

PLAY, IMPLICIT BIAS AND DISCRIMINATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD: Implications for Child Development

The years from birth to age five, when a child's brain is developing most rapidly, are crucial for improving educational, health and social outcomes later in life.¹ Access to quality early care with opportunities for imaginative play is increasingly understood as foundational for later school success, creativity and social and emotional skill-building as part of healthy child development. Research also shows that experiences of discrimination can negatively impact well-being, but little is understood about how bias may operate in an early education context and how discrimination may affect very young children.^{2,3,4}

Data on academic achievement in the United States consistently show that Black children fall behind their White counterparts.⁵ Researchers have shown that among low-income children this gap is present by three years of age.⁶ Recent research suggests that quality early

childhood education, such as preschool, can help to narrow the achievement gap between White and Black students.^{7,8} Not only does an achievement gap exist, but Black students are also disproportionately disciplined in school compared to their White peers.⁹ Particularly of concern is

new data from the U.S. Department of Education that show that racial disparities in discipline emerge in the earliest years of schooling. While Black children represent only 18% of preschool students in the United States, they make up 48% of students with multiple out-of-school suspensions (Figure 1).¹⁰

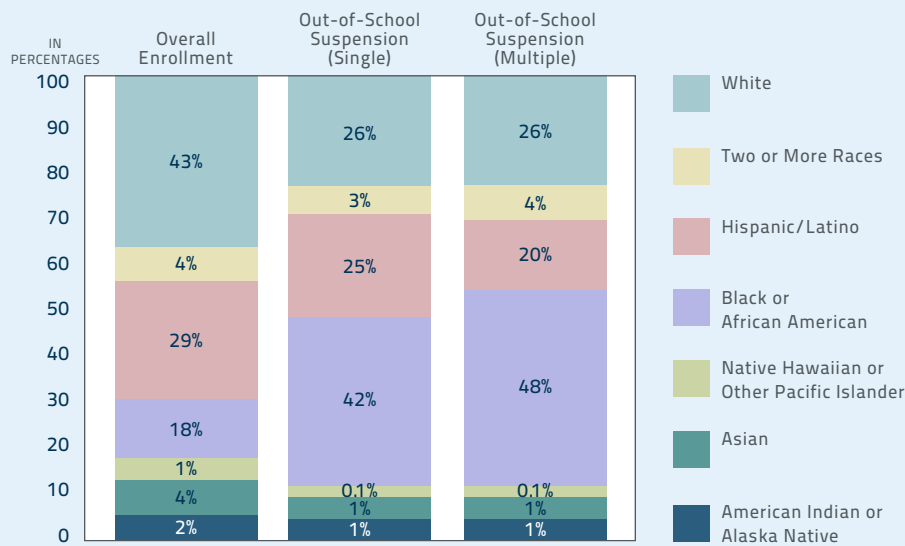
IMPLICIT BIAS IN THE CONTEXT OF EDUCATION

For many years, researchers have investigated how and why these racial disparities arise in educational settings. Understanding that people who work in

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FIGURE 1. PRESCHOOL STUDENTS RECEIVING OUT-OF-SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS BY RACE AND ETHNICITY



Source: U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. (2014). *Civil Rights Data Collection Data Snapshot: Early Childhood Education*. Washington D.C. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/crdc-early-learning-snapshot.pdf>

This chart illustrates racial disparities in preschool discipline. National data collected by the U.S. Department of Education illustrate that while Black children represent only 18% of public preschool students in the United States, they make up 48% of students with multiple out-of-school suspensions.

implications for child development continued >

educational settings generally are not acting on conscious biases or stereotypes, researchers have identified implicit biases as one source of discriminatory behaviors. Implicit biases are attitudes or stereotypes that unconsciously affect our understandings and actions in a given situation. Research shows that these biases are activated unconsciously, involuntarily, and without one's control.¹¹ Implicit biases can be positive or negative, are pervasive, and everyone is susceptible to having implicit biases, including children.¹² Implicit biases are formed in numerous ways such as through exposure to the media, cultural stereotypes, and one's own experiences.^{13, 14}

Research on implicit, or unconscious, biases reveals that teachers' unconscious beliefs about racial and ethnic differences can affect their relationships with their

students as well as how they assess and rate their students.^{15, 16, 17, 18} Students' perceptions of these biases can also have a dramatic impact on their self-esteem and academic achievement.^{2, 4, 19} A recent body of research has started to investigate where these early biases and perceptions arise. Work with preschoolers has begun to show that teachers' biases can occur in early childhood education settings, and that children as young as four years old can form in-group biases.^{20, 21} This issue brief investigates this new line of research and examines the implications of racial discrimination and implicit bias in early childhood education.

THE ROLE OF "PRETEND PLAY" IN HEALTHY CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Research with preschoolers also has looked to pretend play as a measure of children's positive development and

coping abilities. A body of research on play has shown that pretend play is key to healthy child development.^{22, 23} The quantity and quality of pretend play has been linked to the development of a variety of skills such as creativity, problem solving, emotional regulation, and social and educational adjustment.^{22, 24} To measure play, researchers rely on standardized instruments such as the Affect in Play Scale which assesses affect and imagination in play, during which researchers observe children playing with two puppets and a set of colored blocks.^{24, 25} Results from this research on play suggest that children who participate more in imaginative play are better at coping and problem solving and are better adjusted.²⁴ A recent study by Yates and Marcelo of a racially diverse sample of 250 preschoolers, in which children were observed playing and caregivers were interviewed about stressful life events that had occurred, such as divorce, death or changes in financial resources, found that preschoolers who expressed more imagination in solitary pretend play in a laboratory setting engaged in more varied coping strategies (i.e. coping flexibility) and had lower levels of internalizing behaviors (i.e. feelings of sadness, irritability, fearfulness, difficulty concentrating, etc.). Moreover, these effects were more pronounced among children exposed to relatively high rates of stress, thus demonstrating the particular value of pretend play for children experiencing high levels of stress in their lives.³⁴

EXPERIENCES OF BIASES AND DISCRIMINATION IN THE CLASSROOM

Children in the United States experience discrimination and social exclusion on a range of dimensions including age, gender, race/ethnicity, religion or other social categories. Discrimination can occur in public settings, in educational settings or during interactions with peers and adults. Much of the research on childhood discrimination has focused on educational

settings. While there are laws to attempt to ensure equity in access to education and to protect children from differential treatment, everyday social interactions and behaviors can still foster discrimination and prejudice.²⁶ These biases can impact evaluation and rating systems used in standardized testing and assessments, which have implications for continued educational advancement.

In the United States, institutional structures, racial prejudice, and implicit biases have been shown to impact the educational achievement of Black children. In her book, *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity*, Anne Arnett Ferguson argues that institutional practices and cultural representations of racial differences in the school setting have furthered the stigmatization and devaluation of young Black boys.²⁷ Black boys are often viewed by teachers as unruly and aggressive, which biases, often unconsciously, how they are supported academically or disciplined. Ferguson and other researchers also have shown that children are fully aware of these biases, and that their interpretations of these prejudices have a direct impact on their self-esteem and development.^{2, 4, 27}

A few studies have documented how teachers may perceive or evaluate the behaviors of children in early childhood educational settings. For example, using the Affect in Play Scale–Preschool version,³⁷ a modified version of Russ’s Affect in Play Scale, a recent study by

Yates and Marcelo found that although the quality of pretend play was similar among all races of the preschoolers involved in the study, teachers rated Black children who were expressive and imaginative in their pretend play as less prepared for school, less accepted by others, and as greater sources of conflict than their non-Black peers (**Figure 2**).²⁰ Another study by Dobbs & Arnold found that teachers gave more commands to preschoolers that they perceived as having more behavioral problems.²⁸ Although that study did not assess for racial differences among the children, these findings are important because Black students are often perceived to have more behavioral problems in the classroom. This study’s findings are similar to research that has been done with elementary, middle and high school students that has found that teachers hold lower expectations for Black students.¹⁵

CHILDREN’S PERCEPTIONS OF DISCRIMINATION AND BIASES

Research has not only investigated potential biases of teachers in the classroom, but it has also begun to look at children’s perceptions and understandings of biases. Results indicate that children are not only aware of biases, but that they too have the potential for developing biases at least as young as age four.²¹ This research has implications for our understandings of how children develop biases as well as how teacher behaviors may influence the development of biases and prejudices at an early age.

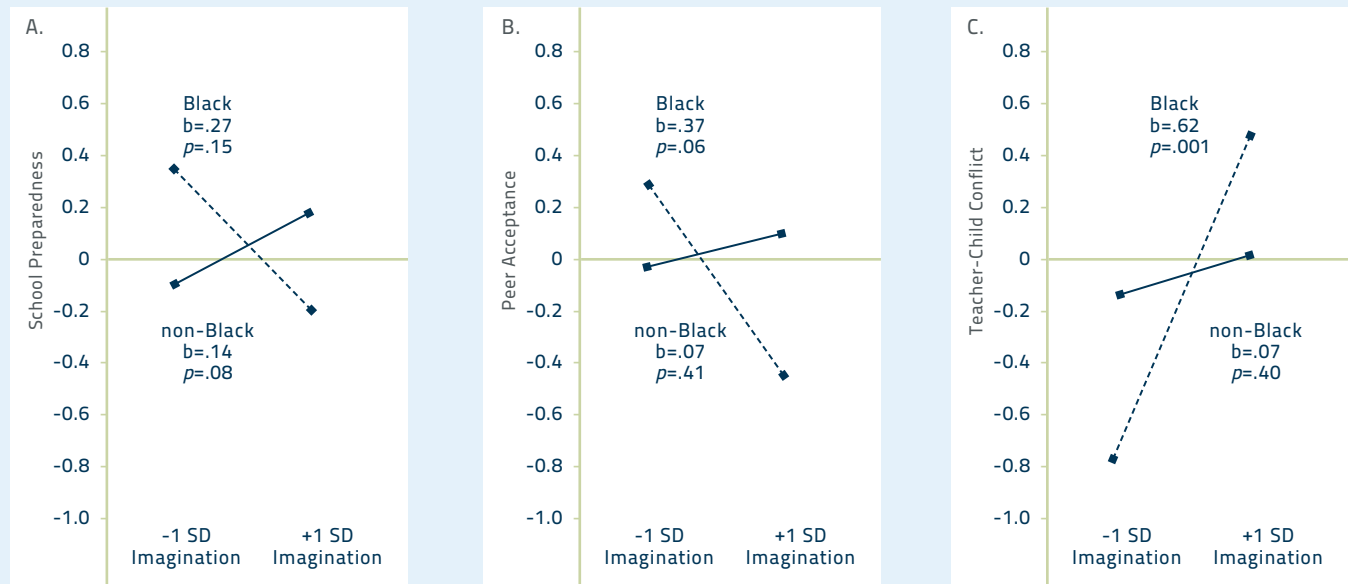
Little research has explored perceptions of discrimination among children under five years of age. However, research with older children has revealed that they do perceive and understand discrimination, and that it has lasting effects on their development.³⁸ In her ethnographic work with Black middle schoolers, Ferguson argues that their behaviors were often a direct response to the biases and discrimination they faced in school.²⁷ They acted out and disengaged from school, because institutional policies and unconscious biases against them led them to find alternative routes to establish self-esteem. Longitudinal research with seven year-olds compared their self-reported experiences of discrimination with their adjustment one year later.²⁹ Analyses show that perceived discrimination predicted higher examiner ratings of internalizing behavior one year later. Moreover, the effects of discrimination on internalizing and externalizing behavior were particularly pernicious for children with low ethnic identity. These results highlight the potential effects of racism on children’s behavioral and psychological well-being, especially for children with low ethnic identity who may be more vulnerable to the effects of racial discrimination.²⁹

Other research has found that racial stereotypes can lead to chronic disengagement from educational performance for Black college students.⁴ Related research has revealed the existence of a phenomenon known

Pretend play has been linked to the development of a variety of skills such as creativity, problem solving, emotion regulation, and social and educational adjustment.

FIGURE 2. PRETEND PLAY AND PRESCHOOL ADJUSTMENT

Teacher ratings of (A) school preparedness, (B) peer acceptance, and (C) teacher-child conflict as a function of child imagination in play by the effect of child race for Black versus non-Black youth. b =unstandardized regression coefficient (i.e., simple slope); SD =standard deviation.



Source: Yates, T. M., & Marcelo, A. K. (2014). Through race-colored glasses: Preschoolers' pretend play and teachers' ratings of preschooler adjustment. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 29(1), 1-11.

These graphs demonstrate that although the quality of pretend play was similar among all races of the preschoolers involved in the study, teachers rated Black children who were expressive and imaginative (the +1 SD label in the figures) in their pretend play as less prepared for school, less accepted by others, and as greater sources of conflict than their non-Black peers.

as "stereotype threat," in which self-perceptions of inferiority essentially become a self-fulfilling prophecy. However, neutralizing negative stereotypes about Black students being less intellectual can lead those students to do significantly better on a test than when they are reminded of the stereotype.³⁰ Moreover, research on student-teacher conflict with at-risk Black students and their teachers reveals that as teacher and student reports of perceived conflict improve, student performance improves.³¹ These research findings suggest that addressing students' perceptions of biases and providing culturally-responsive support to both teachers and students may

help to moderate the stressful effects of prejudice and discrimination on educational achievement.

Research shows that very young children show in-group biases.^{21, 32, 33} In one experiment researchers separated preschoolers into two groups labeled with different colors.³² In one classroom the teacher used the colors to label children and organize the class, without attaching a value to the colors. The teacher in the other classroom ignored the color distinction. On subsequent testing, preschoolers in both classrooms showed a preference for in-group members. These findings are important because they show that young children

are aware of novel social groups and can create in-group biases on their own as well as indirectly from parents and teachers. Also, because the teacher did not assign value to the color labels, but did use them to group the class, these findings indicate that how children learn biases and social distinctions is likely much more subtle than direct teaching or explicit messaging. Children also are likely to show preferences for groups that adults' consciously or unconsciously bias in their language and behavior.³² These findings have implications for teachers, parents and caregivers in examining their own unconscious biases and how they may affect or influence the development of prejudice in multi-racial classrooms.

POLICY & PRACTICE Implications

The existence of biases in early childhood education settings has a number of implications for educational policy in the United States. As policymakers begin to embrace greater investments in early childhood education programs, concerns about program quality and teacher standards arise. How do we create large-scale preschool programs that will provide all students with a high-quality start to their social, emotional and educational development? How do we ensure that imaginative play is a fundamental part of these educational settings? How do we ensure assessment systems are not undermined by potential biases? And how do we best ensure stability of placement with children in those classroom settings?

In light of increasing attention to academic testing and universal quality standards in early childhood the importance of play in educational settings should not be lost. Imaginative play is key to healthy child development and the development of critical social and emotional skills such as coping, adjustment and creativity, yet opportunities for pretend play in school settings are increasingly competing for time with more structured learning tasks.³⁶ National non-profit organizations such as the Alliance for Childhood have created campaigns to raise awareness of the importance of play and to promote practices and policies that encourage creating more opportunities for play, especially in schools.

Supporting preschool providers and teachers in strengthening their behavioral and class management skills, including addressing potential implicit biases, can help to ensure that all children are treated in a fair and equitable manner. Professional development frameworks for culturally-responsive teaching, such as John Hopkins University's Double Check model,³⁹ may have important applications for early childhood settings. Programs such as Foundations of Learning and the Chicago School Readiness Program

highlight the importance of providing early education teachers with classroom management training to enhance the social and emotional development of preschoolers, specifically those in low-income areas without access to high-quality pre-school. Results from the Foundations of Learning program show that better classroom management skills that focus on students' positive behaviors lead to improved teacher ability to effectively support student behavioral and emotional development, more instructional time, and greater student engagement.³⁵

Related to supporting students' social and emotional development is the need to address preschool and elementary school discipline policies. Zero-tolerance policies for middle and high school students have created a national dialogue around the school-to-prison pipeline. Zero-tolerance policies can criminalize minor school infractions and push children out of schools and into the criminal justice system.⁹ Trends reveal that Black children are disproportionately affected by zero-tolerance policies. With the release of new data revealing that Black children nationwide are disproportionately represented in out-of-school suspensions and expulsions in preschool, preschool

and elementary school discipline policies should be reviewed and revised to reduce the use of school exclusionary practices.¹⁰

The research on implicit bias in the classroom reveals that some teachers are rating Black children's school readiness differently from their White peers inconsistently with differences in observed behaviors. These findings have implications for universal preschool programs and universal teacher rating systems, and potentially for long-term tracking of students by achievement level. Training on implicit biases and potential de-biasing strategies is key to ensure that all children are assessed equitably and given the same opportunities to succeed in the classroom.

Finally, while teacher training to reduce implicit biases is important, it is also important to provide children with education on diversity to promote justice and tolerance among peers. Media programs such as *Sesame Tree* (similar to *Sesame Street*) in Northern Ireland have used Muppets to teach about diversity and social inclusion. Research findings show that exposure to *Sesame Tree* improved children's willingness to be inclusive of others. Similarly, programs in Canada and the UK have incorporated lessons on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into standard educational curriculum. Evaluation data show that educational opportunities such as these promote equity and social justice and that children's attitudes towards minority children become more positive and respectful.²⁶ ■

As teacher and student reports of perceived conflict improve, student performance improves. Providing culturally-responsive support to both teachers and students may help to moderate the stressful effects of prejudice and discrimination on educational achievement.

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