

## “I Don’t See Color”: Challenging Assumptions about Discussing Race with Young Children

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**Abstract** Early childhood classrooms in the US continue to become increasingly diverse as we journey through the twenty first century. Yet and still, many early childhood educators have been slow to respond to these shifts in diversity on the basis of both developmental and political concerns. In this guest editorial, I argue for the integration of anti-racist education in the early childhood social studies classroom. The reasons I discuss here concern: when and how children develop racial attitudes, the difficulty of altering long-standing stereotypes, student empowerment, critical teacher reflection, and issues of standardization. I conclude with several considerations teachers should heed as they engage in this form of education.

**Keywords** Anti-racist education · Diversity · Early childhood education · Guest editorial · Social studies · Race · Racism

The demographics in US classrooms continue to experience dramatic changes as we journey through the twenty first century. The NCES (2000) predicts that by the year 2035, students from racially/ethnically diverse backgrounds will comprise a statistical majority of the public school population. In spite of these demographic shifts, few early childhood educators make conscious efforts to respond to these changes within the curriculum on the basis of developmental and or political concerns (Derman-Sparks and Ramsey 2006; Ramsey 2004). Many early childhood educators believe that children are “too young” to engage in critical discussions of race (Husband 2010).

An overwhelming majority of early childhood educators opt to employ “color blind” approaches to discussions of racial identity and racial oppression (Banks 1985, 1995). Although colorblind approaches appear to be politically neutral, they actually work to exacerbate racial oppression in schools and society (Kalin 2002). By virtue of not attending to the privilege that is granted or denied to individuals on the basis on racial identification, children develop what Freire (1972) calls a “magical” or false consciousness of race and racism in schools and society. Ultimately, this false consciousness leads children into believing that racism is not a significant concern in society and thereby warranting no social action toward rectification (Derman-Sparks and Ramsey 2006). In this paper I argue for integrating anti-racist education in the early childhood social studies classroom as an alternative to the widely used colorblind approach. To provide background, I begin with an explanation of some of the theoretical and practical tenets common in the anti-racist education literature. Next, I espouse five reasons why anti-racist education is warranted in the early childhood social studies classroom in particular. I conclude with several considerations teachers must take into account as they engage in this form of education.

### Some Theoretical and Practical Tenets of Anti-Racist Education

#### Theoretical Tenets of Anti-Racist Education

What do I mean by anti-racist education? Isn’t that the same as multicultural education? At first glance, one might assume that anti-racist education is the same as more traditional forms of multicultural education. While much of

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the theoretical literature (i.e., Brandt 1986; Derman-Sparks and Ramsey 2006; Tatum 1992) on anti-racist education has been conceptualized in ways that are consistent with traditional notions of multicultural education, there are specific theoretical tenets of anti-racist education that distinguish it from more traditional notions of multicultural education. First, anti-racist education is based in and driven by knowledge critique and reconstruction (Kalin 2002). An anti-racist approach to education assumes that schools exist as microcosms of the larger US society (where racism exists and permeates every institution therein). In keeping with this assumption, anti-racist theorists and practitioners believe that racial injustice exists in and is furthered through the formal and informal ideologies, policies, practices, and texts implemented in schools. Thus, anti-racist education is based in intensive critique and reflection (related to the ideologies, policies, practices, and texts present in schools) as the necessary first step in identifying and responding to racial injustice in schools. An early childhood educator endeavoring to implement an anti-racist education in his or her classroom might begin by spending a significant amount of time examining the information and perspectives presented in school policies, texts, and curriculum for racial injustice. He or she might begin working toward implementing anti-racist education by examining the student handbook, course of study, and parent involvement policies for racial bias or injustice as a means of exposing underlying oppressive agendas and power relationships and outcomes between individuals of different racial backgrounds.

A second theoretical tenet of anti-racist education, that distinguishes it from traditional forms of multicultural education, is its overtly political nature (Brandt 1986; Dei 1996; Kalin 2002). In keeping with this distinction, Brandt (1986) defines anti-racist education as form of theory and practice that endeavors to develop a critical awareness of race and racism that exists in direct opposition to the commonly accepted norms, values, and ideologies related to race and schooling in society. While traditional forms of multicultural education seek to *reform* many of the current policies and practices in schools, anti-racist education seeks to exist in direct *opposition* to many of the policies and practices that transpire in schools. For example, traditional perspectives on schooling in the United States view schools as places that embody justice, equality, and democracy for all students. Accordingly, racial injustice is seen as a seldom-occurring phenomenon that warrants curriculum and pedagogical adjustments to accommodate for these injustices. Directly contrasting these traditional perspectives on schooling in the U.S., anti-racist education is predicated upon the belief that schools are purposely designed to maintain and advance racial and economic inequalities extant in the larger society. As a result, anti-racist

education seeks to develop a consciousness of race and racism that is contrary to the “normal” perspectives and understandings of schooling policies and practices. Further, it is important to reiterate here that while traditional approaches to multicultural education seek to salvage much of the policies, procedures, and texts presented and implemented in schools while integrating a multicultural approach to curriculum and pedagogy, anti-racist education seeks to exist in direct contrast to what is presented and implemented in schools due to the belief that schools are racist by virtue of being reflections of a larger racist society.

A third tenet of anti-racist education, that differentiates it from traditional forms of multicultural education, concerns the ways in which the relationship between racial and economic oppression is constructed and analyzed (Kalin 2002). Traditionally, scholars in the field of multicultural education have centered their scholarship on helping practitioners and students develop the attitudes and skills pertinent to respecting, tolerating, and including various aspects of diversity (i.e., race, class, gender, physical disability etc.) in curriculum and pedagogical decisions. Additionally, within more traditional forms of multicultural education, various aspects of diversity (i.e., race, gender, class, sexuality, etc.) have tended to be analyzed and responded to in a separate or isolated fashion (Banks 1995). Essentially, multicultural scholars and practitioners have tended to study and implement projects that were aimed at responding to one particular aspect of social injustice (i.e., racism, classism, sexism, etc.) while giving little or no attention to other forms of social injustice. In this vein, an expert multicultural practitioner might decide to combat racial inequality within the official school curriculum by teaching about American history through the experiences of Native Americans, while paying minimal attention to other forms of diversity. While making the experiences of Native Americans the focus of the curriculum, gender, for instance, is not discussed at all or discussed in a way that leaves it along the margins of the curricular content. In contrast, anti-racist education is guided by the assumption that racial oppression is largely a result of and connected to class oppression. Therefore, analyses within anti-racist education occur around the ways in which racial and economic oppression are interconnected (Kalin 2002). In keeping with the example above, an anti-racist educator would examine and critique the ways in which racial and class oppression exist within the historic experiences of the Native Americans simultaneously.

A fourth theoretical tenet that distinguishes anti-racist education from more traditional forms of multicultural education is its central emphasis on Freire’s (1972) notion of praxis (Kalin 2002). Freire (1972) defines praxis as the process by which critical reflection (theory) is carried out

in practice (action) and whereby practice (action) dialogically informs reflection (theory). After engaging in intensive critique and reflection related to how racism exists and is furthered through the normal schooling policies and practices, anti-racist educators "...ground their aims in grass-root support and engage not only in theorizing, but also in developing a praxis that seeks to confront and transform unequal power relations" (Kalin 2002, pp. 56–57). While activism is seen as a *potential* final product within traditional forms of multicultural education, activism is viewed as an *indispensable* component of anti-racist education. For that reason, Dei (1996) saliently points out that while being non-racist requires little or no action, being anti-racist requires social activism.

### Practical Aspects of Anti-Racist Education

What should an anti-racist curriculum entail? Cheng and Soudack (1994) conceptualize an anti-racist curriculum as a curriculum that: (1) explicitly interrogates power inequities related to race and class; (2) invokes critical thinking around social issues; (3) helps students identify stereotypes; (4) infuses and emphasizes the historical and cultural experiences and perspectives of racial minorities; (5) helps students develop positive values and respect for differences; (6) affirms diversity on an on-going basis; (7) includes scholarship of males and females from racial and ethnic backgrounds; and (8) empowers students with the tools needed to resist bias and oppression in their everyday lives. Additionally, Kalin (2002) informs us that an anti-racist curriculum works to challenge the development of Eurocentric and racially biased perspectives. Making the perspectives of racial minorities the focus of the curriculum often facilitates this process. Notably, Dei (1996) points out that an anti-racist educational curriculum is based in an integrative framework that examines race in relationship to other social identities (i.e., class, gender, sexuality, etc.) simultaneously. For example, an anti-racist early childhood educator might integrate a project that examines and responds to the suffrage of African American women in tandem with the marginalized experiences of those who are commonly referred to as the "working poor".

How should anti-racist education be implemented as a form of pedagogy? Regarding early childhood instructional settings in particular, Derman-Sparks and Phillips (1997) propose that teachers implement anti-racist/anti-biased pedagogies in three phases. First, they suggest that teachers critically evaluate their present classroom climate for racial bias and create an atmosphere that is conducive to anti-racist teaching and learning. This might involve activities such as increasing their personal awareness of anti-bias issues, assessing what children presently know about diversity, making appropriate curriculum and activity

decisions, and modifying the physical classroom environment where necessary. The second phase requires teachers to introduce anti-bias concepts during "teachable moments" that arise or lend themselves toward racial discussions. The final phase requires an on-going commitment, consideration, and appropriation for diversity within the teacher's lesson plans, material choices, learning activities, and ways of interacting with students, parents, and other staff at the school. This last phase is continuous as the needs of students and parents change alongside new developments and research in and around anti-racist education. It is important to note here that teachers should implement anti-racist education as an *on-going* and *voluntary* endeavor in order to experience the greatest degree of success (Ramsey 2004). Anti-racist education should never be implemented as a forced or compulsory initiative in and among students. Further, some pedagogical strategies that may aid teachers in facilitating student engagement in anti-racist education include: direct instruction on the topic, the use of vicarious and interracial contact through drama and role play, incorporating literature from authors of diverse backgrounds, and providing students with access to direct interaction with members of other racial or cultural groups as role models of cooperative, and sustained, and equal status learning activities (Banks 1995; Tatum 1992).

### Race in the Early Childhood Social Studies Classroom

Why teach children about race in the early childhood social studies classroom? One reason early childhood teachers should integrate anti-racist education in the social studies classroom is that children are constantly constructing meanings and understandings about race as they interact with other children and adults in different social and cultural contexts in society (Ausdale and Feagin 2002; Derman-Sparks and Ramsey 2006; Ramsey 2004). Frequently, the meanings and understandings that children acquire related to race are not interrogated on the basis of accuracy or racial bias. Racially biased information is frequently transmitted to children via consistent and prolonged interactions with family, media, and peers at school (Gopaul-McNicol 1988). For example, a racist parent might communicate a statement such as, "You know that's just how they are" while describing the actions of a character on a television sitcom. With little or no subsequent instruction to place this racially biased information within a larger anti-biased context, children are likely to take such racially biased knowledge at face value and believe it to be true (Tatum 1992). Hence, infusing anti-racist education in early childhood social studies classroom can counter this bias by equipping children with the cognitive, linguistic, and social tools necessary for identifying, deconstructing,

and countering racially biased information acquired in and outside of school.

A second reason early childhood educators should integrate anti-racist education in the social studies classroom deals with prompting children to respond to racial injustice around them. It is much more difficult to prompt older children to respond to racial injustice around them than younger children (Tatum 1992). This is attributed to the fact that the longer that people participate in racist institutions and structures without critically examining these institutions and structures for racial oppression, the more they become indoctrinated into believing that racial inequality is a “normal” part of life (Kalin 2002). As Derman-Sparks and Phillips (1997) point out that, “Once the members of a society are imbued with racist thinking, they will not only perceive their institutions as natural, they will also voluntarily carry out institutional functions as if they are a function of their own individual choice” (p. 17). Ultimately, this form of dysconscious racism leads people (both those who benefit from racial oppression and those who are marginalized by it) into developing apathetic ideas about transforming these racial institutions and structures (King 1991). Thus, by integrating anti-racist education in the early childhood social studies classroom, children will see racial inequality as an abnormal part of life. Further, children who view racial inequality as abnormal part of society are more likely to assume an active role in combating racism in their school and the world around them (Tatum 1992).

Not only will infusing anti-racist education in the early childhood social studies classroom prompt more children into working toward racial justice, integrating anti-racist education will also empower children with the tools necessary to identify, resist, and respond to racism in constructive ways (Tatum 1992). An example of how children become empowered to identify, resist, and respond to racial injustice through anti-racist education is exemplified in Derman-Sparks’ (1998) study involving a preschool teacher and a class of preschoolers. One day while the preschool teacher was locating a Band-Aid for one of her students, she noticed that the Band-Aid was labeled “flesh colored”. As a means of raising critical consciousness among her students related to race and racial injustice, the teacher pointed out to the children that the Band-Aid was labeled “flesh colored” and asked her students to hold the Band-Aid next to their skin tones. The teacher then asked the students if they thought the Band-Aid actually matched their own skin color. The following day the teacher invited other children from a nearby school to see if the Band-Aid matched their skin tones as well. The teacher made a chart of exactly how many students had skin coloring that actually matched the color of the Band-Aid. To the students’ dismay, the “flesh colored” Band-Aids only

matched the skin tones of only a few of the students’ in the classroom. As a means of responding to this issue of racial injustice in a constructive manner, the teacher suggested that the students write a letter to the company to report what they learned related to the number of students who had skin coloring that matched the Band-Aid category of “flesh colored”. Additionally, she encouraged her students to describe the process by which they arrived at their learning. Weeks later, the class received a letter from the company apologizing for the misuse of the term “flesh colored”. The students also received several transparent Band-Aid strips as a means of rectifying this problem. What is most noteworthy about this anti-racist learning experience is that the children involved in this experience became empowered with the tools necessary respond to racism in constructive ways.

How does anti-racist education impact early childhood teachers? A final reason that I shall highlight for implementing anti-racist education in the early childhood social studies classroom pertains to critical self-reflection and the development of critical consciousness (Freire 1972) in and among teachers related to race and racism. Anti-racist education mandates teachers to place race at the center of their decision-making processes. By engaging in anti-racist education with their students, early childhood teachers are unavoidably thrust into situations where they have to confront issues of racial privilege and marginalization in both historical and contemporary contexts. Through prolonged engagement with notions of racial privilege and oppression via implementing anti-racist curricula and pedagogies, teachers become more aware of the ways in which racial identification impacts their own lives and the lives of their students. In this sense, anti-racist education teaches the teacher as it simultaneously teaches the students involved.

An example of how choosing to implement anti-racist education helped an early childhood teacher become more conscious of the ways in which racism impacts her life and the lives of her students is seen in Marriott’s (2003) narrative of her experiences while implementing anti-racist education in her classroom. After participating in several anti-racist professional development experiences, Marriott was admonished by the professional development instructor to “do something” to combat racism with her students. Marriott decided to begin this challenge by engaging her students in dialogue related to race and racism. Interestingly, prior to the study, Marriott had not engaged in open and honest dialogue with her students related to race and racism and thereby assumed that racism was not a problem at her school in general and in her classroom in particular. Like many early childhood educators, she had opted to avoid discussions of race and racism and taught from largely “colorblind” perspectives. Filled with trepidation,

Marriott decided to respond the professional development instructor's admonishment by engaging her students in a project aimed at discussing issues of race and racism openly and honest. Marriot reflects on her anxiety as such:

At the beginning, I had many more questions than answers. Could I, a White woman in the process of discover my own complicity in a racist world, do this work? Did I know enough? Could I talk about racism with my African American students? Would I have any credibility? Where would parents come down on the issue? What material would I use? Who would support me? How would I recover from the mistakes I was bound to make? How would I justify this work in an educational environment focused intensely on test results? (p. 497)

Despite these questions and uncertainties, she decided to proceed with her plan of action. Through the aid and assistance of African American centered children's literature (i.e., *The Story of Ruby Bridges* by Robert Coles 1995) and an African American classroom volunteer, Marriott was able to help her 2nd graders acquire deeper and more sophisticated notions of racial justice. What is noteworthy in this example is the way in which anti-racist education served both the teacher and the students involved. While implementing anti-racist education, Marriott learned how her own racial identity in America affords privileges (directly and indirectly) that impact what occurs in her classroom. Prior to the study, Marriot had chosen not to discuss race and racism with her students. Consequently, her students did not voice the ways in which they were being impacted by race and racism at the school. As Marriott began to reflect on the ways in which her own racial identity contributes to racism and engage in open and honest dialogue about this information with her students, they (Marriot and her students) became more aware of and vocal about the ways in which racism works in their lives and within the larger society. Further, it is this recursive aspect of anti-racist education that makes it beneficial for teachers and students occupying both dominant and marginalized racial identities in society.

Why social studies? Why not integrate anti-racist education throughout all content areas? It is important to note here that I am not arguing, by any means, that anti-racist education should only occur in the social studies content area. Indeed, anti-racist should permeate all areas of the early childhood curriculum. However, for the purposes of this paper, I am arguing that social studies as content area, is the most appropriate place for anti-racist education to occur for two important reasons. First, the social studies content area is one of the few subject areas where teachers still have a great deal of autonomy over what is taught and the manner in which it is taught. Since the recent passage

of the NCLB legislation in 2001, more and more educators report having less and less control over the curriculum content that is taught in their classrooms (Fry 2009). Many teachers even go as far as to report being forced to teach scripted curricular in subjects such as reading or mathematics, as a means of increasing student achievement on standardized assessments (Fry 2009). Interestingly, the social studies content area remains a content area that is more flexible and open to teachers' professional judgments. This is due largely to the fact that in many states social studies is one the few subject areas that has yet to be included in many schools' school improvement plans and or Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) goals (Fry 2009). Consequently, less scrutiny has been given to what constitutes the social studies curriculum and how it is implemented. In these states, decisions over what should and what should not be included in the social studies curriculum is typically driven by broader national and state standards. If we take these curriculum constraints into serious consideration, then the early childhood social studies classroom presents itself as a highly appropriate and opportune place to integrate anti-racist education.

Another reason why the social studies classroom is an appropriate place to implement anti-racist education is that it fits quite consistently with the broader national social studies content standards outlined by the National Council for the Social Studies (Ladson-Billings 2003). As mentioned earlier, many early childhood teachers express trepidation over teaching about race and racism in their classrooms on the basis of political concerns. Essentially, many of these early childhood teachers are concerned over whether or not it is appropriate for them to teach children about serious or "controversial" issues such as race, racism, sexism, etc. (Ramsey 2004). Additionally, a significant number of early childhood educators express concern over what potential backlash may occur among other colleagues and community members as a result of teaching about issues such as race and racism (Derman-Sparks 1998). Early childhood teachers who are reluctant about teaching children about race and racism can find support and solace in knowing that discussions of race and are very much a part of the national social studies content standards to be taught. If early childhood teachers find themselves being questioned about their curriculum and pedagogical choices by colleagues, administrators, and or parents, they can easily point to the national social studies standards as both justification and support for their curriculum and pedagogical choices.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued for the implementation of anti-racist education in the early social studies classroom.

Although anti-racist education promotes endless possibilities for racial justice within schools and the broader society, there are important considerations early childhood educators must wrestle with as they engage in this form of practice. Prior to engaging in anti-racist education, early childhood educators must spend substantive time reflecting on: (1) how race and racism operates in their own lives; (2) how race and racism operates in the lives of their students; and (3) how race and racism operates within the broader institutional contexts where they teach (Tatum 1992). This first step is extremely important, because many of the ways in which racial oppression is maintained and advanced in schools are imbedded in the status quo or “normal” policies and practices within schools. Although many of the normal practices and policies in schools are deemed as being racially neutral, they may indeed be racist on the basis of disproportionately benefiting one race of students at the expense of disadvantaging another race of students (Nieto 2004). As a result, covert acts of racism often go unnoticed and unchallenged in schools. Hence, early childhood educators endeavoring to enact anti-racist education must first be willing to examine how race and racism operates in their own lives, the lives of their students, and within the broader institutions where they teach.

In addition to spending time reflecting on the role of race and racism, anti-racist early childhood educators must also be willing to embrace the nuances, challenges, ambiguities, and even sometimes painful emotions that discussions of race will likely evoke. Teachers are likely to experience negative and even painful emotions as they begin to unpack race, racism, and the historical and contemporary events attached therein (Husband 2010; Ramsey 2004). Rather than use these painful emotions as a reason to flee from further discussions of race, early childhood teachers must be willing to remain steadfast in the journey toward developing a deeper and more critical consciousness of race and racism in their lives and the lives of their students.

Finally, teachers endeavoring to employ anti-racist education must be willing to deal with any conflicts that may result in and between parents, students, administrators and the like from engaging in open and frank discussions of race and racism (Derman-Sparks and Ramsey 2006). Anti-racist educators frequently experience a wide range of negative consequences while engaging in anti-racist practice (Husband 2010). These consequences are due to the openly political nature of this form of practice. Thus, educators working toward resisting and combating racial oppression in schools must be willing to risk encountering and enduring potentially negative experiences by parents, colleagues, administrators and other community members. To ease some of the discomfort that may arise as a result of integrating anti-racist education in the early childhood

social studies classroom, Husband (2010) suggests that teachers first engage in ideological dialogues with administrators and parents in order to alert these key officials of the issues that will be discussed prior to discussing them. While these ideological dialogues may not prevent negative experiences from occurring entirely, they can, nonetheless, eliminate some of the potentially negative consequences that may occur. Further, any remaining negative consequences that might occur should be seen as an uncomfortable, yet necessary, component in the process of eradicating racial oppression in both schools and society.

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