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INTRODUCTION: CHILDREN, RACE, AND RACISM: GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

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It is play time in a kindergarten classroom. With much glee and unbridled enthusiasm, the children approach the dramatic center. There are Black dolls and white dolls in the center. A young Black boy, however, refuses to select a Black male doll. The teacher asks why he refuses the doll, and he responds that “he does not like it.”

In 1947, Clark and Clark conducted the famous “doll test study” to assess children’s developing race consciousness. The data revealed that young Black children recognized differences in skin color and were able to identify both the Black doll and the white doll. A more concerning finding, however, was that Black children overwhelmingly attributed more positive descriptors to the white doll. Although scholars have heavily critiqued the methodological design of Clark and Clark’s (1947) study, such research was instrumental in not only highlighting children’s racial awareness, but also in prompting numerous investigations focused on children’s racial perceptions, the behavioral manifestations of such beliefs, and the processes (i.e., developmental or social), that influenced how children attached value and meaning to dominant and racialized identities.

The scope of the children and race literature continues to expand, offering interdisciplinary exegeses that challenge the limitations of previous theoretical constructs, as well as empirical findings that illustrate both pro-white and pro-Black attitudes among white and children of color. There has also been an increase in qualitative studies, international research on children’s experiences in non-American contexts, and anti-racist and anti-bias interventions to support the development of positive racial identity in racialized children. Further, there has been an upsurge in empirical and theoretical expositions that examine the pedagogical approaches to discussing race and racism that move beyond merely embracing difference, to interrogating foundational elements of both systemic racism and white privilege. Recent studies documenting children’s implicit bias further enhance the research terrain of children and race. The field has certainly evolved—and in many creative and incisive directions.

Racism, global white hegemony, and the long-standing effects of colonization and slavery provide the contextual and historical backdrop for situating the social and educational significance of children and race research. In this special issue, therefore, we sought to obtain new global insights on how context-specific features of racism impact the lives of young children, and how parents and educators engage in socialization practices that cultivate racial pride as well as anti-racist perceptions and behaviors. As Black female academics committed to anti-racism in global contexts, we brought a scholarly-activist lens to this piece. We were interested in theories, research studies, and educational solutions that challenged dominant beliefs and practices concerning children’s racial beliefs and attitudes.

As each of the articles indicate, the authors, either conceptually or empirically, shared our vision of reconceptualizing views of children in relation to issues of race and racism, as well as early years practice. Our first contribution, “Politicizing Early Childhood Education and Care in Ontario: Race, Identity and Belonging” by Zuhra Abawi and Rachel Berman (Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada) interrogates the positioning of children as race-innocent by accenting the role of context and socialization in shaping children’s racial identity. The authors further argue that early childhood centers should provide children with opportunities to resist dominant race-based ideologies.

Beverly-Jean Daniel (Ryerson University) and Kerry-Ann Escayg (University of Nebraska-Omaha), in their article, “‘But, I Don’t Believe it’s About Race’: Challenging Fallacies of Race and Racism Amongst Early Childhood Educators in Ontario,” further explore the theme of educators’ teaching practice—and how these should be transformed to reflect anti-racist pedagogy. Drawing on empirical data from a broader study on Canadian children and race, the authors discuss key findings that characterize early childhood educators’ perceptions of children’s racial competence and their strategies for addressing race and racism in the classroom.

Similar to their Canadian counterparts, but with a focus on the Caribbean, Kerry-Ann Escayg from the University of Nebraska-Omaha, and Zoyah-Kinhead Clark from the University of the West Indies, Mona Campus,

explore anti-colonial pedagogical strategies for developing racial pride in African Caribbean children. In their article, “Promoting a Positive Racial Identity in Young African Caribbean Children: An Anti-colonial Approach,” the authors utilize the epistemological lens of both anti-colonial Caribbean theory and Afrocentric education, and emphasize the importance of using a decolonized approach to Caribbean early childhood education, one which centers children’s cultural realities and racial identities.

A U.S. perspective of anti-racist pedagogy in the early childhood classroom is provided by Anna Falkner, from the University of Texas at Austin, in the article “‘They Need To Say Sorry:’ Anti-Racism in First Graders’ Racial Learning.” Based on the findings of a critical ethnography, the authors explore concrete examples of how first graders understand racism and conceptualize and engage in anti-racist praxis.

In contrast to previous research, an increasing number of scholars use ethnographic methods to capture children’s lived experiences with race and racism. Jacklyn Murray, (University of Winchester, Hampshire, UK) adds to this growing body of scholarship. In the article, “Troubling ‘Race’ and Discourses of Difference and Identity in Early Childhood Education in South Africa,” the author utilizes post-structural theory, and concepts such as subjectivity and performativity, to interpret the discursive forces that percolate the schooling environment and the multiple ways in which children and educators engage in and resist racial discourse.

While scholars have advocated for anti-racist education in the early years classroom, there remains a dearth of research data on teachers’ anti-racist pedagogy, including teacher-led discussions centered on racial justice. In “Supporting Conversations about Race and Racism with Young Children While Watching for Manifestations of Whiteness,” Shubhi Sachdeva and Jennifer Adair, from the University of Texas at Austin, explore two first grade teachers’ strategies for discussing racism and race with young children. Their findings revealed that despite teachers’ anti-racist approaches, the pervasive nature of whiteness was still evident in how children perceived and discussed race and performed their racial knowledge.

In addition to the classroom context, research has also explored the racial socialization practices (that is, the diverse strategies parents use to teach children about race and racism) of African American parents (e.g., Blanchard, Coard, Hardin, & Mereoiu, 2019; Kurtz-Costes, Hudgens, Skinner, Adams, & Rowley, 2019; Thomas & Blackmon, 2015). What is far less known, however, is the racial socialization practices of white parents. Rhianna K. Thomas (New Mexico State University), in “Developing a Vocabulary to Talk about Race in the white Home: One Family’s Experience,” shares an anti-racist approach to parenting two white children, aged five and eleven. As part of this experience, the author’s children not only developed a more nuanced racial vocabulary but also recognized the material dimensions of white privilege, such as power and safety.

Concluding this special issue is a contribution by Aisha White and Shannon B. Wanless from the University of Pittsburgh. In their article, “P.R.I.D.E: Positive Racial Identity Development in Early Education,” the authors discuss the P.R.I.D.E. program, offering critical insights on how socialization agents such as parents and teachers can mitigate the deleterious effects of racism on Black children’s self-perceptions by supporting the development of a positive racial identity.

In closing, the articles in this special issue represent more than a collection of thought-provoking scholarly analyses of children, race, and racism. These articles—the narratives, and the counter-narratives they embody—testify to the ongoing presence of racial injustices across the globe—the ideologies used to sustain them—and more importantly, the steadfast desire to transform the social worlds in which children live, grow, develop and acquire beliefs about their identity and self-worth. The special issue foundationally has sought to critique ongoing and, in some ways, nebulous and ever-changing practices that reinforce racism while simultaneously highlighting the possibilities for change that can be enhanced amongst those who care for and raise our nations’ children. The authors have joined the editors in “resisting” the knowledges and practices that deemphasize the saliency of race and racism. In addition, the pieces underscore the importance of working towards ensuring that all children, but more importantly, racialized children, are supported in developing healthy and positive racial identities. Through reading the articles, we hope that you, the reader, can also see yourself as an agent of change, hope, and justice. May our collective solidarities stir new awakenings in the hearts of those deeply disturbed by the inhumanity of racism, and the heavy toll it exacts on children and adults alike.

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