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## CHAPTER 6

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### **Ethnic-Racial Socialization in Early Childhood: The Implications of Color-consciousness and Colorblindness for Prejudice Development**

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*“A student of mine who had darker skin was being told by others that they didn't want to play with him because of his "weird skin." I wasn't sure where this was stemming from, so the next day I read a book that had different children in it with different color skin who were talking about their skin. Then we had a small discussion about everyone's skin in the room and what color it is. We asked and answered questions like: Why is our skin different? How is our skin the same? Did we get to pick the color of our skin? Does the color of our skin matter while playing and making friends?” -a preschool teacher*

Children are often perceived to be innocent or colorblind<sup>1</sup>, pure and untainted. In the face of these widely held notions about the youngest people in our society, adults are often surprised to find out young children develop racial stereotypes and prejudice around 3-5 years of age (for reviews see Cristol & Gimbert, 2008; Levy & J. M. Hughes, 2009). As the opening quote demonstrates, children begin to navigate messages around race before they learn to read, count, or ride a bike without training wheels. Yet, in contrast to adults' attempts to teach children those skills, most adults avoid conversations about race, ethnicity, or racism with young children (e.g., Vittrup, 2016b). White adults, who comprise about 80% of the public school, K-12 teaching

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<sup>1</sup> “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 that potentially perpetuate negative stereotypes about people with disabilities.

force (Taie & Goldring, 2017), are especially hesitant to discuss race (Hamm, 2001). Research involving adults of color, specifically Black and Latinx parents, indicates that although discussing race is more common for parents with older children, at least some parents with young children *do* address topics such as ethnic pride or racial identity (e.g., Caughy & Owen, 2014; Suizzo, Robinson, & Pahlke, 2008). Discussing with or teaching children about race or ethnicity is defined by developmental scholars as *ethnic-racial socialization*. D. Hughes and colleagues (2017) more specifically define ethnic-racial socialization as “behaviors, practices, and social regularities that communicate information and worldviews about race and ethnicity to children” (p. 255). Although documenting the process and benefits of ethnic-racial socialization stems from the need to support and uplift the well-being of children and families of color, increasingly, scholars argue understanding racial socialization of White children is also important (D. Hughes, Watford, & Del Toro, 2016). Researchers have begun to document ways in which White parents and teachers send messages of silence, colorblindness, and colormuteness<sup>1</sup> to children in their care (Bartoli et al., 2016; Pahlke, Bigler, & Suizzo, 2012; Vittrup, 2016a; Vittrup & Holden, 2011).

The benefits of ethnic-racial socialization for young children’s cognitive and social development are becoming increasingly apparent (Caughy, O’Campo, Randolph, & Nickerson, 2002; Caughy & Owen, 2014). Ethnic-racial socialization, particularly hearing positive messages about one’s race or ethnicity, may serve as a buffer against the impact of discrimination and prejudice in young children. Although, most ethnic-racial socialization work has been conducted with parents and family members, scholars, including the authors of this chapter, argue the need to apply principles of ethnic-racial socialization to both school and early childhood education contexts (Aldana & Byrd, 2015; Farago, Sanders, & Gaias, 2015). Educators can critically

engage their students in discussions about race and racism and use instances of bias or exclusion for what Havighurst (1972) coined as “teachable moments,” or opportunities when learning a particular idea is easiest.

In this chapter, we argue ethnic-racial socialization can protect children of color from the harmful impact of racial prejudice and discrimination, and prepare White children to bravely confront racial prejudice in themselves and others. We are extending the principles of ethnic-racial socialization to early childhood education contexts and expanding the notion of ethnic-racial socialization to encompass ideologies of colorblindness, color-consciousness, and anti-bias approaches. Our four primary goals are a) to synthesize the limited research conducted on ethnic-racial socialization in early childhood contexts; b) to highlight the intentional and unintentional ethnic-racial socialization that early childhood educators engage in via colorblind and anti-bias practices; c) to extend the work on ethnic-racial socialization to White children; and, d) to draw the connection between ethnic-racial socialization practices and anti-bias education.

### **Ethnic-Racial Socialization of Young Children**

Ethnic-racial socialization has primarily been studied in home contexts with parents of color, with mothers predominantly serving as the most important agents of ethnic-racial socialization (for a review see Priest et al., 2014). Recently, ethnic-racial socialization work has been expanded to school and early childhood contexts (Aldana & Byrd, 2015; Byrd, 2017; Vittrup, 2016b). Teachers in early childhood contexts are authority figures who can relay messages to children about race through classroom practices, choice of curricular materials, and interactions with families. Importantly, teacher practices which are present as well as absent, or acts of inclusion *and* omission, may send messages to children about race. On a positive note, teachers’

cultural or racial competence and ethnic-racial socialization practices can serve as protective factors for children of color in the face of bias and discrimination.

### **The Content of Ethnic-Racial Socialization**

Ethnic-racial socialization is conceptualized by developmental scholars according to areas of content. D. Hughes and colleagues (2006) identified four ethnic-racial socialization content categories throughout the empirical literature: *cultural socialization*, *preparation for bias*, *promotion of mistrust*, and *egalitarianism*. Lesane-Brown (2006) highlighted three similar categories: *culture messages*, *minority experience*, and *mainstream experience*. We briefly review research on these various content categories of ethnic-racial socialization in the following sections.

**Cultural socialization.** Although sometimes using varied terminology, the majority of studies reviewed by D. Hughes and colleagues (2006) and all of the studies reviewed by Lesane-Brown (2006) included some measure of what is termed *cultural socialization*. This is the most common type of ethnic-racial socialization message relayed by African American, Puerto Rican, and Dominican parents (D. Hughes, 2003), as well as by Mexican-American (Knight Bernal, Garza, Cota, & Ocampo, 1993) and Latinx (Barbarin & Jean-Baptiste, 2013) families with young children. Parents, in reviewed quantitative studies, use cultural socialization messages to teach children about their cultural heritage, customs, traditions, and history, as well as to promote ethnic and cultural pride. In qualitative studies, parents often report promoting cultural pride to their children as a way to respond to racism (Anderson et al., 2015; Crolley-Simic & Vonk, 2008).

**Preparation for bias.** Studies with African American parents report ethnic-racial socialization in the form of *preparation for bias/minority experience*. These types of messages

increase awareness of bias and discrimination that enable children with coping resources and mechanisms specific to the African American experience. Preparation for bias has typically emerged in qualitative discussions and focus groups of parents ( i.e., Hamm, 2001). Even parents of young children engage in preparation for bias, albeit less frequently than in other types of socialization (Caughy et al., 2002; D. Hughes & Chen, 1997; Spencer, 1983).

**Promotion of mistrust.** D. Hughes and colleagues (2006) define *promotion of mistrust* as an aspect of ethnic-racial socialization that entails “practices that emphasize the need for wariness and distrust in interracial interactions” (p. 757). Lesane-Brown (2006) grouped these practices with messages pertaining to the (Black) minority experience. Parents, in studies reviewed by D. Hughes and colleagues (2006), rarely reported conveying mistrust to their children; however, the “mistrust” theme has shown up in qualitative studies (e.g., Coard, Wallace, Stevenson, & Brotman, 2004).

**Egalitarianism, mainstream socialization, and silence.** Parents often endorse *egalitarianism/mainstream socialization experience* when questioned about ethnic-racial socialization of their children (D.Hughes et al., 2006). Egalitarian or mainstream socialization messages encourage children to develop individual skills, such as perseverance, rather than characteristics oriented toward race or ethnicity, to be successful in settings steeped in mainstream or dominant (non-minority) culture. Egalitarianism/mainstream socialization encourages children to focus on individual characteristics, as opposed to characteristics about being a minority, to thrive in society. D. Hughes and colleagues (2006) also included *silence*, or the absence of communication about race, in the category of egalitarianism. Silence has not been traditionally included as an aspect of ethnic-racial socialization and is challenging to empirically conceptualize and measure (D. Hughes et al., 2006).

## Racial Socialization in White Families

Although the bulk of studies have examined ethnic-racial socialization in families of color, some work has documented racial socialization in White families (e.g., Hamm, 2001; Lesane-Brown, Brown, Tanner-Smith, & Bruce, 2010; Pahlke et al., 2012; Vittrup, 2016a; Vittrup & Holden, 2011). White parents often avoid discussing race and adopt a colorblind or color-mute approach to ethnic-racial socialization (Hamm, 2001; Lesane-Brown et al. 2010; Pahlke et al., 2012; Vittrup, 2016a; Vittrup & Holden, 2011), which primarily entails communicating silence, discussing race in vague, superficial terms, or actively avoiding the topic of race altogether. Colorblind or color-mute approaches contrast with *color- or race-conscious* approaches that involve explicit discussions of race, racism and race-relations with children. In an online survey study (Vittrup, 2016), 107 White mothers of 4- to 7-year-old children were asked about their racial socialization practices. Most mothers indicated this topic was important to discuss, especially for the purpose of eliminating bias and discrimination. However, many mothers reported having no or only vague discussions. Thirty percent were categorized as having a color-conscious approach, whereas 70% indicated a colorblind or color-mute approach. Comparatively, studies find parents from minority backgrounds talk to their children about their racial/ethnic heritage several times per month. Two out of three Black parents (63.6%) in Thornton and colleagues' (1990) study, along with more than 90% of Puerto Rican, Dominican, and African American parents in D. Hughes' (2003) sample affirmed they socialize their children with regard to race.

When White parents do talk about race, their messages are limited. In a qualitative study of 13 adolescents and 23 parents, Bartoli and colleagues (2016) found White youth primarily received messages about colorblindness. Parents encouraged children to avoid acknowledging,

naming, or talking about race and racial differences and to avoid using the racial term “Black.” These strategies, although not necessarily ill-intentioned, may hinder White children’s ability to identify racial prejudice and injustice in their environment and minimize or deny the identities and experiences of children and families of color.

### **The Impact of Ethnic-Racial Socialization on Young Children**

Ethnic-racial socialization strategies have been found to influence a variety of outcomes including identity formation, psychological factors, and academic achievement (Banerjee, Harrell, & Johnson, 2011; D. Hughes & Johnson, 2001; White-Johnson, Ford, & Sellers, 2010). Parents and caregivers utilizing positive ethnic and racial socialization strategies tend to raise children with better cognitive functioning (Banerjee et al., 2011; Caughy, Nettles, & Lima, 2011), stronger cross-race friendships and social skills (Hamm, 2001), and fewer mental health issues (McHale et al., 2006). Research on ethnic-racial socialization practices of parents of color indicates fostering a sense of ethnic pride and preparation for bias can serve as protective factors for students of color in the face of bias and discrimination (Harris-Britt, Valrie, Kurtz-Costes, & Rowley, 2007). However, the vast majority of studies have focused solely on parents and families as conductors of ethnic learning. To capture a holistic view of the kind of messages children receive about race and racism, and how children interpret messages to generate their own understandings, it is important to examine ethnic-racial socialization practices outside of the family context.

Education literature continues to highlight the increasing racial and cultural diversity of our nation’s children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012) in contrast to the predominately White teaching workforce (Taie & Goldring, 2017). Early childhood programs follow this trend, though to a lesser degree (Reid & Kagan, 2015; Whitebook, McLean, & Austin, 2016). With federal and

state early childhood funding continuing to increase, the number of children attending pre-k programs and early care settings is on the rise. This puts early childhood programs, and therefore early childhood educators, who are mainly White, in a unique position to greatly influence children's developmental trajectories. As such, an important question to consider becomes: What are the ethnic-racial socialization practices of early childhood educators? Ethnic-racial socialization in early care settings raises questions related to caregiver-child racial or ethnic match, teacher belief systems, and the racial and ethnic composition of early childhood classrooms.

Goals of many early childhood programs focus on meeting developmental milestones, improving social-emotional learning, and developing self-help skills. To add the complex negativism of prejudice and racism to this mix may seem premature or inappropriate to many parents and educators. Preschool classrooms tend to default to overarching themes of treating everyone the same and not "seeing" skin color. Yet, as research shows, very young children are capable and ready to begin thinking about complex social constructs such as race and ethnicity (Cristol & Gimbert, 2008). Furthermore, 5-year-olds have shown evidence of understanding power dynamics associated with race and using racial characteristics to define, include, and exclude others (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 1996). For many children of color, less than ideal aspects of their school environments are countered by supportive home environments in which parents instill racial or ethnic pride. However, for White children, lack of conversations around race and lack of awareness of how racism and race impact the world may foster a sense of superiority and racial privilege and therefore perpetuate stereotypes and prejudice. The absence of messages around race may in fact send an inadvertently strong message about race.

**Colorblindness, Color-muteness, and Color-consciousness in Educational Contexts**

Scholars have argued that silence about race, or colorblindness/color-muteness, is an aspect of ethnic-racial socialization (Aldana & Byrd, 2015; D. Hughes et al., 2006). Colorblindness may implicitly communicate values about race (Aldana & Byrd, 2015). Colorblind racial ideology minimizes or ignores the existence of race and racism in contemporary society (Neville, Gallardo, & Sue, 2016). Professor of law Neil Gotanda (1991) has suggested a colorblind stance is self-contradictory – one cannot “un-see” color or race, or reject its significance, without actually considering race.

Research on colorblindness in teachers has primarily focused on educators in middle school and high-school settings (e.g., Castro-Atwater, 2016; Castagno, 2008; Lewis, 2001; Pollock, 2004; Schofield, 1986, 2007; Sleeter, 1992; Walton et al., 2014), with some literature on early childhood educators (Bernhard, Lefebvre, Kilbride, Chud, & Lange, 1998; Farago, 2016; Husband, 2016; Nash & Miller, 2014; Park, 2011; Vittrup, 2016b). One study involving pre-service teachers found colorblindness predicted low levels of awareness of cultural diversity (Wang, Castro, & Cunningham, 2014). In another study, researchers found colorblind beliefs of 200 social workers were associated with perceptions of minority children as aggressive and out of control in a movie (*Crooklyn* by Spike Lee) (Dunlap, Shueh, Burrell, & Beaubrun, 2017).

In early childhood contexts, racial silence is a “tool of Whiteness” which leaves racialized messages infused with White privilege and White supremacy unchallenged (Doucet & Adair, 2013; Michael & Bartoli, 2016). In one study of 77 Pre-K-2<sup>nd</sup> grade teachers (47% White), 86% of teachers indicated it is important to discuss race-related issues with young children. However, only 42% of teachers said that discussions of race were part of their regular curriculum, and only 21% could identify specific discussions (Vittrup, 2016b). In the same

study, 70% of teachers took on a *color-mute* approach and only 30% of teachers took on a *color-conscious* approach.

Teachers avoided discussing race for the following reasons: believing (erroneously) that children are colorblind; lacking comfort/confidence; viewing discussions around race as parents' responsibility; and fearing or actually encountering parent objections (Vittrup, 2016b). Overall, research has found that teachers, especially White teachers, are not comfortable or skilled at addressing race or racism in the classroom, feel unprepared discussing race and racism with young children, and need support and training in this arena (Bullock, 1996; Farago, 2017; Farago & Swadener, 2016; Priest et al., 2014; Vittrup, 2016b). Teachers may be uncomfortable discussing race, but children in early childhood settings are already learning to navigate racial interactions (Bernhard et al., 1998; Farago, 2016; Nash & Miller, 2014; Park, 2011; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 1996; Vittrup, 2016b). Curiously, in a study of 77 pre-K-2<sup>nd</sup> grade teachers, most educators perceived children to be bias free or just a little biased, but almost half reported witnessing biased statements or discriminatory behaviors among children (Vittrup, 2016b). Given teachers' reluctance to label children as biased, teachers did very little to address or interrupt racial or racist incidents. Part of the issue could be White adults (teachers/parents) may find it challenging to understand young children's knowledge or attitudes about race and may make erroneous assumptions regarding children's racial attitudes and behavior. For instance, in one study, White mothers of young children assumed if their child played with racially diverse playmates or never explicitly mentioned a racist comment, they harbored no racial biases (Vittrup, 2016a).

In another study, 199 predominantly White early childhood teachers and 108 family members of color were interviewed about racial and discriminatory incidents in early care

settings (Bernhard et al., 1998). Although racial and discriminatory incidents were frequent based on both parent and teacher reports, the incidents and the impact of racism were more likely to be noticed by parents than by teachers. Fifty-four percent of teachers reported racial incidents, with the majority being verbal behaviors (45%) such as name-calling or teasing based on skin color. Additionally, exclusion/avoidance (e.g., refusing to sit next to someone) (28%) and attribution of stereotyped roles (16%) were not uncommon. In response to racial incidents, the majority of teachers (71%) talked to children, however, responses also included: doing nothing (16%), conducting group discussions (14%), involving families (12%), consulting colleagues (6%), and documenting the incident (4%). The teachers who reported not seeing any racial incidents (46%) said these incidents are unlikely or impossible to take place with 3- to 6-year-olds.

Furthermore, although teachers often attempt to be silent about race, they communicate colorblindness in other ways. For example, in an ethnographic study, White early childhood teacher educators used a critical race stance as they researched race and racism in two contexts: an early childhood education course and home/community settings with one of the author's own three young children (Nash & Miller, 2014). Findings indicated that discourses of Whiteness were taught to students through the following avenues: *overrepresentation* of White people in books, magazines, media; *omission* of persons of color; *citizenship* whereby White people were depicted as protectors against Black crime; *morality* whereby White people were depicted as wholesome; *re-appropriation* whereby children portrayed White people in their artwork; and, *stereotypes*, whereby Black people were represented as caricatures. In sum, teachers feel uncomfortable and unskilled at addressing race in their classrooms, however racism and Whiteness are still very present.

## **The Impact of Silence and Colorblindness**

Colorblind ideologies may be especially harmful in school contexts, as they make it difficult for teachers and students to identify racism and take actions against it (Husband, 2016; Sapon-Shevin, 2017). Colorblind ideologies contribute to issues with representation in the curriculum, perpetuate implicit racial bias, and hinder teachers' ability and willingness to identify and combat institutionalized racism (Husband, 2016). In some studies, when middle and high school students heard messages from teachers about colorblindness, students felt less connected to others at school and had a more negative view of their academic abilities (Byrd, 2015, 2017). Experimental work indicates that both White children and children of color learn by the age of 9 that mentioning race or racial differences is socially inappropriate (Pauker, Apfelbaum, & Spitzer, 2015), a message that perpetuates colorblindness and its' negative impact, particularly for children of color. In the same study, researchers found minority children were just as likely to avoid talking about race as White children leading to nonverbal discomfort and lower performance on a photo identification task. Results of the study also suggest teachers are particularly important social referents for instilling norms regarding race: children's impression that their teachers avoided race independently predicted their own avoidance of race in a photo task.

In a study with 8- to 11-year-old predominantly White children, those who were exposed to a colorblind message by reading about a teacher who endorsed colorblind beliefs were less likely to recognize racial discrimination as compared to children who were primed with a diversity-valuing message, similar to race-conscious discourses (Apfelbaum, Pauker, Sommers, & Ambady, 2010). Children who are taught principles of colorblindness may disbelieve or discount their peers' experiences of racism and may be less likely to challenge the status quo (see

Farago et al., 2015). Silence regarding race and racial diversity may be particularly harmful to the development of inclusive racial attitudes in European-American children. Silence may transmit the message that talking about race or racism is taboo or inappropriate. However, it is impossible to address and reduce racial prejudice without talking about race. In early childhood classrooms, both verbal expression as well as play materials and toys should reflect racial and ethnic diversity. Although highly theorized, research is lacking on the implications of colorblindness for early childhood contexts. Fruitful areas of study include evaluating the impact of colorblind and color-conscious educational practices on young children's social, emotional, and academic well-being.

### **The Impact of Color-Consciousness**

As a push back against colorblind and color-mute ideologies, scholars, activists, and educators have started to refer to *race-* or *color-conscious* practices (see Bell, 2016 for a review). Race-consciousness entails being informed and transparent about the existence and causes of racial inequality, and how to intentionally redress it. Some benefits of race-conscious discourses are theorized to be a reduction of prejudice, improved inter-group relations, and a greater sense of empathy and perspective taking (see Bell, 2016 for a review). In one study, 6- to 11-year-old White and Black children received history lessons that included information about racism experienced by African Americans (*racism condition*) or identical lessons that omitted this information (*control condition*) (J. M. Hughes, Bigler, & Levy, 2007). Children's racial attitudes and cognitive and affective responses to the lessons were assessed. Among White children, participants showed less prejudiced attitudes toward African Americans in the racism condition than in the control condition. This work demonstrates the benefits of learning about historical discrimination for White children's racial attitudes – messages about race were indispensable to

the intervention. Interestingly, Black children's racial attitudes were not affected by the intervention, presumably because of previous life experiences and familiarity with racial discrimination.

In addition to prejudice reduction, race-conscious approaches may also be effective in reducing racial discipline disparities in early childhood, disparities that are in part created or perpetuated by educators' racial biases. Although very little work has explicitly examined early childhood educators' attitudes about race, recent research on the causes of racial disparities in preschool suspensions and expulsion indicates that teachers' implicit racial biases and racial attitudes play a role (Gilliam, Maupin, Reyes, Accavitti, & Shic, 2016). Using eye-tracking technology, Gilliam and colleagues (2016) found early childhood teachers gazed longer at Black children in video clips, especially at Black boys, when *expecting* challenging behaviors although there were no actual behavioral problems in the videos shown. This work indicates that teachers are potentially far from being colorblind and harbor implicit racial biases about challenging behaviors of children of color, biases which very likely contribute to the disproportionate rates of expulsions and suspensions of young children of color, particularly Black boys (Gilliam et al., 2016). Indeed, Husband (2016) argues colorblind attitudes impede teachers' abilities to reflect on their own views.

Carter, Skiba, Arredondo, and Pollock (2017) call for race-conscious approaches to addressing racial disparities: "If we are to undo the racial inequities that continue to plague us, we must find constructive ways to talk about them and intervene constructively and consciously to end them" (p. 209). The goal of course is not just to talk "more" about racial patterns in discipline; rather, the goal is to discuss those patterns more thoroughly and then ultimately eradicate them (Pollock, 2016). Carter and colleagues (2017) write:

Sustaining a critical conversation about race patterns means asking questions about the full set of interactions that produce discipline patterns; about how race factors into how adults react to students and how students then react to adults; about which false or harmful notions about “races” we carry around with us as we interact; and even when and how thinking of other human beings in terms of race is helpful. (p. 220).

To address and alleviate these biases, we must confront race and racism head on, rather than avoid acknowledging and talking about it. A disease cannot be cured, in this case the disease of racism, without an accurate diagnosis and proper understanding of its causes.

### **Risks of Engaging in Racial Socialization**

Despite the documented benefits of color-conscious approaches in the arena of ethnic-racial socialization, some risks may be involved for both children and teachers, especially in the domain of *preparation for bias*. Learning about racism can re-traumatize and scare young children of color, especially at the hands of an educator who is under- or un-prepared to deal with issues of race in-depth. In a study of 218 Black preschoolers and their parents, depression and anxiety were higher for children who received messages related to preparation for bias and discrimination than for children whose parents only emphasized cultural pride (Caughy et al. 2011). Learning about racism and bias may be emotionally taxing for children, especially for children of color, who may view themselves as potential targets of racial discrimination and bias. It is important to teach children coping skills when addressing issues of racial disparities and discrimination (Lesane-Brown, 2006). Simultaneously teaching young children about racial and cultural pride coupled with messages of racism could be effective.

Another concern is whether school socialization messages are consistent or inconsistent with messages received at home. White children are unlikely to view themselves as or be victims

or targets of racism, and at the same time are less likely to receive messages about racism in home settings. Therefore, educators have an especially important role to play in addressing race and racism with White children. Interestingly, White parents expect schools to play an active role in ethnic-racial socialization (Hamm, 2001). There is also some indication that teachers view discussing racism as a responsibility of parents (Vittrup, 2016b). However, in Vittrup's study, only 25% of teachers believed parents were doing a good job, and some teachers even blamed parents for children's biases. Doucet (2008) argues educators have a lot to learn from parents of color in how to provide continuity and support for ethnic-racial socialization taking place in the home.

For children of color, cultural congruence or continuity between the home and early care context may ease the transition between home and early care settings (see Shivers & Sanders, 2011). Congruence of ethnic-racial socialization between the home and early care contexts is likely very beneficial for children of color. However, the focus on continuity between home and school contexts raises the question of whether continuity regarding colorblind and color-mute socialization is beneficial, or, if in the case of colorblindness, discontinuity is indeed better for children. Based on literature reviewed, the latter is probably the case. As others have argued, *not* discussing race and racism with young children likely does more harm than explicit discussions (see Farago et al., 2015; Boutte, Lopez-Robertson, & Powers-Costello, 2011).

Another issue is parents of color and White teachers may have different perspectives on racial incidents and on the best way to handle such incidents (Bernhard et al., 1998). In Bernhard's study, teachers felt racial incidents were adequately handled in early care settings, whereas parents often felt unheard and reported their concerns of racism were trivialized and explained away. Educators may be reluctant to address race at school for fear of offending

children and families, fear of drawing attention to children's differences, fear of instilling prejudice and racism into young children, and/or fear of being unprepared (e.g., Boutte, 2008; Boutte et al., 2011; see Farago et al., 2015 for a review; Husband, 2012; Vittrup, 2016b).

Given these fears and risks, it may be understandable why early childhood educators are hesitant to address the topic of race. However, remaining silent about issues of oppression may connote agreement; "Although we are not teaching children prejudice, we are not teaching them not to be prejudiced" (Boutte, 2008, p. 171). As Beverly Tatum (1997) poignantly puts it, "children who have been silenced often enough learn not to talk about race publicly. Their questions don't go away, they just go unasked" (p. 36). If a child cannot recognize or name something, they will be unable to interrupt it or take actions against it (e.g., Sapon-Shevin, 2017). However, as much as addressing race and racism are important, if teachers engage in "clumsy race talk," this could result in stereotyping students and causing harm (Pollock, 2016) to children and families who are already marginalized. Therefore, great care must be taken when addressing race and racism with young children. In other words, talking about race is not enough; reflecting on how one discusses race and how children interpret these conversations is critical. Teachers need support and training in discussing race and racism with children (Bullock, 1996; Priest et al., 2014; Vittrup, 2016b). One form of training may be anti-bias early childhood curriculum.

### **Anti-Bias Education**

Anti-bias education or curriculum (Derman-Sparks & the A.B.C Task Force, 1989; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010) is a transformative early childhood curricular approach which calls on educators to explicitly address issues of social justice such as sexism, racism, and ableism with young children. The key goals of the anti-bias early childhood 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 about *cultural socialization*, *preparation for bias*, and *egalitarianism* or *promotion of pluralism*.

The primary goals of anti-bias education are as follows:

Goal 1: Each child will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities.

Goal 2: Each child will express comfort and joy with human diversity, accurate language for human differences, and deep, caring human connections.

Goal 3: Each child will increasingly recognize unfairness, have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts. Furthermore, being able to think critically about the world is a skill important for later school success.

Goal 4: Each child will demonstrate empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, pp. 3-6).

Anti-bias practitioners view children *and* educators as active participants who can confront sexism, racism, and other forms of oppression. The aim of the anti-bias early childhood framework is to empower all children to be “up-standers” in the face of injustice and to develop skills to identify and challenge injustices, including prejudice. Educators are encouraged to be intentional and proactive in addressing prejudices with young children and to celebrate children’s diverse identities (e.g., Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Kemple, Lee, & Harris, 2016).

Anti-bias principles have been applied to early childhood contexts across the globe (see Farago, Murray, & Swadener, 2017; Scarlet, 2016), and have consistently addressed issues of

exclusion, discrimination, and prejudice in young children's lives. According to anti-bias principles, it is the teacher's responsibility to initiate conversations regarding diversity, rather than waiting for children to broach the subject (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). Preparedness and practicing specific responses to racial teasing and exclusion are important to provide teachers the skills to handle these situations which will inevitably arise. Early childhood educators need the preparation, time, and resources to be able to pre-emptively address race, rather than waiting for incidents to arise.

Anti-bias and anti-racist curricula are closely linked, with the main distinction being the latter has a more explicit focus on addressing race and racism (see Escayg, Berman, & Royer, 2017; Husband, 2016). As Escayg, Berman, and Royer (2017) argue, racial attitudes in children need to be analyzed from an anti-racist lens that considers societal power structures and White power and privilege. Providing diverse classroom materials, without engaging children with these materials is not sufficient to counter biases and can promote color-muteness (Escayg et al., 2017; MacNevin & Berman, 2016; Park, 2011). Educators are urged to have critical discussions about race and racism and question the assumption that mere exposure to diverse materials or diverse playmates or environments can teach children to be non-biased and inclusive (Bartoli et al., 2016; MacNevin & Berman, 2016). Further, it is critical that educators observe and participate in children's play, ask questions, and have explicit conversations about race and racism with children to "reveal, disrupt, and actively challenge racism" (Escayg et al., 2017, p. 17).

### **Research on Anti-Bias Practices**

In an online sample of 341 early childhood teachers (61% White) with high levels of formal education researchers found only 20% reported ever hearing of the anti-bias approach

(Farago, 2016; Farago & Swadener, 2016). Teachers who did engage with anti-bias work relied on strategies such as use of diverse materials and discussions around race. Additional race-related practices involve reading books, doing art activities, pairing up children, and explicitly labeling skin color to teach children about race (Farago, 2016; Farago & Swadener, 2016). However, many teachers were uncomfortable and some treated racial diversity as a special topic to be addressed during certain times of the year. This type of “tourist curricula” or tokenistic approach can reinforce racial stereotypes (Derman-Spark & Edwards, 2010; Farago & Swadener, 2016).

Other research has demonstrated White early childhood educators struggle with implementing anti-bias practices around race and are more skilled at addressing cultural differences, special needs, and gender (Bullock, 1996; Farago, 2017; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 1996). Even when racial incidents arise in the classroom, teachers may trivialize or misunderstand these incidents, miss opportunities to intervene, or actively silence children (Bernhard et al., 1998; Berman, Daniel, Butler, MacNevin, & Royer, 2017; Farago, 2017; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 1996; Vittrup, 2016b). In a qualitative study of young children’s (aged 3-5) day-to-day experiences with racial and ethnic diversity in an early childhood classroom (Park, 2011), children enacted racial and ethnic identities, constructed theories about how differences operate, formed peer groups, and made sense of the multitude of messages they received about diversity. The infrequent but powerful conversations about race allowed some students to engage with complex questions about identity, representation, and power.

Anti-bias prejudice interventions may be most the effective with young children (see Brown, 2011) before stereotypes and prejudice are deeply entrenched. Although more research is needed about ways we can talk to children about race without reifying stereotypes and prejudice,

one study provides clues about how to discuss group differences with children (Levy et al., 2005). Emphasizing *both* similarities and differences among groups (“people are similar in some ways but each person is also unique”) increased social tolerance in 11- to 14-year-old Black and Latino children (Levy et al., 2005). Although this study was conducted with middle school students, early childhood scholars similarly underscore the importance of emphasizing ways social groups are both similar, yet different (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Ramsey, 2009). According to anti-bias early childhood approaches, learning about how people are similar yet different go hand in hand; they are not mutually exclusive dichotomies (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010).

### **Developmental Considerations**

Despite the best intentions of educators, children may distort or misremember adults’ messages surrounding race (see D. Hughes & Chen, 1999; D. Hughes et al., 2008). In line with constructivist theories of stereotype and prejudice development (Bigler & Liben, 2006, 2007), children are not passive recipients of information. There can be a discrepancy between the messages adults intend to send about race and what children actually interpret, partly due to young children’s cognitive developmental level and partly due to the implicit, non-verbal racialized behavior of adults (Castelli, De Dea, & Nesdale, 2008; Castelli, Zogmaister, & Tomelleri, 2009). In general, parents’ and children’s reports of the frequencies of racial socialization are not always aligned (Bartoli et al., 2016; D. Hughes, 2009; Marshall, 1995). Educators need to be sensitive to and vigilant of children’s reactions to and interpretations of ethnic-racial socialization within the classroom context. To ensure that conversations about race between educators and children are age-appropriate, it is important to ask children questions and listen to their responses and reactions to conversations about race.

## Summary and Key Points

Ethnic-racial socialization has historically been studied in families, however, increasingly there is a need to understand how non-familial contexts such as school and early childhood classrooms contribute to ethnic-racial socialization. Understanding ethnic-racial socialization dynamics in early childcare settings allows us to better understand how to prepare educators who are ready to support children of color when issues of racism or discrimination arise; who are ready to name and interrupt White privilege; and who are eager to learn from as well as teach parents and family members about the importance of engaging children around issues of race. Colorblind attitudes and practices potentially cause harm and are best replaced with color-conscious, anti-bias, and anti-racist approaches. The wisdom and well-established ethnic-racial socialization practices of Black and brown parents can guide educational interventions aimed at implementing intentional anti-racist programs in early care settings. Teacher educators, professional coaches and trainers, and early childhood professionals must work with each other as well as with families to promote adaptive ethnic-racial socialization in early care settings. We must better understand how children of color can be supported and celebrated not despite of, but *because of* their racial identity, and how White children can become allies and champions for inclusion.

### Key Points

Ethnic-racial socialization is important to examine in school- and early childhood contexts as young children learn to navigate racialized messages around them.

Teachers are agents of ethnic-racial socialization in early childhood settings.

Ethnic-racial socialization can protect children of color from racial prejudice and prepare White children to confront racial prejudice in themselves and others.

Silence, colorblindness, and color-muteness are potentially harmful aspects of ethnic-racial socialization that teach children to avoid recognizing and discussing issues of race and racism. Color- or race-consciousness can help children bravely recognize race and confront racism. The anti-bias education approach assists teachers and children to disrupt racism and celebrate racial diversity in age-appropriate ways.

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