (2005), there are two areas which facilitate the development of a critical cultural consciousness: personal character traits and dispositions (in terms of: openness,
self-awareness, commitment to justice), and experience (inter-cultural, support group, and educational experiences). Teacher education programs tend to have many of these components but the one that can be short-shafted are those elements that require self-reflection. Research on improving teacher practice indicates that self-reflection is a crucial component to improved teacher practices in general (LoCasale-Crouch et al. 2012), and this is certainly the case for beliefs that are as deep-seated as the assumptions and values held about race (Lin, Lake, & Rice, 2008).

Self-reflection, however, does not just happen overnight. Effective teacher training must engage the teacher by inviting her to confront her established belief system. This can be done through structured observations in which the teacher is videotaped interacting with children. The teacher subsequently views these videotaped interactions with a mentor who provides in-depth and structured feedback that is designed to prompt the teacher to reflect upon the assumptions behind her actions (e.g. Downer, Kraft-Sayre, & Pianta). Valuable self-reflection can also occur in the educational realm through intercultural exchange or immersion into educational environments that are different culturally, racially, and ethnically from one’s own.

D’Angelo & Dixey (2001) urge teachers to reflect on their own racialized beliefs and prejudices by asking themselves the following questions: “Do I believe some races are more capable of learning and have greater intelligence than other races? Do I model respectful and positive attitudes in the classroom for all races and ethnic groups? Do I integrate race and ethnic issues in the curriculum exclusively through thematic units, holidays, and celebrations?” (p. 84). The authors also offer resources for teachers to create an unprejudiced and supportive learning environment for all children. Similarly, Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) urge teachers to reflect
on their own biases, take instances of racism very seriously, and invite community members to the classroom who are engaged in anti-racist work.

Earick (2009) describes how current racial ideologies are used to maintain White privilege and provides practical anti-racist classroom applications for teachers and administrators. Books like these are critical to implement into teacher training programs and professional development workshops (Saavedra, 2009). Additionally, narratives such as that of Summer (2014) in which the author describes her “racialized awakening” after a parent called her racist can be used to urge pre-service teachers to reflect on their racial biases and classroom practices. Summer (2014) took the “you are racist” accusation as an opportunity to reflect on racially inequitable teaching practices and school policies, to resist deficit perspectives of children of color, to openly discuss race and racism with her students, and to critique the literature she used in her classroom. As the story of Summer’s (2014) “racialized awakening” illustrates, naming and recognizing racism are not sufficient – action must follow, lest well-intentioned teachers passionate about children’s well-being cause unintended harm.

**Conclusion**

Overall, more research is needed to explore how teachers discuss race and racism with young, preschool-age children. Questions remain about the types of classroom materials and curricula early childhood teachers rely on to prompt discussions about racial diversity with children, as well as about how teachers use these materials and curricula. Importantly, understanding how race-related classroom practices are perceived by young children is a critical area of research to pursue. As noted earlier, there is often discrepancy between the messages adults think they send or intend to send to children and the messages children actually receive. Young, preschool-age children’s cognitive skills and abilities have to be considered when
evaluating the effects of anti-bias classroom practices. Even teachers with the best of intentions may inadvertently reinforce racial biases they are not vigilant about assessing children’s perspectives and understandings of activities and discussions surrounding race and racism.

Additionally, understanding the characteristics of teachers who use anti-bias practices will be important for informing teacher training programs. What prompted these teachers to address race and racism in the classroom? Are these teachers intentional about the use of these practices and if so, why? Do experiences of discrimination predict anti-bias practices? Do years of teaching experience contribute to the use of anti-bias practices? How does the racial composition of the classroom impact whether and how these classroom practices are used? As Boutte and colleagues (2011) argue, it will be important to find ways for White teachers to move beyond their comfort zones and address racism on behalf of children who are most impacted by it. There is a tremendous opportunity that early childhood educators have in preparing children to live in an increasingly globalized and ethnically integrated world. However, work remains to be done to better understand how classroom practices, such as discussing race and racism, can help teachers and children co-create classroom environments that nurture appreciation and celebration of racial diversity.
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