

Start at the beginning: New report offers solutions to rooting out racism in early education ^[1]

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Source: The 74 Million

Format: Article

Publication Date: 27 Oct 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

It was the third time Jaren's name had been called that hour. This time, he and his friends were playing in the block area after the clean-up bell rang. "Jaren, how many times do I have to say clean up? his teacher exclaimed. "You've just lost your outside time!" And yet, his white friends playing alongside him faced no consequences. A week later, the preschool director suspended Jaren for being defiant and non-compliant, citing the block incident as one of the reasons for his suspension.

This scene, witnessed by one of us (Rosemarie Allen) in an early childhood classroom in Denver last year as part of her work supervising student teachers, is depressingly normal in American early childhood programs. The seeds of racism are planted, watered, and nurtured in American classrooms — including in early learning settings.

Addressing racism in early childhood spaces is critical to creating an anti-racist America. This is the soil where future doctors, police officers, judges, bankers, and legislators begin to grow with their peers. Early childhood settings teach them who is valued and who is dispensable, who is accepted and who is not, who is given second chances and who is constantly under supervision.

Our new report, *Start with Equity: Data, Research, and an Actionable Policy Agenda*, provides concrete solutions to addressing inequities in early childhood, so that today's preschoolers are not tomorrow's protesters demanding justice in the streets of our country.

The door into early care and learning is too often also an entry point to a lifetime of educational trauma from suspensions, expulsions, corporal punishment, and negative interactions between teachers and children. Too many children of color have experiences like Jaren's, introductions into a system that was not designed for them to succeed and where failure has become commonplace.

Brain science tells us that this time is foundational; it is the point when the greatest developmental gains can be made. During these years, children's brains grow rapidly. Positive experiences during these years, research shows, can have long-term and wide-ranging benefits, improving everything from children's high school graduation rates, to their employment and health in adulthood. Similarly, negative experiences in the early years can have especially detrimental effects.

Lamentably, American early learning programs reflect the racial inequities that plague American life. Forty years of research shows young Black children are three to four times more likely to be suspended from early learning settings than their white peers. In public preschool, Black children make up 19 percent of total enrollment, but almost half of all suspensions. What's more, Black children are consistently and disproportionately targeted for other forms of harsh discipline — including corporal punishment, seclusion, restraint, and even arrest, despite the fact that there is no evidence that suggests that they have more severe or frequent misbehavior.

Research shows that teachers perceive children's behaviors differently based on race, and that biases against Black children create negative behavioral expectations. As part of a series of classroom observations for teacher candidates in her class, Rosemarie watched the children in Jaren's classroom repeatedly see their teacher model racial bias against Black boys. They learned to think of Jaren as an outsider who had to earn the right to belong in their community. They also learned that they could mistreat Jaren with impunity. When asked about her interactions with Jaren, the teacher responded with genuine surprise. She had no idea she'd engaged in such biased behavior.

Black children are also excluded from general education settings through the special education system. Data find that Black children and other children of color with disabilities are less likely to spend their day in general education settings, and more likely to be placed in segregated special education classrooms. Too often that means lower academic expectations, lack of access to the general curriculum, and exclusion from inclusive pedagogy and learning models that we know work. These early inequities in special education placements can have lifelong impacts: once a Black child enters the special education system, he or she is less likely to exit it, compared to their white peers. And when they do, white children are more likely to graduate with a regular diploma, whereas Black children are more likely to graduate with an alternative certificate.

In our research, we find pervasive racial disparities across a variety of educational experiences, and across state lines, children's ages, and

systems – including child care, public pre-K, K–12, and special education. They are largely driven by bias, poorly informed and/or implemented policies, and inadequate professional preparation and development for education leaders, teachers, and child care providers.

The answer lies in inclusive policies that can bridge longstanding opportunity gaps. For instance, we propose discipline reforms to end corporal punishment, seclusion, suspensions and expulsions. The country’s early childhood programs also need stronger federal and state oversight and accountability for abuse, increased resources for mental health supports, and teacher trainings on equity and bias. American special education placements must also be overhauled – national leaders should require states to consider inclusive learning settings as the first resort for all children in exchange for any future federal special education funding.

Too often, and in too many ways, early learning programs risk serving as cradles for establishing and entrenching racial hierarchies. Jaren’s story is common in early childhood spaces across the country. That’s why any effort to address systemic racism in America must begin early, at the roots of young Americans’ social, emotional, and academic development. These and other systemic changes will ensure children like Jaren and millions of other Black and brown children across this nation are protected and can thrive.

Of course, on their own, reforms to the systems shaping these programs will not end racial injustice in America. But neither can police or criminal justice reforms. Structural racism is deeply intertwined with the systems that shape American life; disentangling it will require a comprehensive, systemic, anti-racist approach.

Shantel Meek, PhD, is the founding director of The Children’s Equity Project at Arizona State University; Rosemarie Allen, PhD, is president and CEO of the Center for Equity and Excellence and an associate professor at Metropolitan State University of Denver; and Conor Williams, PhD, is a fellow at The Century Foundation and a regular contributor to The 74.

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