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Our Children, Our Workforce

Why We Must Talk About Race and Racism in Early Childhood Education

by Kelly Matthews and Ijumaa Jordan

Racism exists in early childhood education. Writing that might be a shocking statement, but it is true because almost all institutions in the United States have policies and practices based in racism. Recently, I was listening to a Radiolab podcast episode titled “G: The Miseducation of Larry P,” which begins with researching a California law that forbids administering IQ tests to African American students for placement in special education programs. The first episode discussed that when developed, IQ tests were normed to the cultural knowledge of white children in Europe. It has been documented that the researchers and developers of these tests supported Eugenics; when these tests were given in San Francisco in the 1970s, the head of the special education department testified that Black people were intellectually inferior. This personal bias was institutionalized through the large numbers of Black children given this test, resulting in the children being tracked into special education classes, which provided little formal education. These tests were usually administered in kindergarten. “Larry P” was given the test in first grade without his mother’s permission. It was not until the lawsuit was filed that she learned that he was labeled the “R” word;

it took her and her family years and an out-of-state move to have him placed in general education.

That was in the 1970s, so what about now? Black children are more likely to experience preschool suspension, which can lead into what is called the “Preschool to Prison Pipeline.” Elementary schools have zero tolerance policies while preschools have children removed from programs for common developmentally appropriate behaviors of frustrated or frightened children, such as pushing, hitting, spitting and/or biting. Black children exploring their use of power through rough and tumble play or superhero play are perceived as too aggressive and disruptive. Policies that ban these types of play are seen as “best practices” that “keep everyone safe.”

Racism is also present in ECE through the white cultural dominance of education. The cultural norms are white, Christian, middle class, heterosexual and abled. When Black children, Indigenous children, and children of color behave outside of these norms they are seen as “at risk,” deviant, deficit and needing intervention and correction. Circle time is filled with cultural rules such as children sit and listen quietly while the teacher reads the book. It mirrors the unspoken rule that one should hold one’s applause and appreciation until after the performance. That is not the cultural norm I (Ijumaa) was raised in. When my mother would read stories to my siblings and me, there was a conversation throughout the book reading. Sometimes whole new plots were added to the book. I brought this cultural understanding to my circle time or group reading time. In one program I worked for, the director critiqued my practice by saying it was “too loud” and “the children are not learning about books and reading if they are interrupting with questions and comments.” I knew she was not right and



Kelly Matthews, owner of A Place for You Consulting in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, loves the playful mindfulness of improvisation, promotes experiential learning, and adores combining these two passions in her innovative offerings of professional development around the country. She can be reached at APlaceForYouConsult@yahoo.com.



Ijumaa Jordan shares a strong interest in helping teachers develop a strong sense of agency and integrity in her work with children. She has a graduate degree from Pacific Oaks College and has been strongly influenced by faculty there in how to teach adults with attention to issues of power, privilege, and culture.

years later I learned that Black children’s (especially Black boys’) emerging reading skills benefit from opportunities for them to participate in oral storytelling. Finding this out has me wondering about the impact of the white cultural norm of being quiet during reading time.

It may be hard to accept that these common early childhood program policies are racially based and racist. This may be because as a field we see ourselves as nice and good people who could never create policies that are racist and harm children and families—particularly for white women who have been raised to believe in their own inherent innocence and goodness based in whiteness. It is time to let go of the good/bad binary when thinking about and discussing race. Racist behavior can be done by any white person, not just a self-proclaimed white supremacist. As you build your awareness of how racism is systemic and institutionalized, you can join with and be accountable to people of color to change policies and practices.

Why Are We Not Talking about Racism?

There are reasons that pressure us not to talk about racism and especially racism in early childhood settings. For many white people, we have been taught it is “not nice” to talk about race, let alone racism. We are socialized to be quiet on the topic so we do not make people uncomfortable; with this cycle in place, we never learn the skills so that we can talk about race in useful and needed ways. In fact, by not talking about race when we need to and should, we are guaranteeing to make uncomfortable people who need us to address racism.

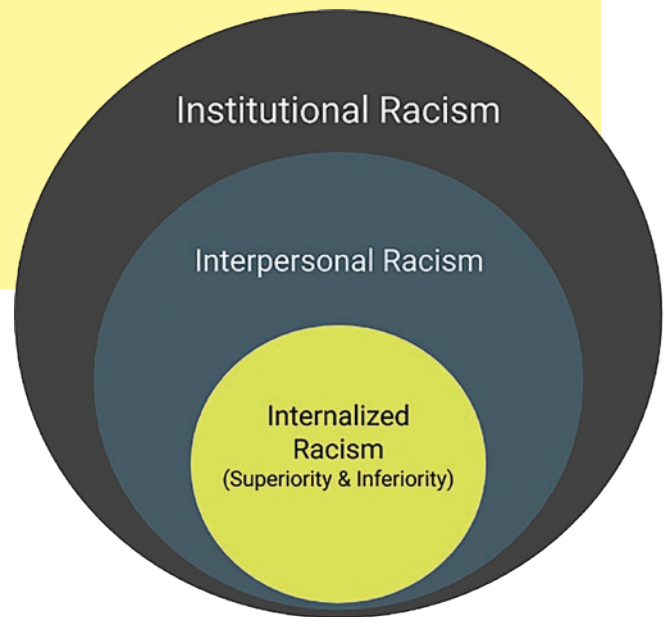
BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, People of Color] educators have another layer of reasons why they may not talk about racism at work: it can be dangerous. If they talk about race and racism, they can be labeled difficult or hard to work

Racism is ... “an institutionalized system of power. It encompasses a web of economic, political, social, and cultural structures, actions, and beliefs that systemize and ensure an unequal distribution of privilege, resources, and power in favor of the dominant racial group at the expense of all other racial groups” (from Teaching/Learning Anti-Racism by Louise Derman-Sparks & Carol Brunson Day).

Institutional Racism: how the system gets baked into the business-as-usual of whole institutions; this includes the intended and unintended consequences of policies, practices, laws, styles, rules and procedures that function to the advantage of white people and to the disadvantage of people of color.

Interpersonal Racism: how the system gets played out between people; this includes behaviors based on conscious or unconscious biased assumptions about self and others. This usually looks like discrimination.

Internalized Racism: how the system gets into each of our bodies, minds, and souls as individuals; this includes both internalized racial superiority for white people and internalized racial inferiority for people of color.



with, which in turn can impact their standing at work, their ability to be promoted, or if they are viewed as competent and capable in their role. They can be seen as playing the race card, even though it is never acknowledged that the dominant way of running the program, making decisions, and creating policies happen through a racial lens of whiteness.

There is another myth that interferes with our ability to talk about race and dismantle racism in early care and education settings. It is the innocence argument—you may have heard it go something like this: Children do not see race and you are putting adult concerns on them when you do talk about it, or children are innocent and do not need to deal with these hard things. But when you break down these

arguments they do not hold up. There is research that shows that infants as young as 3 months notice race and show a preference for like-race faces (David, K, et.al, 2005), which is not surprising, because developmentally babies are noticing EVERYTHING at that age. We also know from research that children make associations about race as young as age 2, which is important because it means they are starting to attach attributes to race (Winkler, 2009).

The flipside to the “children are innocent” argument is the, “We are good people because we work with young children and good people are not racist” way of thinking. This one is a little trickier to break down, but here we go. The reasoning is that because we have dedicated our work to educating young children who, the theory goes, are innocent, we therefore create a sort of innocence bubble that envelopes us too. Our “goodness” as educators means we cannot be actively “bad” and since we know racists are bad, we cannot be racist. It is a circular and misguided idea. As we broke down in the introduction, we live in a racist system—the default of that system is to uphold racism. So we have to be not just neutral, but anti-racist in our work as early educators to help dismantle that damaging system.

There is another way we avoid talking about racism—by using the window dressing method. We add materials to our room which are racially diverse and leave it at that. We may have dolls with shades of brown skin; books which feature African American characters; or paint in rich mahogany and auburn. By adding such materials, we may think we have done enough to ensure the children in the room do not become racist because they have been exposed to diverse materials. It does not work that way. Here is the impact of not talking about it.

Implicit Bias and White Norms: The Impact of Silence

Racism is sometimes defined as prejudice plus power. Our American racial dynamics are set up so that white people hold and have the most access to power. White people, in particular white women, hold the power in early childhood education. They hold the authoritative and institutional power in roles as executive directors, directors, site supervisors, lead and mentor teachers, assessors, coaches and so on. While almost half of the early childhood workforce is made up of BIPOC, the leadership population does not reflect that.

White cultural norms are embedded into ideas, beliefs and policies of professionalism. I (Ijumaa) wear my hair how it naturally grows out of my head. I have been told directly and indirectly that my natural hair “made me seem less professional.” There have been suggestions that I straighten my hair, or wear a straight or loosely curled wig. A few times my hair has disqualified me from job opportunities. Working with Kelly, the only time her hair has been questioned is when she wears ponytails, but never has a client not wanted to work with her. It is read as part of her playful and joyful personality, which is acceptable for white women.

As a white woman, Kelly automatically fits into the white cultural norm; her hair and hairstyles are not seen as unprofessional even when her hairstyle is not usually seen in a professional setting. She is still viewed as competent and professional. I do not have white privilege, which means my body and how I present myself is automatically seen as deviant from the norm. Being outside of the cultural norm means my competency and professionalism is questioned or disregarded. Not being aware of this implicit bias has real world impact on the individual and informs policy and practices within early childhood education.

There are early childhood education programs that prohibit educators from wearing their hair in braids, locks, Afros, twists and so on. Also, hair can only be “natural” colors: blonde, black or brown. Alternative hairstyles are considered unkempt and unprofessional. Clearly, this policy targets Black educators. One center leadership team I worked with was upset when I pointed out that the policy was hypocritical because during one of the beloved traditions of the school “crazy hair day,” all the banned hairstyles were worn by the children and the Non-Black staff. There was an indirect message that Black culture (hairstyles in this case) is only acceptable when it is for white use and entertainment.

Instead of changing the hair policy they stopped crazy hair day. They did not want to address their anti-blackness when it was easier to label their Black consultant anti-fun.

We Need to Talk

We need to talk about these issues because we need to stop the harm that is happening to BIPOC children and educators. By naming what is happening, we stop society’s gaslighting, which tells us these harms are in our heads. Our being taught

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in multiple ways not to talk about race may mean that white people are not caused discomfort, but that comfort comes at the steep price of the well-being of brown and black people. Once we start working to end the harm, we can begin creating a more just world and a more vibrant ECE system. Racism hurts everyone, though it does not hurt us all equally or in the same ways. We live diminished lives when structures are in place that keep us all from thriving. When we work actively to dismantle racism, we begin to create environments that support healthy racial identity for all children. When we start dismantling racism in ECE settings, we can also begin to support the adults in the programs. By creating strong, healthy models of representation and leadership, our programs thrive.

We realize it may feel daunting to consider these conversations. We, especially as white people, have been socialized to have a deep discomfort in talking about racism. But we must remember, our comfort in this situation is less important than the pain and damage the racism is causing. It may be tempting to say, “Oh, I will talk with them later, when we are not in public” (which can be a fine option in many cases), but the trouble comes when we do not follow up. There are some things you can do ahead of time to help the conversations happen when they need to.

Put in the work ahead of time. White people especially need to be able to de-center themselves and their experiences—and this takes work. And it is work that needs to be done prior to coming to these conversations with your colleagues. Because our world is so contaminated with racism, it is not enough as a white person to say, “I will just be better about racism”; there are too many ways racism is embedded in our everyday lived experiences to be vigilant without some skill building. I (Kelly) have found it helpful to have some guided experiences—facilitated workshops or article discussions with people trained to help white people process their place in a racist world.

Understand you will mess up. One of the things that keeps white people from talking about race and racism is our fear of hurting someone, of saying the wrong thing, or myriad other possibilities. But keeping silent causes harm. Not saying anything is already hurtful.

Know how to apologize. There are lots of resources out there that help us as white folks who are navigating our entrance into anti-racism work. Some of the most meaningful to me have explained how to apologize. I know, I know. Those of us in child care can spend a lot of time facilitating apologies between children. What struck me in my learning about apologies dealt with what happens afterwards.

An apology is a commitment to changed behavior. You acknowledge that what you did was harmful, and then you commit to not doing the thing that caused harm anymore. Understand that if someone took the time to tell you what you did wrong instead of just suffering through it silently, it means they have hope that you have the capacity for change and they care enough to show you a start on that path. It can be a “calling in” instead of a calling out—and there is a big difference. We can see “calling in as a practice of loving each other to allow each other to make mistakes, a practice of loving ourselves enough to know that what we are trying to do here is a radical unlearning of everything we have been configured to believe is normal” (Ngọc Loan Trần quoted in <https://everydayfeminism.com/2015/01/guide-to-calling-in/>).

So, listen and listen hard. Listen with humility. And listen with a commitment to do better.

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