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Racial Justice in Early Childhood  
Education and Care: Examining Our  
Perspectives, Impact on Child  
Development, and the Role of Teachers

A Curated Research Collection from  
Denisha Jones, Ph.D., J.D.  
for Liberating Childhood

Welcome readers,

I invited Denisha Jones to curate this collection because racial justice in early childhood education demands exactly the kind of grounded, uncompromising thinking she brings to it. Too often, this work gets softened — reduced to representation on bookshelves or diversity in curriculum — while the deeper question of how systems harm children of color in their earliest years goes unexamined. Denisha doesn't let that happen. She brings us into the scholarship that names what is actually happening and insists we stay there long enough to reckon with it.

My hope is that as you read, you feel the weight of what this work asks of us — and also the possibility it opens. The scholars gathered here do not position children of color as problems to be solved. They begin, as Salazar Pérez and Saavedra put it, from the brilliance of children of color as a starting point. That reorientation is not small. It asks early childhood educators to examine not just their practices but the assumptions underneath them — about development, about behavior, about whose ways of knowing count.

I am grateful to Denisha for her clarity, her care, and her refusal to let early childhood off the hook. Racial justice does not begin with someone else. It begins with you, in the youngest years, in the relationships and routines we build every day. This collection is an invitation to do that work with honesty and with love.

Warmly,

Em Clark





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## Denisha Jones, Ph.D., J.D.

Denisha Jones is a teacher-educator, researcher, and advocate. She started her career as a kindergarten teacher in 2003 and became a college professor in 2009. After 21 years in education, she discovered that too many teachers are demotivated, uninspired, and ready to leave the profession they once loved. Combining her research and desire to help, she took to the stage with the goal of reaching as many people as possible in the field of education. Today, her talks will inspire teachers to reclaim their passion for education and discover the power of joyful teaching and liberated learning. Her courses will provide the support needed to lead with engaging developmentally appropriate child-driven pedagogies that foster liberation, joy, and thriving.

# A letter from Denisha ...

For this curated collection, I wanted to share a few articles and one book that have fueled my thinking about the need to center racial justice in early childhood education and care (ECEC). Most of my undergraduate and graduate teacher preparation work included racial justice in education, but it rarely situated this work in environments with young children. Anti-bias and multiculturalism remain prominent in ECEC, but racial justice is typically aligned with older elementary, middle, and high school learners. But if we truly believe that we must dismantle systemic racism, bias, and inequity in schools, then we must begin in the early years.

I begin with Michelle Salazar Pérez and Cynthia Saavedra's *A Call for Onto-Epistemological Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Care: Centering Global South Conceptualizations of Childhood/s*. Their opening line, "The brilliance of children of color is rarely positioned as a starting point for discussion in early childhood studies," resonated deeply and left me speechless. As I reflected on my education, I never heard anyone suggest that children of color are brilliant, let alone that this belief should be the foundation of our work as educators.

In fact, everything I was taught was the opposite, and led me to believe that schooling had to compensate for the "deficits" children of color inherited through racism and other systems of oppression.

In this article, Salazar Pérez and Saavedra ask us to consider what is lost when early childhood is theorized from a global North perspective that centers a white, Eurocentric, middle-class, able-bodied norm, and to show what is possible when we theorize from a global South perspective. To truly pursue racial justice in early childhood education, we must examine our perspectives and make space for ways of being and knowing that normalize the brilliance of children of color.

In addition to reexamining our perspectives, we must also understand how racism impacts child development. For this discussion, I turn to Iheoma Iruka and colleagues' *Effects of Racism on Child Development: Advancing Antiracist Developmental Science*. Here, we find a detailed description of how systemic racism fuels the disparities and inequities observed at birth that impact various aspects of child development. But what makes this article unique is that, in their proposed model, families' cultural assets are included as resilience and resistance that help their children thrive. I especially appreciate the challenge to developmental science to include antiracist policies and practices as foundational to supporting the developing child.

The next pieces funnel downward from theory and development to classrooms and educators. Gloria Bouttee and Nathaniel Bryan document how five types of anti-Black violence show up in schools and impact two young Black boys. In *When Will Black Children Be Well? Interrupting Anti-Black Violence in Early Childhood Classrooms and Schools*, we see how curricular and pedagogical choices that are not culturally sustaining and uplifting can enact violence on Black children.

I remember one of my students telling me that he didn't realize how much linguistic violence happened in a kindergarten classroom until after he read this article. He and I appreciated the recommendation that what is needed is revolutionary love, the kind of love that begins with seeing Black children as brilliant and working alongside them to disrupt anti-Black violence in schools.

In their book *Segregation by Experience: Agency, Racism, and Learning in the Early Grades*, Jennifer Keys Adair and Kiyomi Sánchez-Suzuiki Colegrove introduce us to Ms. Bailey, a first-grade teacher serving low-income children of color whom they spend a year observing and documenting how she fosters children's agency and enhances their capabilities. As they share her work through a video made based on their observations, they soon learn that many early childhood educators justify routinely denying low-income children of color their agency.

They call this justification segregation by experience, noting how young white middle-class children are often given agency and autonomy, creating a racial divide where some children have to earn what others are freely given. This remains one of the most powerful books I have read, and I highly recommend it to others. You can also read a research article about this study titled *Troubling Messages Agency and Learning in the Early Schooling Experiences of Children of Latinx Immigrants* by Adair, Colegrove, and McManus.

As a proponent of child-led free play, I am always interested in articles that explore the intersection of race, racism, and play. In *The Power of Play and Language on Early Childhood Racial Identity in the Three U.S. Schools*, by Mary Earick, we gain insight into the interplay between play, language, and racial identity. Three case studies are presented that document a critical incident that was used by a collective of educators to unpack how in-group messages for Black and white children contributed to positive and negative conceptual metaphors. In each critical action study, an intervention is implemented that alters the in-group message from negative to positive for the Black child, demonstrating the power early childhood educators have to disrupt unhealthy racial identity development that is often reinforced in classrooms through interaction with peers and adults. Through the process of creating an intervention steeped in positive in-group messages, the teachers changed their beliefs about children's racial identity and their role in supporting it.

Finally, I conclude with a recent publication from my colleague Shaddai Tembo and me titled "Why Don't We Teach Loving Who You Are?" Exploring the Need for a Positive Racial Literacy Programme for Young Children. This piece further connects the need for early childhood educators to embrace healthy racial identity as a developmental goal and a pedagogical responsibility. We report on the findings from our focus group with six educators from the US, London, and Wales about an intervention to foster racial literacy in the early years. Though all of our participants believed an intervention was needed, they expressed concerns with their lack of confidence and ability to implement it, reminding us that even experienced teachers need support in this area.

# A Call for Onto-Epistemological Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Care: Centering Global South Conceptualizations of Childhood/s

by Michelle Salazar Pérez and  
Cinthya M. Saavedra

**Abstract:** In this chapter, we call for onto-epistemological diversity in the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC). Specifically, we discuss the need to center the brilliance of children and communities of color, which we argue, can be facilitated by foregrounding global south perspectives, such as Black and Chicana feminisms. Mainstream perspectives in ECEC, however, have been dominantly constructed from global north perspectives, producing a normalized White, male, middle-class, heterosexual version of childhood, where minoritized children are viewed as deficit. Although there have been important challenges to the discourse of a normalized, deficit child, we argue much of this work has remained grounded in global north positionings, which separate theory from the lived realities of children of color. As such, we introduce Black and Chicana feminisms as global south visions to transform approaches to research and pedagogy in ECEC and, in turn, disrupt inequities



# Effects of Racism on Child Development: Advancing Antiracist Developmental Science

By [Iheoma U. Iruka](#)<sup>1</sup>, [Nicole Gardner-Neblett](#)<sup>2</sup>, [Nicole A. Telfer](#)<sup>3</sup>, [Nneka Ibekwe-Okafor](#)<sup>4</sup>, [Stephanie M. Curenton](#)<sup>4</sup>, [Jacqueline Sims](#)<sup>4</sup>, [Amber B. Sansbury](#)<sup>5</sup> and [Enrique W. Neblett](#)<sup>6</sup>

**Abstract:** Racism, a multidimensional system of oppression and exclusion, is part of the foundation of the United States and is detrimental to the health and well-being of Black communities and other racially and ethnically minoritized (REM) communities. There is an emerging body of literature that draws attention to the impact of racism and different racialized experiences on the lives of REM children. Based on the Racism + Resilience + Resistance Integrative Study of Childhood Ecosystem (R<sub>3</sub>ISE) and focused on attending to the interaction between racism and the cultural assets of REM families and communities, this review highlights how racism impacts REM children's healthy development and learning. In addition to calling for research that advances racial equity using the R<sub>3</sub>ISE integrative model, we also identify policies that have some potential to ensure equity in economic stability and security, home and community environment, birth outcomes, and educational opportunities for REM children and their families.



When will Black children be well?  
Interrupting anti-Black violence in  
early childhood classrooms and  
schools

by Gloria Boutte and Nathaniel Bryan

Abstract: We demonstrate that Black children are not faring well in early childhood settings and suggest ways educators can work toward ensuring that Black children thrive and flourish in schools. Five types of daily violence/traumas that Black children experience in schools are described against the ethical backdrop First Do No Harm (Boutte, 2008). Evoking the Maasai legend that asks, How are the children? we share two examples of Black males' school experiences, though we readily acknowledge that Black females experience parallel issues. We present an overview of five types of school violence (physical, symbolic, linguistic, curricular/pedagogical, and systemic), and conclude by offering ways to interrupt these to ensure that Black children are well.



# Segregation by Experience Agency, Racism, and Learning in the Early Grades

By Jennifer Keys Adair and Kiyomi Sánchez-Suzuki Colegrove

Summary: In *Segregation by Experience*, the authors filmed and studied a first-grade classroom led by a Black immigrant teacher who encouraged her diverse group of students to exercise their agency. When the researchers showed the film to other schools, everyone struggled. Educators admired the teacher but didn't think her practices would work with their own Black and brown students. Parents of color—many of them immigrants—liked many of the practices, but worried that they would compromise their children. And the young children who viewed the film thought that the kids in the film were terrible, loud, and badly behaved; they told the authors that learning was supposed to be quiet, still, and obedient. In *Segregation by Experience* Jennifer Keys Adair and Kiyomi Sánchez-Suzuki Colegrove show us just how much our expectations of children of color affect what and how they learn at school, and they ask us to consider which children get to have sophisticated, dynamic learning experiences at school and which children are denied such experiences because of our continued racist assumptions about them.

*If you're unable to purchase the book (or get it from your local library!) Denisha has included this article by the same authors plus Molly E. McManus that reviews their research for the book: [Troubling Messages: Agency and Learning in the Early Schooling Experiences of Children of Latinx Immigrants](#)*



# The Power of Play and Language on Early Childhood Racial Identity in Three U.S. Schools

By Mary Earick

Abstract: This article includes 3 transformative action research case studies conducted in 3 geographically diverse locations—the Northeast, Southwest, and Southeast United States—with children between the ages of 4 and 7. The case studies that are the focus of this article were selected from studies collected between 1997 and 2007. The outcomes of each clearly identify issues signifying a relation among race, play, and language in both student-to-student and teacher-to-student discourse. Discussion includes how critical incident logs and language events transform White teacher identities and support self-reflection. The relations that exist among theory, practice, and academic achievement in the field of racial identity development are discussed, as is the role that play-based curriculum models can have on identity consistency in early childhood classrooms.



# ‘Why don’t we teach loving who you are?’ Exploring the need for a positive racial literacy programme for young children

By Shaddai Tembo and Denisha Jones

**Abstract:** The early years setting is often where young children have their first solo experience of socialising, making friends and meeting unfamiliar adults. It can also be the place where they first experience racism. Further, while research highlights the presence of racial bias and exclusion in early childhood, there is limited understanding of how practitioners address these realities in everyday practice. This paper presents Proud of the Skin I’m In, a racial literacy development programme developed across Wales, England, and the United States to support conversations about race, identity and belonging in early years settings. While the program includes multiple components, this paper focuses on educator reflections gathered during a focus group exploring its feasibility and potential value. This qualitative study draws on a 90-minute online focus group with six early years practitioners from England, Wales, and the United States, which was analysed thematically to explore their perspectives. We find that practitioners welcomed structured opportunities to engage with race but expressed concerns around confidence, implementation, and the tendency for racial identity work to fall disproportionately to minoritised staff. We argue that supporting young children’s racial identity cannot be left to individual goodwill. It must be embedded into everyday pedagogy through intentional practice, shared responsibility, and sustained institutional support—ensuring all children are recognised, affirmed, and encouraged to take pride in their identity.



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