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# The Missing Links: Enhancing Anti-Bias Education with Anti-Racist Education

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# THE MISSING LINKS: ENHANCING ANTI-BIAS EDUCATION WITH ANTI-RACIST EDUCATION

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*Abstract: Fostering social justice in early childhood has generally been conceptualized to include an anti-bias curriculum, and to a lesser extent, anti-racist education. Over the years, however, scholars have highlighted the many areas in which anti-bias education falls short, both pedagogically and conceptually. This paper builds on this discussion, identifying significant gaps in anti-bias education by engaging central premises of anti-racist education. It also provides practical suggestions on how to align early childhood classroom practices with anti-racist principles.*

Many early childhood scholars have advocated for anti-bias education. The anti-bias curriculum emerged in the late 1980s, due to the pioneering work of Derman-Sparks and the A.B.C. Task Force (1989). It is grounded in a developmental perspective, which stresses tailoring "...materials and activities to each child's cognitive, social, and emotional developmental capacities" (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 8). By accenting ideals such as empathy, positive group identity, and fairness, and framing teaching strategies around developmental considerations, the anti-bias curriculum has earned some scholarly sanction.

However, despite the widespread support for the anti-bias curriculum in the early childhood community, a few scholars have problematized and interrogated many of its chief assumptions and underlying premises (e.g., Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2006; Vandebroek, 2007). For example, Pacini-Ketchabaw and Bernhard (2012) argued that the anti-bias curriculum largely centers on addressing children's perceptions of themselves and others, calling it "individually focused" (p. 164). I build on this critique in the following discussion, arguing that the anti-bias curriculum ignores the systemic and racial inequities embedded in various components of early childhood education, and that the goals of the program, including teaching strategies and guidelines, lack institutional and systemic focus.

The following discussion also illustrates how the incorporation of specific principles from anti-racist education – such as the recognition of institutional racism, experiential knowledge, White privilege, and White power – into anti-bias education can make it more relevant and appropriate to the realities and perspectives of the racialized oppressed. This kind of approach builds on Matsuda's (1995) idea of 'looking to the bottom' – I focus on how non-dominant voices conceptualize and experience race and racism in American society, with the goal of gauging the utility and limitations of the anti-bias program. Specifically, I move the locus of analysis from the 'individual' to more complex and nuanced discussions that foreground the ways in which institutional racism shape and inform the lived experiences of racialized children and their families in the United States, and the implications for teaching and administrative practices. I also carefully consider how current early childhood policies fail to explicitly name and address issues of race and racism, with the goal of re-thinking, re-creating, and re-assessing key elements of early childhood education.

I begin this paper by exploring the main themes of anti-bias education. Next, I explore the characteristics of anti-racist education that are most relevant to the present discussion, and show how anti-racist tenets can address some of the main limitations of anti-bias education. Guided by the epistemological underpinnings of both critical race and anti-racist theory, I conclude with a call for resistance: a discursive, collective, and social act of justice that supplants dominant discourses surrounding issues of race and racism, and stresses the need for curricular and institutional reform.

## Anti-Bias Education

Anti-bias education has several interrelated goals: its central premise is that young children are conscious of differences and impute both positive and negative meanings to social identities such as class, race, and gender. Thus, the anti-bias curriculum has been defined as "an active/activist approach to challenging prejudice,

stereotyping, bias, and the isms” (Derman-Sparks, 1989). As part of its framework, anti-bias education positions both educators and children as agents of social change, and promotes specific goals: identity, diversity, justice, and activism (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; 2016). These four objectives are not mutually exclusive; they are interconnected, so the successful implementation of an anti-bias program necessitates the execution of all four goals (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2016). However, a closer examination of these goals reveals significant limitations.

One of the goals of the anti-bias program is to ensure that young children ... “recognize unfairness, have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts” (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 5). Consequently, much of the emphasis is placed on addressing a wide range of prejudice and stereotypes, including those related to ability, class, and race; however, the authors fail to offer any pedagogical strategies for demonstrating how racial stereotypes, in particular, derive from and reproduce White power and privilege. In my opinion, this is an egregious omission: other social identities produce a myriad of exclusionary experiences, but race in particular remains a dominant organizing principle in American society. An intersectional approach is therefore needed, in which race is centered, and also examined alongside other identities.

Additionally, the teaching guidelines are informed by developmentally appropriate practice. For example, one guideline for goal three is to “plan activities that help children learn how to contrast inaccurate, untrue images or ideas with accurate ones” (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 5). Such activities appear to support children’s pre-operational and concrete-operational stage of development, because first, teachers are advised to use materials to help children discover the ‘inaccuracy of images’ and second, the conversation is limited to what children can ‘see’ instead of more abstract concepts, namely, systemic racism, racialized power, and privilege. However, it is important to point out that young children not only recognize and experience these realities, but also reproduce them in social interactions with others (Escayg, Berman & Royer, 2017).

Within this context of an emphasis on developmental considerations and a lack of intersectional approach – including the foregrounding of race – can anti-bias teaching strategies de-center, disrupt, and complicate Whiteness? Can anti-bias education address the knowledges and discourses that have marginalized other ways of being and knowing?

Early childhood education functions within the nexus of racialized power and privilege. Scholars, including myself, who advocate for non-Eurocentric perspectives in early childhood education therefore ask: who is speaking for whom? Whose voices and perspectives are silenced in the anti-bias curriculum? If a curriculum that seeks to expose and challenge societal injustice is developed based on a limited perspective of issues related to race/racism and interrelated forms of oppression – and more importantly, barely includes non-dominant voices that challenge assumed ‘truths’ – how can be it classified as transformative education? Is White privilege and power shaping curriculum (e.g., anti-bias and multiculturalism) aimed at addressing ‘diversity’ in early childhood education? More importantly, has the anti-bias curriculum garnered support because it attends to all identities, without centering race specifically? These provocative questions are all related to the fundamental tenets of anti-racist education, and guide the following discussion.

## **Anti-Racist Education**

Anti-racist education explicitly draws attention to and critiques institutional racism. Therefore, while it addresses how racist beliefs/ideologies structure micro-relations, it also examines and challenges how institutions support and maintain disadvantage and advantage along racial lines (Berman & Paradies, 2010; Carr & Lund, 2009; Pon, Gosine, & Phillips, 2011). It recognizes that in a White-dominated society created through a historical legacy of racial oppression, race is a central social identity through which other identities find their expressions and meanings (Dei, 2017). Thus, while anti-racist education supports an intersectionality perspective (Dei, 2011), it does not simply lump race in with other social categories: oppression is analyzed by affording race primary conceptual and experiential significance.

Placing race at the center of analysis exposes the characteristics of White privilege, including how it is derived from and intimately linked to unequal relations of power, racial discourse, and institutional practices. Anti-racist education promotes an unveiling of ‘Whiteness’ as a system of oppression and privilege (Dei, 2006). It highlights and problematizes the ‘roots’ (historical processes), constructs (White privilege and power, racial ideologies), contexts (systems, institutions, micro interactions), and outcomes (agency among racialized groups as well as their experiences with racism; structural and psychological advantages for dominant group) of racism, as well as the interplay between knowledge production and power.

## Anti-Bias and Anti-racist Education: Pedagogical Possibilities

Anti-racist education stresses the existence of multiple social realities. In contrast, the anti-bias curriculum stresses theoretical orientations including liberalism-pluralism and ‘developmentally appropriate’ practice. With regard to issues of race and racism, a strict adherence to developmentally appropriate practices is problematic because racism is not a developmental issue: it is a social, historical, cultural, and institutional issue. Teaching strategies that are intended to address race(ism), but are influenced by developmentally appropriate practice, can actually reproduce dominant perspectives of racism (i.e., the emphasis on prejudice) by dismissing racial ideologies, systemic racism, racialized power and privilege. Therefore, it is vital that early learning curriculum take into account how racial discourses, whiteness, and power relations shape children’s understandings and evaluation of racial identities. More pointedly, such realities should provide the theoretical basis for classroom activities, materials and teaching pedagogies.

‘Discourse’ refers to the ways in which language and social practice represent and are used to represent a particular social phenomenon (Foucault, 1972; Mac Naughton, 2005). In the United States, for instance, two competing and contradictory racial discourses exist: color-blindness and anti-Blackness discourses. Many scholars have shown that color-blind discourse promotes and reflects an ahistorical ideology: it dismisses the cumulative effects of past injustices such as slavery and segregation, while assuming a form of racial utopia in which racialized persons now experience life chances and outcomes comparable to their White counterparts (Gallagher, 2003; Leonardo, 2007). This rhetoric is inaccurate and insulting, particularly when juxtaposed with the long history of racial oppression in the United States, yet it is still widely upheld among dominant group members (Gallagher, 2003; Leonardo, 2004). It serves to accomplish the goals of White supremacy (maintenance of hierarchal political, economic and social relations), and also supplants any attempts at recognizing and redressing racial injustices. Color-blind discourse produces a false consciousness about issues of race and racism while protecting White privilege and power, as well as the current racial social order. Simply put, it encourages and supports victim-blaming by attributing structural inequities to the perceived shortcomings of non-dominant group members (Leonardo, 2007), and on a symbolic level, by re-investing in the myth of White ‘goodness’ and ‘innocence.’

Conversely, anti-Blackness discourse refers to the dehumanization of Black peoples and Black identity through physical violence (e.g., lynching, police brutality, mass incarceration), psychological violence (negative representations of Blackness and disregard for Black pain), and systemic violence (institutional arrangements that create and maintain disadvantage/ oppression) (Dei, 2017; Dumas, 2016). These practices, while rooted in the historical legacy of slavery, continue to persist because “...the Black is (still) imagined outside of the citizenship that allows claims for redress to be regarded as legitimate, or even logical” (Dumas, 2016, pp. 14–15). In other words, Blackness is equated with “thingification” (Cesaire, 1972): a non-human identity. One of the tools used to disseminate this kind of colonial racial logic – and therefore to justify all forms of violence, including the violence of White supremacy – is racial images:

There is a direct and abiding connection between the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy in this society and the institutionalization via mass media of specific images, representations of race, of Blackness that support and maintain the oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of all Black people (hooks, 1992, p. 2, as cited in Dei, 2017, p. 35).

In sum, anti-Blackness discourse remains embedded in the American collective psyche and social structure, because unequal power relations require an ideological justification – which is provided by anti-Blackness discourse.

Taken together, both color-blind and anti-Blackness discourses are produced and maintained by White supremacy: both involve a tacit acknowledgment of the ‘innocence’ of White identity, which is a socially constructed category that holds the privilege of being viewed as ‘normal’ (Decuir-Gunby, 2006, p. 93). Some scholars have argued that such discourses, more so than cognition, influence how children acquire and enact the racial discourse of their specific socio-cultural context (Escayg, Berman & Royer, 2017; Mac Naughton, Davis & Smith, 2010).

As noted above, the anti-bias curriculum, while acknowledging the role of racial discourse in shaping children’s racial attitudes, emphasizes teaching practices that align with and support age-related cognitions. However, this strict application of a developmental lens means that more abstract components of racism – including White economic, social, and cultural power, privilege, as well as the positive representation of White identity – are

removed from classroom discussions. Thus, by focusing solely on concrete representations of stereotypes, rather than what informs the construction and dissemination of racial images, the anti-bias curriculum de-historicizes and de-contextualizes the interrelated mechanisms of white racial domination.

Given the negative psychological outcomes of both anti-Blackness and color-blind discourse, it is imperative that early childhood education interrogates the scope, practices, and characteristics of these discourses. An alternative counter-hegemonic approach is needed to provide racialized children, especially Black children, with ways to cultivate and nurture a decolonized identity.

## **Pedagogical Possibilities: Identity**

The first goal of the anti-bias curriculum centers on developing positive racial, cultural, gender, and class identities (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). This goal is commendable insofar as it recognizes how self-concept can influence children's social and emotional well-being. The authors also listed specific strategies to guide teachers as they work toward affirming and nurturing children's individual and group identity: collectively, these guidelines offer teachers practical advice on how to support children's identities in ways that are empowering and respectful to themselves and their families.

Nevertheless, a comprehensive analysis reveals that such activities render a marginal – or even absent – status to the ideologies, constructs, historical events, contexts, counter-narratives, and patterns of resistance (historical and contemporary) that affect how children perceive their racialized identity. From an anti-racist perspective, it is important to provide young Black children with a more critical understanding of race, including their African contributions and historical legacies (and why such knowledges were denied or dismissed), as well as the continuity of agency, voice, and Pan-African subversive acts of resistance. An Afrocentric epistemology, with its emphasis on African ways of being and African knowledges as pertaining to all peoples of African descent, can serve as a counter-narrative to anti-Blackness and color-blind discourses – for both racialized and White children. Simply, the main goal of anti-racist education, as applied to children's identity development, is to dismiss the ideological tenets upon which anti-Blackness discourse is founded. However, a sole focus on cultivating racial pride is insufficient.

Ideally, racial pride will serve as an entry point to helping young children recognize the 'self-other connection' (Dei, 2006). Teaching strategies should first clearly reveal (by using contemporary events and linking these to historical antecedents) the socio-economic effects of racism and sexism. By incorporating racial pride and the awareness of racial oppression – how it functions, why it functions, and the effects – it is possible to develop a more robust and holistic approach to pedagogical opportunities that bridge children's racial pride with knowledge of and support for activism, collectivism, and critical consciousness. Dei (2017) wrote, "...We can begin to challenge the dominance of Whiteness by affirming a positive force of Blackness which is about resistance from a social and epistemic location and identity" (p. 20). I believe that both racialized and White individuals should be part of this process, because racial discourses continue to affect the psyches and lives of both groups, although in distinct ways. The anti-bias agenda recognizes such realities, but anti-racist and decolonization agendas go one step further by identifying and critiquing White supremacy (and the conditions it creates) while also incorporating specific elements of agency, including the ability to 're-theorize' Blackness, Black identity, and subjectivity (Dei, 2017).

While anti-racist education can inform pedagogies, curriculum, materials and learning activities, a more thorough transformation, however, requires a national anti-racism early childhood education policy. Christie (2013), for instance, argued that early childhood education policies should not re-center Whiteness. As such, I define an anti-racism early childhood education policy as one that recognizes the continued effects (material and immaterial) related to race and racism within American society, and that these are manifested at individual, institutional, and cultural levels. Overall, it should ensure that young racialized children and their families experience a school environment that is safe, welcoming, and non-violent – to both their person and their psyche.

## **Conclusion**

Research has shown that some dominant group members misconstrue the meaning, scope, and impact of racism, because their perceptions are shaped by their continued privilege and power (see e.g., Bonilla-Silva, 2010). The fact is that in the United States, racial inequities are buttressed by racist discourse. Interventions such as the anti-bias curriculum are designed to challenge children's negative evaluation of 'difference,' broadly defined.

However, they may lack critical content; with regard to the anti-bias curriculum, this can be attributed to its focus on developmentally appropriate practice. This paper has illustrated how anti-racist education can address some of the gaps within the anti-bias curriculum.

In conclusion, the anti-bias curriculum has been widely used over the years to integrate elements of social justice into early childhood education. However, it would perhaps be remiss and woefully inadequate if early childhood scholars and practitioners posture towards a rhetoric of “inclusion” so palatable to dominant voices and sensibilities, that in the process, they not only pay minimal attention to the realities, the tragedies, and the living legacies of racial injustices, but also contaminate themselves with the same evil they ought to renounce—and renounce relentlessly: silence.

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