

THE HANDBOOK OF

Racial Equity

IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION



Jen Neitzel & Ebonyse Mead

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The Handbook of Racial Equity in Early Childhood Education

by

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Dr. Jen Neitzel is the Executive Director of the Educational Equity Institute. She received her B.S. degree in child development from the University of Pittsburgh and then began her career in the classroom in Pittsburgh as a teacher of young children with significant behavioral challenges. In 1998, she moved to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where she worked in a group home for adults with autism. Following this, she began her studies at the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill, where she received a master's degree in early intervention. Dr. Neitzel then returned to the classroom where she was a teacher in a model demonstration classroom for toddlers with autism at the Frank Porter Graham (FPG) Child Development Institute. Her quest for knowledge was not finished, however. After 2 years in the classroom, Dr. Neitzel began her doctoral studies at UNC-Chapel Hill where she earned a Ph.D. in education in 2004, specializing in early childhood. Her oldest son, Josh, was 6 months old when she defended her dissertation. To maintain a healthy balance between work and being a mother, she worked on various projects at FPG focused on autism and response to intervention. Dr. Neitzel finally became a full-time researcher and technical assistance provider in 2012. During this time, she began work on a project focused on examining the disproportionality in suspensions and expulsions of young Black children, particularly boys. As a White person, she had two choices: she could act like she hadn't see the data because they did not affect her or her family in a meaningful way, or she could be a part of the solution. Dr. Neitzel chose the latter, and thus began her work in educational equity. As she delved deeper into this area, she started examining the role of implicit biases in early childhood, sources of trauma, culturally responsive practices, and systems change. In 2018, Dr. Neitzel started the Educational Equity Institute (www.educationalequityinstitute.com), a nonprofit based in Charlotte, North Carolina, that is focused on promoting equity and justice through racial healing and systems change. She is widely published in peer-reviewed journals and is the author of *Achieving Equity and Justice in Education Through the Work of Systems Change* (Lexington Books, 2020). Dr. Neitzel lives in Charlotte with her husband, Craig, and their three sons, Josh, Gabe, and Luke.

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Dr. Mead is a Certified Family Life Educator and holds a doctor of education degree in early childhood and a master's in human services from Concordia University Chicago. In 2015, Dr. Mead earned a master's degree in family studies from Texas Woman's University and completed a master's in inner city studies from Northeastern Illinois University in 2004. Recently, she completed a graduate certificate in Anti-racist Urban Education from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Dr. Mead has presented nationally and has published articles on racial equity in early childhood. She is deeply committed to creating brave spaces to talk about structural racism and promote equitable and just programs in early childhood.

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Dr. White has held positions at many early childhood programs including Family Communications, Inc. (now Fred Rogers Productions), where she currently is a consultant to the *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* television show. She directs the Positive Racial Identity Development in Early Education (P.R.I.D.E.) Program at the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development.

Preface

In recent years, there has been an increased emphasis on racial inequities in early childhood education, particularly related to the suspensions and expulsions of young Black boys. Throughout this book, we focus almost entirely on Black children and families for several reasons. First, the deepest disparities across every system in our country (e.g., criminal justice, housing, wealth, health care), including within early childhood, are with Black children and families. When we address the deepest disparities, we also will work to eliminate inequities with other racial and ethnic groups. The second reason that we are focusing primarily on Black children and families is that the discrimination and oppression that other groups of color experience is grounded in anti-Blackness—a construct born out of slavery to dehumanize Black children and families as a justification for their subjugation. As race was socially constructed, other individuals of color were absorbed into anti-Blackness and have been “othered.” We have spent most of our history running away from anti-Blackness, which is a key reason that despite efforts following the Civil Rights Movement, the opportunity and achievement gaps persist.

In May 2020, there was an instantaneous shift within our society when George Floyd was murdered by a police officer in Minneapolis. Following his death, there were large-scale marches and protests meant to draw attention to the centuries-long oppression of Black children and families within our society. For many White people, this event forced an internal reckoning that we do not and never have lived in post-racial society. This is not to put blame on any one White person for not knowing. It is just a given within our society that our racial position greatly affects our ability to see racism. For example, White people do not need to be aware of oppression for it to exist. Since the social construction of race in 1705 with the Virginia Slave Codes (discussed in Chapter 4), our nation has put structures in place to advantage White individuals while oppressing Black children and families. We have been swimming in white supremacy culture (Chapter 4) for so long that it has become invisible to us—unless we choose to see it. After the murder of George Floyd, White people were forced to see the reality of racism within our society and the gross inequities within each system in our country, including within early childhood.

With this awakening, there has been a new-found emphasis on eradicating the disparities that exist between White preschoolers and young children of color, particularly Black children. Although this work is welcome and needed, we must be intentional and strategic about how we go about eradicating racism within early childhood. Currently, too many educators, administrators, and policy makers are engaged in addressing these inequities who do not fully understand that equity and justice work must be focused on transformation. Much of the equity activity going on within early childhood is “check-the-box” work. For example, many organizations have begun providing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) trainings to generate awareness about racism.

Although these trainings serve a purpose, they will not disrupt the root causes that have held racial inequities in place for centuries. The issues are too deep and complex to be solved in one training or a series of trainings. Instead, we need to be engaged in deep transformational change that requires commitment, determination, self-reflection, and internal work, not just at the individual level but also at the organizational level.

The first component of transformational work is to shift mind-sets and generate a shared language for early childhood professionals. We must push individuals from thinking that equity work is just learning more about diversity, inclusion, or how to be culturally competent. Again, these trainings do serve a purpose; however, they are not going to be sufficient in upending the centuries-long subjugation of Black children and families within our society.

In our work at the Educational Equity Institute, we provide two primary trainings: an introductory paradigm shift training and a historical and racial trauma training that are designed to alter the mind-sets of educators. The first training is focused on helping early childhood professionals develop a shared language, particularly because many terms are currently being used interchangeably when they are not interchangeable at all. Having a shared language allows us to be united in our quest to eradicate the inequities within early childhood. Another key aspect of this training is helping educators understand the root causes of the inequities within society, specifically focused on the structures (i.e., policies, practices) that have prevented equal access to resources and opportunities within our various systems. We must understand how we got here, so we know where to go moving forward.

With the historical and racial trauma training, we always ground the content within the history of the area or region where we are conducting the training. We recently began work in a county in North Carolina, where in 1860, 27% of the population were slaves. This is remarkable because at the height of slavery, only 25% of the South owned slaves. In this county, there were six known lynchings, two of them involving 11- and 13-year-old brothers. One of the other men was a family member of the murdered boys. The family still lives in that county of North Carolina today. This is only one community in the United States; however, each city and town has its own unique history of oppression and deep pain that is in the ground of that community. Racial equity cannot be achieved without racial healing.

We must heal from slavery, the American Genocide, and the legacies of Jim Crow. We all have been affected by those atrocities, whether or not we are willing to see that. Our nation has experienced a series of traumas, the original trauma being slavery, for which we have yet to acknowledge and atone. The second large-scale trauma is the American Genocide and displacement of Indigenous Peoples. The suffering of these two primary groups has been immense and deep. Yet, we continue to say that “it’s all in the past.”

Each community across the United States has its own unique history, which needs to be unearthed so that we can begin to identify how those histories are still influencing Black and Indigenous children and families’ involvement with and access to various systems within the United States. Placing an emphasis on racial healing is the path toward equity and justice, which is why one DEI training will not solve the racial disparities that exist within our society.

For White people, racial healing means having a commitment to learning about race and racism within our society; reflecting on how they have been complicit in their personal and professional lives in upholding systems of oppression; and unlearning their whiteness in which all experiences, frames of references, and understandings

of the world are seen through a “white is the norm” lens (i.e., the white experience is *the* experience within society). White people must become their own educators so that they can learn about the true history of our country and how racism is endemic within each of our nation’s institutions. They can then reflect on the ways in which they can contribute to confronting racism within their spheres of influence.

For Black people, racial healing involves unlearning internalized racial oppression. Many Black Americans have internalized the negative messages, stories, and images about who they are as a people. Unlearning these false depictions and narratives includes acknowledging the ways in which they have been deeply impacted by white supremacy and racism. Black people must address the ways in which they unintentionally perpetuate racist ideas and beliefs, and ultimately passed them down from one generation to the next (i.e., colorism). Black people must redefine and reframe definitions of success, strengths, and accomplishments not rooted in whiteness and adopt frames of references that uplift their culture, protect their humanity, affirm their identity, and celebrate their resilience. Racial healing for Black people also means deconstructing anti-Blackness and embracing the diversity of their racial group as there is no monolithic way to be Black.

A second component of transformational work is an ongoing commitment at the organizational and individual levels. For organizations, this means reviewing current policies, handbooks, hiring practices, and so on. Early childhood systems also must be deeply committed to reviewing data disaggregated by race, class, gender, and ability to identify where disparities exist. After this, current policies and practices can be reviewed to identify specific structures that are contributing to the ongoing disparities between Black and White children and families. In their place, organizations can develop more equitable and just programs to ensure increased access to services, supports, and opportunities that have been routinely denied to Black children and families.

At the individual level, early childhood educators are committed to ongoing learning and developing a deeper understanding about how they can alter the ways they interact with families, provide services to children, and challenge the way things have always been done. Early childhood educators engage in this work to develop a keen awareness about how whiteness (Chapter 4) and anti-Blackness (Chapter 10) play key roles in perpetuating disparate outcomes for Black children and families.

Currently, we are being confronted with a unique opportunity to address racial inequities in early childhood head-on. This work will require a unique commitment and determination. Many existing obstacles will work against attaining equity and justice in early childhood. In our experience, there is a great desire among early childhood professionals to “fix” the problem immediately. This impatience is heartening; however, it can be counterproductive to the cause. In the work that we do, we always ask early childhood practitioners to commit to nonclosure. It took more than 400 years to get to this point; it is going to take time to undo what has been done.

We often say that achieving equity and justice in our society will probably take 11 generations, which is approximately how many generations of slavery there were. This paradigm shift work is the first, most essential step in all equity work. If we do not commit to this personal and professional growth, we are at risk of perpetuating the status quo and putting bandages on the wounds of racism and white supremacy rather than working toward deep, transformational change.

Our society is on the precipice of momentous change. We can choose to be a part of that effort, or we can continue to look away. The onus lies with each of us to make

this critical decision. Equity and justice work is in deep need of individuals who are committed to upending the ongoing disparities while also honoring the unnamed souls who lost and continue to lose their lives to racism and white supremacy throughout our complicated and hypocritical history. We need more early childhood professionals who understand the moral obligation each of us has: we must create an early learning system that ensures equal access and opportunity.

Throughout this book, we will explore topics that we believe are the most pertinent and important in working toward transformational change. Our hope is that this book helps practitioners, administrators, and policy makers think deeply about the racial issues within our society and commit to personal and professional growth. Each chapter will conclude with strategies that educators can use to address the topic that was discussed. Our intention is that this book is truly a handbook—one that educators can come back to again and again to deepen their understanding of a specific topic and to use the specific strategies to work toward lasting change.

It is important to understand that a commitment to anti-racism is a journey, not a destination. Many of us want to check the box and move on; however, none of us will ever arrive at anti-racist. Anti-racism is a process of unlearning all that we have been taught about who we are as a country and who we are racially. Anti-racism also is a learning process, which is not a check-the-box activity. We must commit to continual learning through reading, podcasts, watching documentaries and movies, and so on. Anti-racism requires self-reflection, not only about who we are as social beings but also how we have been complicit in upholding and contributing to the status quo. Anti-racism is a letting go—of who we currently are and how we have existed in a racist society until this moment. Anti-racism requires shedding the skin of who we thought we were. As we do this, there will be great discomfort and unease. *Who am I? Where do I fit? How do I operate in this world?* However, this work will open new possibilities, new relationships, new understandings, and a new commitment to achieving equity and justice in early childhood. We welcome you to this journey and look forward to providing guidance and support as you commit to deep transformational change.

Jen Neitzel and Ebonyse Mead

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Current Issues and Challenges

Jen Neitzel and Ebonyse Mead



We (Jen and Ebonyse) entered equity work around the same time and for remarkably similar reasons. Our first entrée into equity in early childhood was the release of the Office of Civil Rights (OCR), U.S. Department of Education data regarding suspensions and expulsions for young Black children in public pre-school programs. The OCR has been collecting data regarding these types of exclusionary practices for decades; however, 2014 was the first time that they reported statistics for young children. According to the OCR report, young Black children are up to 4 times more likely to be suspended or expelled from early childhood settings than their White peers. Young Black boys, in particular, are disproportionately on the receiving end of these types of exclusionary practices (U.S. Department of Education, 2014b). The statistics were so alarming, and they were hard to ignore.

For me (Jen, a White person), I knew that those data did not reflect my experience or the experiences of my three sons. However, as a non-Black person, I also recognized that I had a choice to make. I could (a) ignore the data and pretend that I had never seen them or (b) join the efforts to address the racial disparities in suspensions and expulsions and other inequities in early childhood. I chose the latter, which took me down a path that I never could have imagined. Through ongoing self-reflection, near-constant unlearning of my whiteness, and learning about racism and white supremacy in our society, I have grown, and continue to grow, personally and professionally. I have altered the ways in which I parent my children and how I operate in this world. For that, I am grateful.

For me (Ebonyse, a Black person), I was born and raised in the North Lawndale community on the west side of Chicago. Seeing many inequities in my neighborhood, I felt a deep sense of social responsibility to be a voice for those children and families who are often marginalized and excluded based on their ZIP codes. I started my career as a parent educator working with teen parents in Chicago public high schools. I have held numerous positions where I advocated for the healthy development and well-being of families and children of color. In 2016, I was asked to participate in a workgroup to help write North Carolina's preschool suspension and expulsion plan. After reviewing the data indicating that Black preschoolers are 3.6 times more likely to be suspended than their White peers, I felt compelled to address these inequities. Since that time, I have provided training on diversity, inclusion, and equity with a particular focus on examining structural barriers to educational equity, implicit racial bias, and culturally responsive instruction to the early childhood workforce. As president of the Educational Equity Institute, I am deeply committed to creating brave spaces to talk about structural racism and promote equitable and just programs in early childhood.

CURRENT ISSUES RELATED TO EQUITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Although we have been doing this work for more than 5 years now, both separately and together, we did not encounter a sense of urgency for addressing equity in early childhood until May 2020. Following the murder of George Floyd, more organizations began to place an emphasis on finally facing the racism that has been present within our society since its inception. The current inequities within early childhood are framed within four fundamental issues: (1) suspensions and expulsions, (2) instructional practices, (3) teacher-child relationships, and (4) access to high-quality early learning programs. Each of these issues is interconnected, making it difficult for young Black children to succeed in a system that was not set up for them. We often get questions and comments about how other groups of color also face prejudice and discrimination within our various systems. Even though that is true, it is important to understand that the deepest



disparities, across every system in the United States (including early childhood), are with Black children and families. When we create and implement policies and practices that are designed to address the deepest inequities, we will also inherently help other children and families of color.

Preschool Suspensions and Expulsions

Chapter 6 provides an in-depth discussion about suspensions and expulsions, as well as the issues associated with disparities in early childhood. As such, we will not spend much time discussing the disproportionalities in the suspensions and expulsions of young Black children in early learning settings. As Allen and Gilliam discuss in Chapter 6, implicit bias, anti-Blackness, and adultification all play key roles in these ongoing statistics.

Instructional Practices

Existing research suggests that Black children may have different instructional experiences than White children, negatively affecting their academic achievement (Bodovski & Farkas, 2007; Early et al., 2010). Of additional concern is how much instruction teachers provide to students. For example, researchers have found that teachers spend less instructional time on math skills with young Black children, which is related to their later math achievement (Desimone & Long, 2010). Connor and colleagues (2005) found similar effects for children regarding literacy instruction and outcomes. Results from this study indicated that children who spent more time in academic activities with active teacher instruction demonstrated stronger vocabulary and decoding skills at the end of first grade. Because instructional practices are instrumental in promoting long-term academic achievement, the combined findings from these studies indicate a need for greater equity in providing high-quality instruction to Black children in early childhood classrooms and beyond.



There is a clear need within early childhood to focus on both the quantity and quality of instruction. Many of the current practices and ways for measuring quality are grounded in a White European ideology. When we think about the major theorists who have defined child development (e.g., Piaget, Erickson, Bandura, Vygotsky), we must also reflect on the ways in which those developmental theories laid the foundation for modern-day early childhood educational practices. Those theorists, or our current definitions of high quality, have been foundational in early childhood; however, additional viewpoints and understandings about child development within the context of diverse cultures must be considered. In recent years, culturally responsive anti-bias educational practices have gained increasing attention due to their emphasis on providing instruction and behavioral interventions that promote equal access to learning and success for all students. Chapter 7 focuses on culturally responsive anti-bias practices and how they can be implemented within early learning environments. With these practices, there is an emphasis on providing learning activities that build on and enhance the experiences of children's cultural experiences within their families. By viewing children and families within this strengths-based lens, early childhood programs can enhance learning and development for all children.

Teacher–Child Relationships

Research on teacher–student relationships shows a clear pattern around race, with Black children possessing weaker, less-positive relationships with their teachers (Hughes & Kwok, 2007). For example, several researchers have found that older Black children have more negative relationships with teachers than do White children (e.g., Hughes et al., 2005; Kesner, 2000; Murray & Murray, 2004). Study findings also indicate that early childhood teachers are more likely to rate relationships with Black children

as higher in conflict and as more dependent than those with White children (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Howes and Shivers (2006) also found that Black children formed less secure attachment relationships with their White and Latine caregivers. Additional studies have highlighted the importance of these relationships on child outcomes. Early teacher–student relationships are related to children’s academic achievement, with more positive teacher–student relationships leading to better outcomes for children (Hughes & Kwok, 2007; Ladd et al., 1999).

As we move forward with equity work, we need to fully consider the role of implicit bias in the formation of these important relationships (i.e., unconscious and automatic attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decision making in daily life) (Carter et al., 2017; Gilliam et al., 2016a). Ongoing research demonstrates how implicit bias affects teachers’ relationships with children (Cunningham et al., 2004; Staats et al., 2015; Sugai et al., 2012). Specifically, Kumar and colleagues (2015) found that teachers who held more implicitly favorable attitudes toward White students were more likely to endorse performance-focused instructional practices and less likely to engage in culturally responsive teaching practices. Furthermore, teachers tend to have an implicit preference for White or light-skinned individuals (Clark & Zygmont, 2014; Kumar et al., 2015).

These research findings further illuminate the need for personal reflection and internal work that is grounded in unearthing our biases and challenging them—not only in our everyday lives but also how they play out within the work that we do with young children. Although addressing implicit bias is a key part of this work, we also need to learn about and gain a better understanding of the cultural norms and values of the children and families that we serve. For example, it is important to engage families in authentic ways so that educators can move beyond their own way of thinking about respect, appropriate/inappropriate behavior, what developmental skills are important at different ages, and how children form relationships with others, both adults and peers. This critical information will go a long way in supporting the development of positive relationships between young children and early childhood educators.

Access to High-Quality Early Learning Programs Decades of research indicate that high-quality early childhood education is one of the biggest investments we can make as a society to level the playing field for all children. Findings suggest that children who attend a high-quality preschool program at age 4 are 9 percentage points more likely to be ready for school than are other children (Isaacs, 2012). However, recent statistics suggest that only 31% of Black children are enrolled in some type of full-time center-based program. Of these children, 43% are living in poverty. Studies also have shown that Black children are the least likely to have access to high-quality care and education. According to a recent report by the Education Trust, a considerable number of Black and Latino children lack access to state-funded preschool programs. In addition, rates of access to high-quality early care and education are lower for Black and Latino 3-year-old children than for Black and Latino 4-year-old children. Similarly, a 2005 report from the National Center for Education Statistics showed that almost half of center- and home-based child-care programs were rated as medium, and over 50% of center-based programs were attended by Black children. In addition, 53% of Black children and 63% of Latino children attended home-based programs with either a low or medium quality rating.

Research on accessibility to child care indicates that low-income neighborhoods often are “child-care deserts” where there is little to no access to high-quality programs.

In fact, the supply of affordable, high-quality child care often is influenced by neighborhood wealth, maternal employment, and education levels, as well as the presence of community-based organizations that advocate for state and federal funding (Fuller et al., 2002). As such, the supply of high-quality early childhood programs often is limited in high-poverty neighborhoods.

An additional factor that limits access for Black children and families living in poverty is that high-quality early care and education is expensive. The United States Department of Health and Human Services recommends that child-care costs should be no more than 7% of household income. According to a recent report, the average cost of center-based care is 11% for married parents and 36% for single-parent households, which exceeds monthly housing costs, tuition at a 4-year college, and monthly costs of food and transportation. Since 2018, child-care costs have risen nearly 4% nationally. In most regions of the country, child-care costs now exceed what families pay each month for housing (Child Care Aware of America, 2020). Low-income families, in particular, have difficulty finding and affording high-quality early care and education programs. People of color are more likely to be in low-wage jobs that have erratic and unpredictable hours, and they are unlikely to have employment benefits such as paid time off, which makes it even more difficult to access affordable child care that offers flexible, nontraditional hours (Johnson-Staub, 2017). Although child-care subsidies are available for low-income families, only 17% of eligible families access them due to a complex maze of program rules at the state level regarding waitlists, family co-pays, and provider reimbursement rates (Dobbins et al., 2016). Children of color and their families are particularly affected by these policies (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997).

Universal access to high-quality early childhood education is essential if we are to achieve educational equity. Providing young children with a firm foundation, which is geared toward meeting their unique needs (i.e., emphasis on social-emotional and mental health), before they enter kindergarten supports them as they move through elementary school and beyond. To achieve this goal, communities across the nation will need to make additional investments in high-quality early childhood education that maintains a keen focus on implementing culturally responsive anti-bias classroom practices.

BARRIERS TO EQUITY WORK

Working toward equity and justice in early childhood education is imperative. We all have a moral obligation to unearth the root causes so that we can create policies and practices that promote optimal outcomes for all children. This is the intellectual understanding about what needs to happen; however, the barriers to this work are numerous and growing more intense every day. Because of this, we cannot approach this work naively. If we do, our noble efforts will fail. Instead, we need to be realistic about the challenges we face when undertaking this work.

Siloed Efforts

One of the biggest challenges in ongoing equity work is the propensity to work in silos. That is, early childhood mental health does their own equity work, whereas pre-kindergarten programs go about addressing equity in a different way. These individual efforts, although essential, will not fully eradicate the ongoing disparities for young Black children and their families. The issues are too multilayered and complex for any one sector to address on their own. Often, siloed efforts are driven by a sense of urgency, which is a characteristic of white supremacy culture. According to Okun (1999),

when individuals and organizations feel pressure to solve a problem, it is difficult for them to take time to be inclusive, to encourage democratic and/or thoughtful decision making, to think long-term, and to consider consequences. Having a sense of urgency regarding this work is important; however, if we are not strategic and do not have a firm understanding of the issues, we are going to be working against the very goals that we are trying to accomplish.

In our work with organizations, one of our main goals is to facilitate a shared language so that everyone can be on the same page regarding key terms (e.g., *racism*, *prejudice*, *diversity*, *equity*, *inclusion*). That lack of a shared language is a smaller, but still significant, barrier to this work. Too often, organizations and early childhood professionals do not have a firm understanding about what racism means, or even prejudice for that matter. For example, having a shared language allows us to identify prejudice when we see it and then address it.

Generating a shared language across organizations is also critically important so that there is no confusion regarding terms such as *equity* versus *equality*. Recently, we worked with an organization that partners with and shares staff with another early childhood organization—each is engaged in its own equity work. This is commendable; however, it is also counterproductive to what they are trying to achieve. These competing efforts can create confusion about specific terms and how to go about addressing equity in early childhood, which can lead to potential burnout for employees because they are being bombarded with too much information. All of this is driven by a sense of urgency.

The most important thing that early childhood organizations can do when starting to address equity is to commit to nonclosure. Yes, we want to eradicate racism and injustice within our society, including within early childhood; however, the issues are too deep and complex to be solved in a brief period of time. That is why it is critical that organizations let go of that sense of urgency, which is driven by the need to “fix” things. Instead, we can be impatient while also being strategic and thinking about the long-term consequences of the work that we are undertaking. Once individuals and organizations commit to nonclosure, then they can begin the work of equity and justice in early childhood.

Ending siloed work also requires that early childhood professionals communicate with other early learning organizations that are doing equity work in their communities. The issues are so vast, and the resistance to change is so virulent, that we need to combine our efforts toward a common cause. Working in silos allows us to be disjointed and disorganized, and it fosters an unhealthy competitiveness. Early childhood organizations should be working together to push back against the resisters who want to uphold the status quo. We live in a very individualistic society where each person, organization, and institution is working in isolation.

This individualism is also a characteristic of white supremacy culture. From very early in our lives, we are socialized to focus on individual achievement and advancement. As such, we have very little experience or comfort working as part of a team. In our work lives, this translates into believing that people and organizations are responsible for solving problems alone, which leads to isolation and competition (Okun, 1999). As a society, we need to move into collectivism where we are working together toward a common goal, which, in this case, is equity and justice in early childhood. When organizations combine efforts, they can think long term, combine resources, and generate more transformative change within communities. However, this requires setting aside individual egos, which is another barrier to change.

Egos

Because of the individualism within our society, we often are driven by our own need to advance, attain, or be recognized as the solver of problems. Being grounded in our egos gets in the way of transformative change. Ego-driven work is intertwined with siloed efforts in communities because individuals who are ego-based want recognition and power. This hoarding of power is another characteristic of white supremacy culture, which must be deconstructed if we are to achieve what we have set out to do. According to Okun (1999), those who are ego driven see little, if any, value around sharing power. Rather, power is seen as limited—there is only so much to go around. Individuals who are grounded in ego feel threatened when anyone suggests changes in how things should be done. This work will not be successful if egos and power struggles come into play.

That is why we must set aside our own personal agendas and our own needs for recognition and accomplishment. This work is about putting our own career advancement and our own egos aside to do what is right and necessary to disrupt the roots of inequity within the educational system. Again, this is why self-reflection and individual work is so important. Progress cannot coexist with ego. According to Deepak Chopra (1994),

The Ego, however, is not who you really are. The ego is your self-image; it is your social mask; it is the role you are playing. Your social mask thrives on approval. It wants control, and it is sustained by power, because it lives in fear. (p. 11)

Reflecting on our need for approval and recognition pushes us to examine what we are afraid of. Are we afraid that we will not get the recognition we feel we deserve? Are we afraid that someone else will get that recognition? Are we driven by the need to be the “one” who fixes racism in early childhood? When we can identify what is driving our need for power, we then can begin to let go of the ego part of ourselves. There is so much work to do, and we need to be working together toward the common cause of equity and justice in early childhood. The challenge is to move beyond ourselves and realize that this cause is greater than any one person.

Failure to Explicitly Name Racism

Another significant barrier to equity in early childhood is our failure to explicitly name racism and the effects it has on children’s learning and development. According to McCarthy (2020), racism can lead to continual stress for young children, which contributes to changes in hormones that cause inflammation in the body—a marker of chronic disease. A failure to explicitly name racism is often grounded in an unwillingness to engage in hard conversations and our own need to avoid any topic that causes discomfort. As such, many times, efforts to address the current inequities are focused on cultural competence or diversity and inclusion. These types of trainings and professional development activities do little to highlight the root causes of the ongoing disparities in early childhood education, which is critical if we are to achieve equity and justice. It is long past time to explicitly name racism and how it is a key contributing factor in upholding the status quo.

Bills and Laws

Currently, 26 states have anti-racism laws, bills, or other state-level actions that are designed to prevent transformational change. As of July 2021, the following states have signed laws that ban teaching students about racism and sexism: Arkansas, Arizona,



Florida, Idaho, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas. Seven other states have proposed this type of legislation: Alabama, Kentucky, Michigan, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Wisconsin. In addition, three other states have other state-level action that is legally binding: Georgia, Montana, and Utah.

A common thread across all these states' actions is the focus on teaching critical race theory within schools. Kimberlé Crenshaw, among others, coined the term *critical race theory* (CRT) in the late 1970s and early 1980s. CRT is a framework that critiques how the social construction of race and institutionalized racism perpetuate racism and oppression within our society. CRT scholars assert that we must acknowledge the legacies of slavery, segregation, and Jim Crow (George, 2021).

Across all these states, there are commonalities regarding language and intent. In Arkansas, the law bars state agencies from teaching “divisive concepts” during racial and cultural sensitivity trainings, including teaching that America is an inherently racist nation (Bowden, 2021). Idaho has prohibited schools and universities from teaching that “any sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, or national origin is inherently superior or inferior” (House Bill No. 377). Oklahoma’s law (OK HB1775) prohibits teachers from instructing students that “an individual, by virtue of his or her race or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex,” and from making students feel “guilt” or “anguish” on “account of his or her race or sex.” In general, these laws and bills are directly focused on K–12 education.

This leads to the question, “Why is it important for early childhood educators to understand what is happening in states regarding race and racism?” First, many offices of early education are housed within departments of public instruction, which means they are included in these bans. Second, we must understand that no school in this nation is teaching children in any setting about CRT, which is a graduate-level class. What is being proposed across the country is a revision of social studies standards to include a more accurate representation of our nation’s history.

Although these social studies standards do not apply directly to early childhood, efforts are already underway to limit teaching young children about diversity in a developmentally appropriate way. For example, the Idaho Freedom Foundation suggests that CRT is “infiltrating” early childhood programs in the form of preventing the use of picture books that promote diversity and inclusion. In addition, they maintain that

anti-bias education peddles the idea that America is systemically and irredeemably racist and sexist; that white children, especially boys, are complicit in that racism and sexism; and educators must discriminate in their treatment of white and Black, male and female students to erase perceived “biases.” (Miller, 2021, p. 154).

Not only are these claims blatantly false in their description of anti-bias education, but these types of groups are also gaining steam and visibility in school district Board of Education meetings across the country.

These groups, in combination with state legislation efforts, present a considerable barrier in addressing equity and justice in education. This leads to the question, “What can we do to address these efforts head-on?” First, we must become knowledgeable about the legislation in our state to determine what is prohibited and for whom. Second, it is essential that early childhood educators push themselves more into advocacy. That is, organize efforts in your communities and show up at Board of Education meetings to counter the noise of groups, such as Moms for Liberty, who are actively working against diversity, equity, and inclusion. Become well-versed in what CRT is and is not. Knowledge is power, and we must control the narrative about equity and justice work rather than constantly being on the defensive.

We also need to know their talking points. For example, one of the main strategies that opponents to anti-bias education use is to take quotes by Martin Luther King, Jr. out of context. One common refrain is that Dr. King would be horrified by what is happening within education because anti-bias educational practices are divisive. The most frequent quote that is used is “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character” (King, 1963). Contextually, Dr. King spoke these words in a time when overt racism was extremely commonplace. Today, many of us believe that we live within a color-blind society where we are hyperfocused on being loving and kind to all, regardless of their skin tone. The anti-bias opponents are weaponizing Dr. King’s words for their cause, which would horrify him.

Another common strategy is to state that teaching history should be left to parents. This tactic is manipulative and designed to subvert the efforts to help our children develop a greater understanding about diversity, equity, and inclusion. The goal of these teaching efforts is not to make White children feel ashamed or bad about themselves, which is counterproductive to the cause. Our nation’s youth are already learning about this history through social media (e.g., TikTok, YouTube, Instagram) and peers, even in the younger years. Our children need spaces where they can process what they are learning and gain a better understanding about what is and is not the truth.

This argument also is highly flawed because parents of public school students have not been protesting that they should oversee teaching their children how to read or do math. This tactic is grounded in white supremacy, racism, and white shame. Understanding the strategies that are being used to distract from the real work of equity allows champions for change to gain control of the false narratives that are being pushed. Again, it is imperative that early childhood educators, administrators, and policy makers understand the key components of culturally responsive anti-bias education

(Chapter 7) so that these falsehoods can be put to rest and we can get back to the work of addressing disparate outcomes within early learning programs.

Nice White People

In our trainings, we emphasize that kindness, compassion, and empathy are important traits; however, they will not advance the cause of equity and justice. As such, “nice White people” pose a significant barrier to our work. DiAngelo (2021) refers to nice White people as “white progressives,” whereas Dr. King referenced “white moderates” in *Letter from Birmingham Jail* (1963). White progressives/moderates, or nice White people, “see themselves as racially progressive, well-meaning, nice” (DiAngelo, 2021, p. 2). There is a propensity within this group to say, “I treat everyone the same regardless of race” or “I’m not a racist,” which can result in personal complacency or an unwillingness to do deep reflection about the ways in which they have been complicit in upholding systemic racism. According to DiAngelo (2021), “Niceness requires that racism only be acknowledged in acts that intentionally hurt or discriminate, which means that racism can rarely be acknowledged” (p. 49).

The issue with nice White people is that they are so focused on seeing racism as an individual act, or trying to prove that they are not racist, that they cannot, or refuse to, see all the racist policies and practices that are below the surface. Nice White people are so focused on maintaining their goodness and innocence in the form of kindness, compassion, and empathy, which halts any conversation around the topics of racism and white supremacy. More White people must start pushing through their own discomfort or fear of making a mistake so that they can start shouldering some of the equity and justice work that has been placed on the backs of Black people since the social construction of race. The beautiful thing about leaning into this discomfort is that White people can engage in deep personal growth that allows them to have a more positive racial identity in which they are not only able to engage in authentic cross-cultural relationships, but they are also able to join the growing number of people who are part of the movement to achieve equity and justice for Black children and families within our society.

MOVING FORWARD

We recognize that everyone is entering this work at different points. For some, you have just begun your anti-racism journey, whereas others are already committed to undoing the centuries-old systems. We also understand that we all enter this work with our own unique life stories—our upbringings, our families, our communities—that provide a lens from which we view the current issues. We honor and respect each of these experiences. Wherever you are on your journey, there are several key things that you can do to further commit to anti-racism.

1. *Educate yourself.* Read books/articles; listen to podcasts focused on race, racism, and racial healing; watch historical and current-day movies and documentaries. These activities are crucial because they facilitate the deep internal work that is needed to undo racism within ourselves and our society.
2. *Reflect.* Take time to reflect on what you are learning. You can journal or just take time to better understand our history and how you have been complicit in some way in upholding the status quo.

FOR MORE, go to: <https://bpub.fyi/Racial-Equity>

3. *Notice.* In your daily life, observe situations, news stories, and television shows and take note of discrimination and bias. Racism is insidious and shows up in many ways and takes many forms within our lives.
4. *Have grace.* As you embark on this journey, have grace for yourselves and others. We have all been socialized in a society where white is the norm. You may feel guilt or even shame. Whereas guilt is healthy because it allows us to atone, apologize, and do better, shame is stagnating. Guilt is *I did something bad*. Shame is *I am bad*. Healthy guilt is expected; however, you need to move through that guilt. Allow yourself to feel the pain, but do not let it define you.

Again, welcome to your anti-racism journey. This is not a sprint or a destination. Anti-racism work requires commitment and determination. With each commitment, we get closer to creating what Dr. King called the “beloved community” (King, 1957).

“Timely and urgently needed today! Grounded in research but geared toward action, this book will help guide folks through the reflection and deep thinking needed to address issues of equity and diversity in early education.”

—Lori Cassidy, M.Ed., Educational Trainer and Coach, Pyramid 802 Plus

“An essential resource for teacher training programs to get the conversation about equity started with our budding teachers ... [this book] will prepare them to go into the classroom with more awareness and knowledge about what steps they can take toward equity and anti-racist practices.”

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- challenge the implicit bias that shapes their perceptions and practices
- develop a shared understanding of key terms used within racial equity dialogue
- create culturally responsive anti-bias (CRAB) education environments
- help young Black children build and maintain a positive racial identity
- develop culturally responsive relationships with families
- take action to resolve racial inequities in suspensions and expulsions
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