

# BUILDING EQUITABLE EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMS

A Social-Justice  
Approach



Ebonyse Mead, EdD,  
and Tameka Ardrey, PhD



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## **A Social-Justice Approach**



**By Ebonyse Mead, EdD,  
and Tameka Ardrey, PhD**

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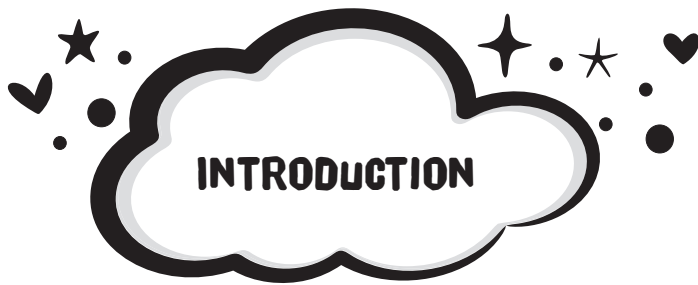
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## Who We Are

### Ebonyse

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 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 in which I advocated for the healthy development and well-being of families and children of color. In 2016, I was asked to sit on a workgroup to help develop a state's plan to address preschool suspension and expulsion. After reviewing the data that show Black preschoolers are 3.6 times more likely to be suspended than their white (U.S. Department of Education, 2016)\* peers, I felt compelled to further address these inequities. Since that time, I have provided racial-equity training with a particular focus on examining structural barriers to educational equity, implicit racial bias, and culturally responsive instruction for the early childhood workforce. As a racial-equity consultant and early childhood professional, I am deeply committed to creating and promoting equitable and just programs in early childhood.

### Tameka

My commitment to this work was born from an aha moment in a sociology of education course during my senior year of college. I remember being overwhelmed by feelings of discomfort and disbelief as my professor began to call into question the purpose of schooling and the implications of race for student outcomes. In particular, she highlighted the ways in which schools

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\* We lowercase *white* in this text but capitalize *Black*. For many people, *Black* reflects a shared identity and community. On the other hand, *white* is used more broadly to encompass a wide range of cultures and communities. Capitalizing the term *white* in the context of this book would risk following the lead of white supremacists.

were structured to prepare students for their roles in society by preparing white students to lead and students of color to serve. The content of the course challenged both who I was as an individual and what I believed about education. As an African American woman who had always been on the A/B honor roll and was only a semester away from graduation, I truly believed that schooling was a fair and equitable process independent of race or culture. However, all that changed after spending a few months volunteering in a third-grade classroom and witnessing inequitable and differential treatment of students simply based on the color of their skin. These inequities ranged from lower achievement expectations to harsher discipline practices for Black students. The culmination of this field experience marked the pivotal moment when I realized race and culture absolutely matter, and I vowed to do my part in advancing educational equity in early childhood education. From then on, I have done just that, both in and out of the classroom, serving in a variety of capacities, including as a teacher, administrator, and child-development specialist, and now as a college professor.

Together, we, the authors, have a total of thirty-eight years of experience in early childhood. We unite our experience as early childhood practitioners and higher-education faculty to write this book not only to help build an equity-minded early childhood workforce but also to help create early learning programs that are socially just.

## **The Changing Demographics of—and Cultural Disconnect in—Early Education**

The demographics in the United States are increasingly more culturally and linguistically diverse. As our society continues to become more culturally and linguistically diverse, so do our early childhood classrooms and programs. Between 1994 and 2014, the percentage of children who are part of families who are recent immigrants, either first or second generation, increased by 45 percent, from 18 to 25 percent (Child Trends, 2018). In 2013, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that 50.3 percent of students in public school were children of color (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow, 2016). The number of children of color in early learning programs has compelled early childhood professionals to rethink how we are educating and engaging with culturally diverse children and their families.

Research shows that a student's race, ethnicity, and cultural background—in conjunction with other variables including poverty, assessment practices,

implicit bias, lack of professional development and training opportunities for teachers in culturally responsive instruction, and institutional racism—significantly influence many students' achievement (Harry and Klingner, 2006; Gilliam et al., 2016; Orosco and Klingner, 2010; Skiba et al., 2011). Students of color have unique learning styles and preferences that are rooted in their culture. For instance, African American students prefer a kinesthetic learning style that allows them to move around while learning. This kinesthetic learning style is related to the African American cultural value of *movement expressiveness* (Boykin, 1994), which is attributed to West African cultural values. When teachers lack knowledge of the unique learning styles of students of color, the students' behavior can be mislabeled or misread, thus leading to the student being reprimanded. To create equitable learning environments, we must address a cultural disconnect that exists between schools and homes. Many early childhood educators, specifically in the K–3 settings, are white, non-Hispanic, monolingual, and middle class (Gitanjali, Early, and Clifford, 2002; Banks and Banks, 2000). In addition, these educators often lack experience with and have limited exposure to children from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds (Hollins and Guzman, 2005). They may not be comfortable discussing race (Gay and Howard, 2001).

Addressing the unique needs of racially and ethnically diverse students is imperative. It is vital that early learning programs be understanding, sensitive, and responsive to the diverse cultural needs, beliefs, and practices of their students and families. To create equitable learning environments, we need a paradigm shift. It is imperative that we prepare preservice teachers in culturally responsive anti-bias instruction; that educators, administrators, and policy makers adopt anti-racist perspectives; and that in-service teachers intentionally embed culturally relevant, sustaining pedagogies in their classrooms.

Creating equitable learning environments requires teachers, administrators, and support staff to have a deep understanding of the racial inequities that children of color experience. To do that, educators must deconstruct anti-Blackness and whiteness in educational settings. Deconstructing anti-Blackness means critically thinking about how anti-Blackness shows up in different aspects of the learning environment. For example, how does anti-Blackness show up in the classroom books? Are African American children or other children of color being portrayed in a stereotypical manner? Are they being depicted as the antagonist or the protagonist?



Are books about children of color positive, joyful, and uplifting, or are they negative and illustrate Black pain and suffering? *Deconstructing whiteness* means understanding how the American educational system was set up to perpetuate white advancement. This includes acknowledging that the assessments used and guidelines established for children's learning and development, such as the *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales*, are often created from the perspective of a white worldview. This worldview is not inclusive or representative of the culturally and linguistically diverse children served in early learning programs.

Schools and programs need to establish a culture of equity that centers and prioritizes the voices of families of color and other families who have been traditionally marginalized and excluded from early childhood programs. Families of color must have shared power in decision-making to ensure their perspectives are considered. This requires an overall shift in beliefs and expectations toward the understanding that all students can be successful regardless of their racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic backgrounds and their gender, language, or ability. Education professionals must make a deep commitment to analyzing the root causes to address the inequities that exist within early learning environments. This book aims to provide guidance and support to help educators engage in these tasks.

## **What This Book Is About**

Many books address culturally responsive instruction and anti-bias education in early childhood. These books serve as guides to help teachers create diverse and inclusive learning environments for all children. While these books are extremely valuable to the classroom teacher, not enough attention has been given to creating and sustaining equitable early learning programs in their entirety. In this book, we intentionally focus on the collective efforts of the administrator and the teacher to build equitable and inclusive learning environments by revising program policies, improving instructional practices, and building authentic family partnerships. We also dedicate a chapter to building the capacity of early childhood professionals to sustain equitable programs through communities of practice.

This book positions early childhood professionals to promote racial equity by addressing cultural disconnect, examining structural barriers to educational equity, and challenging their implicit biases. Given the vast racial disparities in education, such as the disproportionate rate at which Black preschool

children are suspended, it is imperative that early childhood teachers create learning environments where children of color feel safe to learn in their own skin and where their families feel respected, valued, and empowered.

## **Chapter Descriptions**

In chapter 1, we define institutional racism and explain how it creates systemic barriers based on race within our society. We also discuss the implications of historical trauma on people of color.

In chapter 2, we discuss the cultural disconnect in education and explore the ways in which meritocracy, implicit biases, and so-called color blindness undermine efforts to create equitable learning environments.

We emphasize transformative learning, self-reflection, and peer learning in chapter 3, as we explore the use of communities of practice as a strategy for helping teachers hone their skills in creating equitable learning environments.

Chapter 4 begins with a discussion of why traditional methods of family engagement may be insufficient for families of color. A discussion of the barriers to engaging with racially and ethnically diverse families follows. In this chapter, we define *culturally responsive family engagement* and why this approach to engaging families is preferred. This chapter highlights the ten "Diversity-Informed Tenets for Work with Infants, Children, and Families" (Irving B. Harris Foundation, n.d.) and how these tenets can apply to effectively engaging racially and ethnically diverse families.

Chapter 5 draws the reader's attention to the importance of understanding children in the context of their cultures and highlights the ways culture influences the learning styles of racially and ethnically diverse students.

Chapter 6 focuses on the transformative power of meaningful relationships between teachers and students and how to intentionally use these relationships to maximize learning and development.

In chapter 7, we provide a blueprint for effectively implementing culturally sustaining instructional practices that meet the developmental needs of racially and ethnically diverse students.

Using the critical issue of discipline disparities in early childhood education, chapter 8 highlights the importance of examining program practices and policies for potential biases that may negatively impact ethnically diverse students.

We discuss the importance of talking about race with young children in developmentally appropriate ways in chapter 9. The chapter offers concrete strategies teachers can employ for honest and open dialogues with young children concerning race and culture. We share a list of resources, including videos, websites, and books, to help teachers have authentic, age-appropriate conversations. We also offer a list of references and recommended reading to help you develop and deepen your understanding of culturally responsive and equitable learning environments, connecting with and building relationships with families, and supporting all the children you teach.

## **Our Invitation to You**

Young children come into the classroom with their own funds of knowledge and unique needs. At times, caring for and educating young children may feel overwhelming because these children have so many varying needs. Teachers of young children may feel as if they have multiple roles, including social worker or therapist, outside of educating children. As early childhood professionals, we see you and applaud your efforts to provide the best learning experiences for our youngest children. We fully understand the challenges and rewards of educating young children. We also acknowledge that not all teachers have been adequately prepared to care for and educate culturally and linguistically diverse children. This book is a valuable tool to assist teachers and administrators in creating equitable learning environments that are culturally responsive and grounded in building authentic relationships with children and families and within the profession.

Authentic relationships provide an opportunity for us to be genuine and vulnerable within our communication and interactions. This vulnerability is what allows us to challenge our own biases, acknowledge the systemic barriers that have traditionally failed children of color and pathologized the interactions that families of color have with schools. When this vulnerability occurs, we are open to listening, learning, and acting in ways that foster equity and inclusion. We are preparing children to be high-functioning global citizens; therefore, we have a responsibility to ensure children

have the best learning experiences regardless of their cultural, linguistic, or socioeconomic backgrounds.

As you read the text, we invite you to think about your instructional practices and the overall environment of your program. How might this book help you strengthen your current instructional practices and change them to be more culturally responsive? In what ways can your program better serve culturally and linguistically diverse children and families? How might this book improve your relationships with culturally diverse families? How might you challenge and support your colleagues to be more equity minded? In each chapter, we offer reflection questions for you to consider.

Keep in mind: Equity is not a destination. It is a continuous journey of learning and unlearning. You are not alone; this book serves to guide you on your journey. Enjoy!

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

As we have conversations about race and equity, it is incredibly important that we have shared definitions of the terms used to discuss race and equity so we all can be on the same page in our understanding.

**Acculturation:** refers to those individuals or groups who have developed a balance between their traditional culture and the majority culture (Schvaneveldt, 2022).

**Anti-Blackness:** is a form of racism that dehumanizes (devalues) Black people. It involves prejudice, stereotypes, discrimination, oppressions, attitudes, and beliefs about Black people that are rooted in colonization and slavery.

**Assimilate:** refers to individuals who have adopted the majority culture's values and retain little to no cultural traditions unique to their original culture (Schvaneveldt, 2022).

**Critical race theory:** involves studying and transforming the relationships among race, racism, and power relations. It is an alternative conceptualization of diversity and social hierarchy (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012).

**Culture:** refers to the norms, values, practices, patterns of communication, language, laws, customs, and meanings shared by a group of people located in a given time and place (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017).

**Ethnicity:** is the fact or state of belonging to a social group that has a common national or cultural tradition (DeGruy, 2009).



**Historical trauma:** is a form of collective complex trauma that impacts entire communities and is transmitted across generations (Statman-Weil, 2020).

**Implicit bias:** refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner (Staats, 2015).

**Institutional racism:** refers to the policies and practices, intentional or unintentional, that produce cumulative race-based inequities (Boutte, Lopez-Robertson, and Powers-Costello, 2011).

**Microaggressions:** are the everyday slights and insults that minoritized people endure and dominant people don't notice or concern themselves with (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017).

**People of color:** is "the term used to describe people who are racialized based on phenotypical features" (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017). The term *people of color* can be useful when describing similar experiences of racial discrimination and suffering experienced by racialized people. However, the term is also problematic, as it does not give space to the unique experiences of racial discrimination, injustices, and biases experienced by different racial and ethnic groups. The term often lumps all racialized people's experiences together and does not give way to the necessary investigation and injury of each group to fully understand their unique experience.

**Post-traumatic slave syndrome:** is a condition that exists as a consequence of multigenerational oppression of Africans and their descendants' following centuries of chattel slavery as well as the continued experiences of oppression and institutional racism (DeGruy, 2009).

**Prejudice:** learned presuppositions about members of social groups to which we don't belong (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017)

**Race:** is the classification of a group of people sharing the same culture, history, language, and other cultural characteristics. It also refers to a group or set of people with common features, for example, skin color, hair texture, and eye shape or color (DeGruy, 2009).

**Racial equity:** is a process of eliminating racial disparities and improving outcomes for everyone. It is the intentional and continual practice of changing policies, practices, systems, and structures by prioritizing measurable change in the lives of people of color (Race Forward, n.d.).

**Racism:** refers to white racial and cultural prejudice and discrimination, supported by institutional power and authority, used to the advantage of white people and to the disadvantage of people of color. Racism encompasses economic, political, social, and institutional actions and beliefs that systematize and perpetuate an unequal distribution of privileges, resources, and power between white people and people of color (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017).

**Socialization:** refers to our systematic training into the norms of our culture (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017).

**Stereotype threat:** refers to a concern that a person will be evaluated negatively due to stereotypes about their racial group; that concern causes the person to perform poorly, thereby reinforcing the stereotype (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017).

**Whiteness:** refers to the specific dimensions of racism that elevate white people over all peoples of color (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017).



## **The Manifestations of Institutional Racism**

### **How Institutional Racism Functions**

Institutional racism is deeply embedded within normative American society. Institutional racism refers to the discriminatory policies, practices, and unequal opportunities—both intentional and unintentional—that produce cumulative race-based inequities (Boutte, Lopez-Robertson, and Powers-Costello, 2011). Racism has permeated many American institutions, including education, health care, and the criminal justice system, and has been upheld both historically (for example, through “separate but equal” policies) and currently (for example, through mass incarceration) through laws and racist beliefs and attitudes. The inequities that exist within American institutions can be attributed to institutional racism.

Understanding how institutional racism operates is imperative for understanding the inequities within American society. Golash-Boza (2016) argues that racist beliefs produce racist institutions, and, in turn, racist institutions reinforce racist beliefs that impact practices, policies, and laws and perpetuate racial discrimination and bias. Throughout American history, the myth of white superiority suggests that white people are superior and all other races are inferior. White superiority functions as a cultural narrative and norm within American society. This cultural norm serves as the justification for white dominance, resulting in inequitable outcomes that privilege white individuals and disprivilege people of color. There are numerous racial inequities that have grave implications for the lives of African Americans and other people of color. In the next section, we will look at inequities in housing, education, poverty, health care, and incarceration that are rooted in institutional racism.

## Housing

Before the 1968 Fair Housing Act, Black Americans and other people of color were prohibited from living in certain areas, even if they could afford to purchase a home there. The federal government, specifically the Federal Housing Administration and the Home Owners' Loan Corporation, played a significant role in racial housing segregation. Through policies such as *redlining*—the color-coding of maps that displayed the safest and riskiest neighborhoods in America—African Americans were prohibited from residing in certain neighborhoods. The safest neighborhoods were outlined in green, and the riskiest neighborhoods—typically where African Americans and other people of color resided—were highlighted in red (Rothstein, 2017). Another practice instrumental in racial housing segregation was the inclusion of restrictive covenants in home deeds. *Restrictive covenants* were clauses in home deeds that prevented the sale or future resale of homes to African Americans. With these practices in place, African Americans, and even African American veterans, found it extremely difficult to qualify for home loans.

The Federal Housing Administration and the Veterans Administration mortgage programs primarily served white applicants (Rothstein, 2017). These practices excluded African Americans and other people of color from accumulating wealth through ownership. The implications of these racist policies and practices contribute to the inequities in housing and wealth between African American and white Americans today—referred to as the wealth gap.

## Education

Racial housing segregation and school segregation are uniquely connected. To keep African American families from living in white neighborhoods, districts would place the only school that served African American students in designated African American neighborhoods and would provide no transportation for African American students who resided elsewhere (Rothstein, 2017). African American families were forced to live in those neighborhoods so their children could have access to education.

*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) (often referred to as *Brown v. Board*) was supposed to be the great equalizer that eliminated the racial inequalities within America. Education has always been seen as a pathway to social mobility, especially for African Americans. However, more than sixty



years after *Brown v. Board*, children of color and African American children in particular are attending public schools that are more segregated by race and class today than they were prior to the landmark court decision. The racial inequities within American schools are commonplace. African American children and other children of color are more likely to be identified as having special needs and are less likely to be recommended for gifted and talented programs (York, 2016). African American preschool children are 3.6 times more likely to be suspended more than once compared to their white peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Unfortunately, the pattern of suspension continues as African American children matriculate through school. According to the U.S. GAO (2020), disparities in school discipline are prevalent, as African American students, boys, and students with disabilities are disproportionately disciplined through practices such as suspension or expulsion. Access to high-quality early childhood programs is another inequity that disadvantages children of color. Because African American and Latine children are less likely to attend high-quality early childhood programs (York, 2016), they are less likely to be prepared for kindergarten.

Efforts to address racial inequities in education have not been effective. Despite the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and the intentions of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, racial inequities for African American children and other children of color continue to be widespread. African American children are more likely to attend schools that are poorly resourced, have less qualified teachers, and offer lower quality instruction, outdated textbooks, and inadequate facilities (Milner, 2006; Tileston, 2010). Sadly, the promise of *Brown v. Board* has yet to be realized.

## **Poverty**

Racial discrimination in housing and employment practices such as hiring, pay, promotion, and retention is connected to the disproportionate rates at which families and children of color experience poverty. In a 2015 study, the Pew Research Center found that white men out-earned African American and Latine men and women (Patten, 2016). They also found that Asian and white women were paid eighteen and seventeen dollars, respectively, less than white men. African American and Latina women earned thirteen and twelve dollars, respectively, less than white men. However, Asian and white women earned more than African American and Latino men, who earned an average of fourteen to fifteen dollars an hour. Similarly, there are disparities in housing. According to the National Low-Income Housing

Coalition (2019), 20 percent of African American households, 18 percent of Native American households, and 16 percent of Hispanic households are extremely low-income renters; whereas, 6 percent of white households are extremely low-income renters.

Disparities in homeownership rates are also prevalent. USAFacts.org (2020) reported that, in 2019, homeownership rates among white families were 73.3 percent compared to 42.1 percent among African Americans. Rates were 47.5 percent for Latine families, 50.8 percent among American Indians or Alaska Natives, and 57.7 percent among Asian or Pacific Islander Americans. Pervasive discriminatory housing policies contribute to the wealth gap between white people and people of color. According to USAFacts.org (2020), in 2019 white households owned 85.5 percent of wealth, African American households owned 4.2 percent, and Hispanic households owned 3.1 percent.

Race and poverty are inextricably linked. Systemic barriers in housing and employment significantly account for the disproportionate rates of poverty among families of color. According to the Children's Defense Fund (2021), 71 percent of children in poverty are children of color. A recent study by the Pew Research Center found African American and Hispanic children are overrepresented in poverty (Pew Research Center, 2020). About 38 percent of African American children are still living below the poverty line, and Hispanic children represent 41 percent of all impoverished Hispanics.

The association between poverty and education has been well documented. Young children living in poverty are less likely to attend preschool than children from middle-income or higher-income families (Bredenkamp, 2019). In fact, only 18 percent of low-income children are enrolled in high-quality preschool programs (Nores and Barnett, 2014). Further, "Children from low-income families often do not receive the stimulation and do not learn the social skills required to prepare them for school" (Ferguson, Bovaird, and Mueller, 2007). Therefore, children of color and low-income children enter school already behind their more affluent peers. Additionally, the stress related to poverty can adversely impact a child's ability to learn. Children living in poverty may have less access to healthy and nutritious foods and may live in inadequate housing. These factors can severely impact a child's academic performance (Grant and Ray, 2013). It's difficult for a child to concentrate when they are hungry or do not know where they will be sleeping for the night.

## Health Care

Inequities within the American health-care system that disproportionately impact African American people and other people of color are plentiful. People of color are more likely to be uninsured in America, thus leading to uneven access to health-care services and poor overall health outcomes. Systemic barriers based on race continue to impact the well-being of African American children and other children of color. For example, according to the 2019, National Vital Statistics Report, the infant mortality rate for infants of non-Hispanic Black women was more than twice as high as that for infants of non-Hispanic white women, non-Hispanic Asian women, and Hispanic women (Ely and Driscoll, 2021).

Other disparities exist in medical care and dental hygiene. According to a study published in *JAMA Network Open* (Marin et al., 2021), African American and Latine children entering emergency rooms are less likely than white children to receive X-rays, CT scans, and other diagnostic imaging tests. Disparities are also found in dental hygiene for young children of color. Data analyzed by the Pew Charitable Trusts (Corr and Wenderoff, 2022) found that the frequency of treated and untreated tooth decay among American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, Hispanic, and African American third graders is considerably higher than that found in their white peers. These pervasive disparities can impact the overall physical well-being for children of color, thus affecting their ability to be successful in school.

## Mass Incarceration

The Netflix documentary *13th*, directed by Ava DuVernay (2016), illustrates the vast disparities in incarceration rates between people of color, especially Latino and African American men, and white men. Findings from the Department of Justice (Bronson and Carson, 2019) suggest that one of every three African American males born today can expect to go to prison in his lifetime, as can one of every six Latino males, compared to one in seventeen white males. A study conducted by the National Registry of Exonerations (Gross, Possley, and Stephens, 2017) found that African American adults are seven times more likely to be imprisoned than white Americans. In 2017, Black males ages eighteen and nineteen were roughly twelve times more likely than white males of the same ages to be incarcerated (Bronson and Carson, 2019).

Racism is inherent within the criminal justice system. After slavery was abolished in the United States, Black codes and vagrancy laws were established as a form of racial control; these measures severely restricted the new freedom of African Americans. Many Southern white landowners still needed a cheap labor force after slavery ended. Black codes and vagrancy laws allowed Southern white Americans to maintain a cheap labor workforce (Alexander, 2012). For example, many states required African Americans to sign yearly labor contracts. Failure to sign those contracts could result in a fine or prison. Similarly, vagrancy laws made it illegal for people to be jobless or homeless. These laws prohibited people from wandering and were instituted as many newly freed African Americans searched for work and for their family members who had been sold during slavery. If African Americans could not provide proof of employment, they were often arrested and sent to prison. These blatantly racist policies are the origins of mass incarceration in the United States.

The incarceration of a parent or loved one has significant social and emotional impacts on the development of young children. Incarceration of a parent or primary caregiver can impact the family's financial well-being and lead to or worsen housing instability. The stress of worrying about a family member's well-being can affect the mental health of children and other family members. These experiences can lead to or exacerbate anxiety, depression, and other mental illness and behaviors in young children and their families.

## **Understanding the Role of Historical Trauma**

Institutional racism and historical trauma (also referred to as *intergenerational trauma*) are uniquely connected. Communities impacted by intergenerational trauma in the United States include members of the African American community who survived slavery and Jim Crow laws and their descendants, Indigenous peoples who survived genocide and displacement and their descendants, and those who survived the Holocaust and their descendants.

Historical trauma is a form of collective complex trauma that impacts entire communities and is transmitted across generations (Statman-Weil, 2020). Because historical trauma exists on the individual, interpersonal, and community levels, race-based traumatic stress can affect the functioning and well-being of communities. For example, the impact of remembering and dealing with the denigration of one's community and the ongoing effects of stress due to societal racism (Hemmings and Evans, 2018) cause mental



and physical stress to groups that experience historical trauma. Statman-Weil (2020) states that historical trauma can be seen in the descendants of trauma survivors whose communities have suffered major trauma or abuses.

Historical trauma impacts the physical, psychological, and social health of individuals and communities. The connection between racism and trauma has been well documented. For example, Indigenous peoples of the Americas experience high rates of substance abuse due to the ongoing devastating effects of colonialism and mass genocide (Nutton and Fast, 2015). Research also concludes that Indigenous peoples are likely to have increased rates of mental illness. Janzen and colleagues (2017) found an association between racism and depression among Indigenous people. Similarly, African Americans also experience poor health and social outcomes. According to the Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health (2016), African Americans have higher rates of diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease than white Americans, demonstrating the higher likelihood of poor health outcomes. The negative mental and physical health outcomes experienced by Indigenous peoples and African Americans can be attributed to the devastating and compounding effects of historical trauma. Dr. Joy DeGruy (2017) uses the term *post-traumatic slave syndrome* (PTSS) to explain the continuous harm of racial oppression and discrimination. PTSS is defined as the prolonged exposure to a multitude of mental, emotional, and physical injuries coupled with ongoing discriminatory and oppressive practices.

There is currently a growing movement to address trauma in early childhood. While focusing on individual traumas that young children may experience is important, there also must be a focus on historical and racial trauma. The role of historical and racial trauma affects not only children's development but also their outcomes. The legacies of slavery, the remnants of Jim Crow, and the atrocities of mass genocide and displacement are still present in many Indigenous and African American communities. Being aware of the effects of intergenerational trauma on children's learning and development allows educators, administrators, and other staff to better understand the cultural backgrounds and some of the behaviors of the children and families with whom they work and to provide supportive practices that are culturally responsive and trauma informed.

Institutional racism is upheld in part by the unfair policies and discriminatory practices that routinely produce inequitable outcomes for people of

color. The inequities in housing, education, poverty, health care, and mass incarceration are all examples of institutional racism. Acknowledging the significance of institutional racism is vital to addressing the racial inequities within education and in early childhood education in particular. Educators and administrators must conduct a thorough examination of the policies and practices, such as suspension policies, that maintain inequitable outcomes. Additionally, challenging and interrupting the racist beliefs that influence discriminatory policies and practices is a necessary requirement for dismantling institutional racism within education.

Implicit racial biases can influence teachers' and administrators' interactions and responses to students of color. Students of color, in particular African American boys, have often been accused of being aggressive, lacking motivation, being uninterested in learning, and not being as smart as their white peers (Lewis and Diamond, 2015; Tileston, 2010; Kunjufu, 2002). These racialized stereotypes produce inequitable outcomes for children of color. Early childhood educators need adequate skills, ongoing training and development in culturally responsive anti-bias practices, and a nuanced understanding of the prevalence and role of racism within education. A paradigm shift in the way teachers teach, support, and engage with students of color is necessary to support the unique learning needs of culturally and linguistically diverse learners. In the next chapter, we will take a closer look at the cultural disconnect within education.

### **REFLECTING ON INSTITUTIONAL RACISM**

- ✦ Do you think institutional racism has affected your teaching practices? Why or why not?
- ✦ Considering what you have read about institutional racism, in what ways can you challenge institutional racism in early childhood education?
- ✦ How can you create equitable educational opportunities for children and families from groups who have been historically marginalized?



## **Understanding the Cultural Disconnect in Early Childhood Education**

The field of early childhood focuses on educational programs that serve children from birth to age eight and their families. Learning through play and family engagement are integral components of early childhood education. Research has shown that positive early experiences can set young children on a healthy trajectory for school and later life. One could argue then that early childhood experiences can often give young children a jump start in life. In fact, there are several early childhood programs and initiatives, such as Head Start, that adhere to this concept. President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Economic Opportunity Act in 1964, creating various programs, including Head Start, with the intent to fight against poverty in the United States. Yet while Head Start and other early childhood programs strive to create high-quality early learning experiences for all young children, many children of color experience disparate outcomes.

For example, culturally and linguistically diverse children are overrepresented in special education (Counts, Katsiyannis, and Whitford, 2018; Sullivan, 2011; O'Connor and DeLuca-Fernandez, 2006), and African American children are disproportionately suspended and expelled even in preschool (Losen and Skiba, 2010; Gilliam et al., 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Recent statistics suggest African American children make up only 19 percent of preschool enrollment but represent 47 percent of preschoolers suspended one or more times (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

As educators caring for the well-being of all young children, we must ask ourselves what is driving the disparities in education for young children.



# WORKING TOGETHER WE CAN CREATE REAL CHANGE

"I don't see color.  
I see all children  
the same."

"Implicit bias is  
something only  
bigots have."

"Today we have a  
meritocracy—our practices  
are fair and equal for everyone."

Myths like these persist, keeping our educational programs and practices from serving the needs of children and families. Early childhood administrators and teachers can collaborate to create equitable and inclusive learning environments for all children.

*Building Equitable Early Learning Programs: A Social-Justice Approach* gives educators the facts, examples, strategies, and approaches needed to create and sustain programs and practices that can best serve our communities.

- Learn how to adapt culturally inclusive educational practices beyond cultural-awareness months and holidays.
- Discover how to use professional learning communities, honest discussions, and reflection to inform real action.
- Find ways to engage authentically and strengthen relationships with the children and families you serve.
- Learn practical strategies to promote inclusivity in your classrooms and programs.



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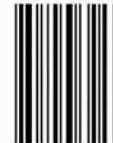
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