

May 2022

An Examination of Early Childhood Teachers' Perceptions of Discussing Race with Children

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AN EXAMINATION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS'
PERCEPTIONS OF DISCUSSING RACE WITH CHILDREN

by

Sarah E. Kubly

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Science
in Curriculum and Instruction

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

May 2022

ABSTRACT

AN EXAMINATION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF DISCUSSING RACE WITH CHILDREN

by

Sarah Kubly

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2022
Under the Supervision of Professor Dr. Leanne Evans

This qualitative study examines early childhood teachers' perceptions and practices with regard to talking to young children about race. Through an online survey and an individual interview with two early childhood teachers, I uncovered three findings: a) teachers' understandings of their students' racial awareness, b) teachers' current classroom practices regarding race, culture, ethnicity, and c) challenges teachers faced in talking about race with their students along with possible sources of support. Based on these findings, I concluded that teachers made the decision not to directly confront the issue of race with their students due to feelings of fear and discomfort. As white women, the participants were able to choose when to engage with race, in contrast to people of color who confront racism daily. Secondly, the teachers demonstrated efforts to respond to the racial and cultural diversity in their classrooms and affirm their students' identities, although they did not support their students' development of sociopolitical consciousness. The work of anti-racist and culturally responsive pedagogy exists along a spectrum, with much more work needed in taking up the most difficult aspects of the approach which require constant self-reflection and the willingness to step outside one's comfort zone.

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Chapter One: Introduction

“He’s a bad guy,” a white, two-year-old remarks as she cautiously walks past a Black custodian in the library hallway. “Was you born like that?” a Black preschool student inquires as she plays with her white teacher’s hair and compares it to her own. “Is he in the NBA?” another white, four-year-old shouts, pointing to a Black man. As these utterances illuminate, children are keenly aware of skin color and physical differences related to race from an early age (Katz & Kofkin, 1997; Kelly et al., 2007, Vittrup & Holden, 2011). However, studies have shown that most white adults rarely include children in conversations about race and are quick to dismiss their race-related comments (Pahlke et al., 2012; Vittrup & Holden, 2011). Americans frequently adopt a colorblind approach, insisting that race does not matter or deciding not to acknowledge race at all (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Pahlke et al., 2012). Although claiming not to see color may appear egalitarian, this outlook ignores the realities of racially diverse individuals, including their experiences with oppression and discrimination (Pahlke et al., 2012).

According to the U.S. census, 2020 marked the first year in history that the population of white Americans declined. The data revealed that the most significant population increase in 2020 came from individuals who identify as multiracial. Furthermore, the majority of people under 18 years of age self-identified as a racial group other than white (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021; Tavernise & Gebeloff, 2021), indicating younger generations are likely to reflect even more diversity. Despite the diversification of the U.S. population, economic, housing, health, and job disparities persist between white people and other racial groups (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). To create a future in which all Americans, regardless of race and ethnicity, have equitable opportunities, today’s children need to engage in conversations about race and develop the skills to critically analyze and resist systems of oppression.

Problem Statement

Early childhood educators, who work with young children as they are making rich observations about the world and developing formative understandings, are especially well-positioned to foster positive racial attitudes in their students. Yet, many educators feel uncomfortable, ill-prepared, or unmotivated to broach the topic of race in their classrooms (Boutte et al., 2011). Without opportunities to discuss their observations and questions, young children are left unsupported as they attempt to make sense of our largely separate and unequal society.

For several reasons, early childhood educators often neglect to discuss race with their students before stereotyped beliefs form (Boutte et al., 2011; Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2008; Vittrup, 2016). First, most teachers do not receive the training necessary to prepare them for conversations about multicultural issues with young children (Vittrup, 2016). According to Goldstein (2008), teachers need opportunities to reflect on their own racial identity and their understanding of privilege and power before leading their students through critical conversations. Barriers like parental or administrative resistance, curriculum and time constraints, and an emphasis on standardized testing also prevent teachers from integrating race-related conversations into their practices (Vittrup, 2016). Additionally, teachers are guided by common misconceptions, such as the belief that children are too young to learn about racism or that talking about race will only make children more prejudiced (Boutte et al., 2011; Bronson & Merryman, 2009; Vittrup, 2016). In fact, scholarship indicates the opposite is true. When children do not have opportunities to discuss the diversity they naturally experience, they are more likely to develop generalized or stereotyped beliefs based on their observations (Boutte et al., 2011). Equally concerning, when adults dismiss children's comments, they send a message

that talking about race is taboo (Boutte et al., 2011; Bronson & Merryman, 2009). It is important for early childhood educators to understand the power of thoughtful discussions and critical questioning on young children's ability to recognize injustice and appreciate human differences. Researchers have demonstrated that teachers must learn to progress beyond reading books with diverse characters or including multicultural materials in a dramatic play center to cultivate their students' positive racial attitudes (Beneke & Cheatham, 2020; Hughes et. al, 2007; Husband, 2010; MacNevin & Berman, 2017). Further, teacher education experiences (both pre-service and in-service) should prepare teachers by providing them a strong pedagogical base from which to effectively support children in developing understandings about social justice and equity (Christman, 2010; Goldstein, 2001; Kohli et al., 2015; Schoorman, 2011).

Background and Need

In the past twenty-five years, literature in the field of early childhood education has focused on culturally relevant practices and multicultural education as means to include and empower culturally and linguistically diverse students in American classrooms (Banks, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Recognizing the heterogeneity found in today's classrooms, culturally responsive teachers strive to create equitable learning opportunities in their classrooms by decentering whiteness and drawing on their students' diverse funds of knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012). It has become common practice to incorporate students' interests, experiences, and cultures into curricula and assessments to make learning opportunities relevant and meaningful. Although many educators understand the need to foster academic success and cultural competence in their students, the area of sociopolitical consciousness is often forgotten (Ladson-Billings, 2014). In other words, fewer educators create opportunities in their classrooms to discuss and critique the systems of oppression that perpetuate

inequality. Furthermore, teachers in predominately white districts may feel like culturally relevant pedagogies are not applicable to their students. On the contrary, young white children observe and appropriate systems of power from a young age, while also quickly developing their understanding of racial differences (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2008). As members of the dominant group in the United States, it is important that white children have opportunities to acknowledge race and critically analyze the systems that produce racial inequities.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine early childhood teachers' perceptions and practices with regard to talking about race with their students. This study's participants are representative of the largely white and female population of public school teachers in the U.S. (NCES, 2018). Through a survey and interview with each participant, I sought to uncover the attitudes that early childhood educators have about broaching the subject of race in school, along with the misconceptions and constraints that prevent teachers from embedding these conversations into their practices. Furthermore, this study has the potential to illuminate the ways that teachers effectively incorporate discussions of race into their curriculum, including strategies teachers find useful in fostering sociopolitical consciousness in young children.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this inquiry:

1. What are early childhood teachers' experiences with having conversations about race with their students?
2. What supports do teachers have in fostering conversations about race? What barriers exist?
3. What strategies do teachers use to facilitate conversations about race in their classrooms?

These questions are significant because they target the deterrences and attitudes that prevent early childhood educators from the valuable and fruitful task of discussing race with their students. An understanding of why teachers hold back from including race in their curricula will inform any future efforts to assert the significance of this topic in the education field. In addition, these questions aim to highlight effective methods used in authentic early childhood classrooms to ignite critical conversations about race.

Definitions

Several terms are fundamental to the focus of this study. Definitions are listed below to provide context to their use within this research.

- **Early childhood education (ECE):** the field of teaching children from birth up to age eight (NAEYC, 2019).
- **Race:** a “social and political construct” that assigns individuals to a hierarchy and has no biological basis (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020, p. 185). According to Derman-Sparks and colleagues (2020), race is used to justify the oppression and exploitation of groups of people that share physical traits.
- **Black:** Americans of African ancestry. I will capitalize the word Black to convey “shared history, identity, and community among people who identify as Black” (Associated Press, 2020, para 1).
- **White:** Americans of European ancestry. White people benefit from racism in the United States (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020, p. 186). I will not capitalize white as white people “do not share the same history or culture, or the experience of being discriminated against because of skin color” (Associated Press, 2020, para 4). This decision also brings

“attention to the unearned privileges of those who identify as white in the United States” (Fontanella-Nothom, 2019, p.12).

- **Multiracial:** individuals who identify with two or more racial groups.
- **People of color:** the groups who have historically been targets of racism in the United States, including Black people, Asian Americans, Latino Americans, Native Americans, and Arab Americans (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020, p. 186).
- **Colorblindness:** An ideological approach that posits race should be ignored, as attention to race promotes discrimination. Proponents of this outlook provide raceless explanations for current affairs, believing that they are no distinctions between racial groups (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Pahlke et al., 2012).
- **Dominant group:** The group within a society with the greatest power and highest social status (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020, p. 182).
- **Racism:** “An institutionalized system of economic, political, social, and cultural conditions that assigns power, advantage, and privilege to one racial group over another group” (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020, p. 186).

Organization of Study

The current study is organized in five chapters. Following this introduction chapter, the review of literature will provide an overview of existing literature relating to race-driven conversations in early childhood classrooms. The third chapter, the methodology, will describe the study’s design, including the participant sample, setting, and data collection and analysis procedures. Fourth, the findings chapter will exhibit the data in relation to three emergent themes. Lastly, in the discussion chapter, I will present analysis of the findings along with reflection on the connection between the data and the research questions.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

In an era of persistent racial disparities, the purpose of this study was to uncover early childhood teachers' perceptions and practices with regard to talking about race with their students. This chapter synthesizes previous literature related to race and early childhood education (ECE). The first section addresses teachers' understandings of the role of race and culture in the classroom. The second section highlights research on young children's awareness of race and the potential for shifting their racial biases. The final section features effective strategies for embedding discussions of race into early childhood curriculum. Existing literature in these areas illuminates the need for additional teacher preparation to inform early childhood educators of their significant role in creating a more racially-just future and to prepare them to create effective and meaningful learning experiences addressing race with young children.

Teachers' Understanding of Race in the Classroom

This study is informed by previous scholars' models of multicultural education. In recent years, there is increased attention on designing culturally relevant learning experiences for students of color and avoiding curricula that treat whiteness as standard (Banks, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, 2012). Despite the progress in providing equitable and empowering learning experiences for diverse students, educators often fail to consider the development of children's sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Teachers frequently adopt a colorblind approach in their classrooms, shying away from discussing race or doing so only in a superficial way that focuses on the ways people are the same (Boutte et al., 2011). While some teachers provide extensive coverage of other cultures in their curriculum, "few [take up] the sociopolitical dimensions of the work, instead dulling its critical edge or omitting it all together" (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 77). Researchers have provided

recommendations for pre-service and in-service teacher training that prepares educators to orient social justice in their practices and discuss systems of inequality with their students (Christman, 2010; Durden et al., 2014; Goldstein, 2001; Kohli et al., 2015; Lee, 2014; Schoorman, 2011). Teachers' understandings of racism and the importance of directly discussing race with children are critical influences on the positive racial attitudes of future generations.

Culturally-Based Frameworks

This current study is grounded in Gloria Ladson-Billings' (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) and Banks' (2008) model of multicultural education. Ladson-Billings' work is centered on improving academic experiences for African-American students and others whom American schools have disenfranchised. CRP seeks to empower students of color by promoting their academic success, developing their competence in their own culture as well as others, and fostering their sociopolitical consciousness, or their ability to analyze injustices (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Students of color are projected to be the majority student population by 2028 (NCES, 2021), and both universities and school systems recognize the importance of meeting the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students while sustaining their cultures (Paris, 2012).

Banks (2008) has described four approaches to multicultural education. The lowest level, the contributions approach, involves the least work for teachers and consists of adding cultural elements like holidays to the existing curriculum. This approach has the potential to strengthen young children's preexisting stereotypes. In the second approach, the additive approach, teachers add diverse cultural perspectives to the curriculum as a distinct unit of study, displaying multicultural concepts as separate from students' experiences. The third approach, the transformative approach, requires teachers to self-reflect and make significant changes to their

teaching practices to foster students' abilities to view themes from diverse perspectives. Lastly, the social action approach empowers students to challenge social issues. My research addresses teachers' perspectives on having honest conversations about race with their students and is situated within both the sociopolitical consciousness aspect of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and the social action approach of Banks' model (2008).

Recent literature has highlighted the implementation of CRP in early childhood classrooms to enhance schooling experiences for marginalized young students. Polson and Arce-Boardman (2021) studied the culturally relevant practices Arce-Boardman utilized with her bilingual second graders. Arce-Boardman successfully created learning opportunities focused on students' interests while also promoting their academic achievement. For example, she noticed students were passionately discussing the best New York City baseball team, so she channeled their excitement into a persuasive writing assignment and did research to create her own grade-level reading materials. Arce-Boardman also engaged her students in reading and writing about influential dark-skinned Latinos, including the racism that Celia Cruz faced as an Afro-Latina immigrant and singer. Throughout this study, students were encouraged to make connections to their own experiences as Latinos and immigrants and to celebrate their skin tones and cultural history (2021). Glover and Harris (2021) have also documented their work incorporating students' lived experiences into the curriculum. Harris centered students' families and culture in the curriculum and frequently invited family members into the classroom to lead discussions or lessons. Students' parents were featured as special guests on a weekly classroom news broadcast, where they had the space to share stories about their home countries and family traditions. Harris recognized that traditional assessments did not accurately represent her students' abilities as emergent bilinguals, so she designed authentic assessments built upon students' funds of

knowledge. In both classrooms, culturally relevant teaching practices supported students in meeting grade-level standards while also empowering them to use their strengths and background knowledge. Research by Durden and colleagues (2014) revealed that early childhood teachers who were the most effective at implementing CRP had previous experience with diverse populations and consistently consulted families about making the learning environment culturally relevant. These teachers also followed a reciprocal model of teaching in which they became more self-aware after experiences of dissonance with their students, which led to increased exploration and improved implementation of CRP (Durden et al., 2014).

Despite the willingness of teachers to incorporate culturally-relevant pedagogy into their practices, in many of today's classrooms, implementation of CRP only vaguely resembles Ladson-Billings' fundamental ideas. Ladson-Billings (2014) noted that teachers she observed seemed to be "stuck in very limited and superficial notions of culture" (p.77), interpreting culturally relevance to mean "adding some books about people of color, having a classroom Kwanza celebration, or posting 'diverse' images" (p.82). Furthermore, educators tend to focus on academic achievement and cultural competence while neglecting to foster their students' sociopolitical consciousness. Ladson-Billings (2014) added that teachers "rarely pushed students to consider critical perspectives on policies and practices that may have direct impact on their lives and communities" (p. 78).

In relation to Banks' (2008) model of multicultural education, teachers commonly take a tourist approach when referencing different cultures, remaining in the contributions or additive levels instead of using a social action approach, which empowers students to critically analyze social injustices. Ladson-Billings (1995) posits that academic success and cultural competence, both individual achievements, are insufficient in preparing students for active citizenship. To

ensure equitable education experiences for traditionally marginalized students, it is essential for "those in the mainstream to develop the kinds of skills that will allow them to critique the very basis of their privilege and advantage" (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 83). In other words, equipping students, and white students in particular, with the ability to analyze the institutions that perpetuate inequities is the aspect of CRP most likely to result in a more socially-just future. Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (2008) addressed misconceptions about talking to white children about race in their article "What if All the Kids are White?". The authors explained that white children naturally observe diversity and learn systems of power from an early age, regardless of whether the adults around them are addressing the topic of race. White children quickly begin to see their whiteness as normal and other races as atypical (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2008; Derman-Sparks et al., 2020). Effective anti-bias teachers go beyond additive approaches to directly address stereotypical biases and discriminatory behavior in young, white children, fostering their appreciation of human differences and their ability to challenge racism (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2008).

Teacher Education

Several researchers (Christman, 2010; Durden et al., 2014; Goldstein, 2001; Kohli et al., 2015; Lee, 2014; Schoorman, 2011) have emphasized the need for current and future early childhood teachers to receive additional teacher development on culturally relevant and social-justice oriented practices. Schoorman (2011) argues that there is more room in early childhood education for culturally relevant pedagogy as the field is less tied to external standards and benchmarks than traditional K-12 settings. She encourages teacher educators to develop social justice-oriented programs to educate teachers about how to provide a curriculum that fosters students' critical awareness and connects to their experiences. Schoorman offers several

recommendations for teacher preparation programs, such as providing teachers with the skills they need to develop successful home-school partnerships. According to Schoorman, programs should also ensure that future teachers are knowledgeable about deficit mindsets, their own identity, and cultural differences, including communication styles, in order to learn from and with families (2011).

Goldstein (2001), who focused on white early childhood educators, also identified three ways teacher preparation programs can prepare pre-service teachers to bring discussions of race into their classrooms. First, Goldstein encourages teacher educators to help pre-service teachers recognize their whiteness by reflecting on their racial experiences and white privilege. Many teachers enter the profession with the belief that we live in a just society where hard work leads to social and economic mobility, failing to realize that students of color do not have the same access to opportunities. Next, Goldstein suggests that future teachers work to understand how white children are privileged in early childhood educational settings. Lastly, for this learning to be constructive, teacher educators should guide pre-service teachers in developing positive, rather than guilty, feelings towards their identity. This mindset allows white teachers to address racism more effectively and maintain a high level of self-awareness. Preparing pre-service teachers with opportunities to examine their whiteness will foster their ability to recognize and combat racism in their classrooms, creating a more anti-racist education system (2001).

In another example, Christman (2010) conducted a case study of an early childhood education preparation program known for its commitment to social justice. She evaluated the program against a framework developed by McKenzie and colleagues (2008) for social justice in educational leadership programs. This framework has several components. First, McKenzie et al. (2008) believe that students should only be admitted to a program if they possess an existing

critical lens. Another component is a commitment to developing critical consciousness consistently throughout all program courses. Finally, programs need to provide continued support and feedback for students once they are in the field. Through the researcher's interviews with participants affiliated with this teacher education program, Christman found that the program was closely aligned with the framework developed by McKenzie and colleagues (2008) and exhibited several strengths and weaknesses related to preparing teachers to center social justice in their practices. The program's strengths included intentionally hiring faculty and admitting students with a solid social justice background. Professors ensured that social justice was at the forefront in all courses and challenged students to critique dominant systems. All courses were designed to develop a critical consciousness in future teachers, although some courses more easily centered a social justice lens than others. The program sought to include men and traditionally marginalized students, and faculty met regularly to evaluate their progress with this goal. Christman also recognized an area for improvement concerning praxis and induction. More specifically, teacher preparation programs need to maintain contact with teachers after they have graduated to reinforce the connection between ECE and social justice and provide support in maintaining a critical lens in new teachers' classrooms (2010).

Further, Lee (2014) noted that efforts of teacher education programs to change pre-service teachers' attitudes towards equity in the classroom have resulted in varying levels of success. Using participatory action research methods, Lee supported three teacher candidates during their field placements and student teaching. Throughout the study, the teacher candidates exhibited differing levels of understanding and attitudes regarding teaching for social justice, which Lee attributed to several factors. The teacher candidates faced different time constraints and school contexts that affected the curricular decisions they could make. Lee also reflected that

the teacher candidates' education program lacked coherence regarding teaching for social justice. Lee noted that teaching to meet the needs of all learners was a constant theme throughout courses; however, this lens did not directly uncover the inequities that affect student learning. Approaches and levels of explicitness in addressing social justice varied by faculty within this program. Lee concluded that individual teacher candidates' existing knowledge, values, and experiences impact their decisions to discuss social issues with their students and should be incorporated into preparation programs, along with ample discussion and reflection opportunities across courses (2014).

In other existing work, Kohli and colleagues (2015) point to the importance of critical professional development (PD) to invoke a social justice orientation in current teachers. Unlike anti-dialogical professional development, which undervalues teachers' critical thinking skills and promotes passive absorption of information, critical professional development nurtures teachers' critical consciousness and their role in transforming society (Kohli et al., 2015). Current teachers are often exposed to irrelevant and prescribed professional development sessions carried out by outside experts who have little knowledge of the cultural and societal influences unique to each school community. Conversely, critical professional development (CPD) involves teachers in the analysis of relevant social justice issues that affect themselves and their students. CPD centers teachers' knowledge and needs through authentic dialogue, community building, the organization of shared power, and the analysis of teachers' roles in the maintenance of inequality. Kohli and colleagues (2015) collected data with more than 350 teachers at three sites to identify themes present in critical professional development opportunities. In all case studies, the professional development promoted community building and cooperation between teachers. Educators were framed as experts and had opportunities to influence the PD around their social

justice goals. Although curriculum and classroom practices remained important aspects of PD, the focus was on education as a means of enacting social justice. Reframing teachers as “politically-aware individuals who have a stake in teaching and transforming society” ensures that students' needs are met while teachers experience growth in their efforts to create social-justice-oriented classrooms (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 7).

Barriers That Prevent Teachers from Discussing Race

Since the 1970s and the era of Jim Crow racism, racial discrimination in the United States has become more covert and harder to detect (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). However, inequalities in the housing and job markets and income disparities between white people and Black people are still striking. In January 2022, the overall unemployment rate in the U.S. was 4%, while the rate for white people was 3.4% and the rate for Black people was 6.9% (Bureau of Labor Statistics). White people often turn to “raceless” explanations for these discrepancies, justifying the current affairs as matters of choice (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). This outlook, called colorblind racism, promotes the idea that people of color are personally responsible for their own misfortune and can achieve equality if they simply pick themselves up by their bootstraps. Bonilla-Silva warns that this “new racial order may be even more formidable than its predecessors,” as it allows white people to falsely assert that racism has ended in the U.S. (2015, p. 1369).

According to Boutte et al. (2011), a common refrain among early childhood educators is to claim that they treat all children the same regardless of race. Teachers and teacher educators in the United States, who are predominately white and female (Picower, 2009), adopt this mindset for various reasons. Misconceptions about children and race, including the belief that young students do not see color, influence teachers' decisions not to discuss race. Teachers also assert that young children are too naïve to talk about social injustices and that talking about race will

draw students' attention to differences that they would not have otherwise noticed. Other teachers find it uncomfortable to talk about race or feel ill-equipped to lead their students through these conversations (Boutte et al., 2011). However, children inherently perceive differences, and it is better to acknowledge and provide a safe space for children to discuss their observations than to deny that these differences exist. Ignoring or discouraging children's comments about race sends a message that the topic is taboo, making the discussion of race feel scary and unapproachable (Bronson & Merryman, 2009). Furthermore, a colorblind approach ignores the experiences of non-white individuals and promotes the white experience as conventional (Derman-Sparks, 2008). Many educators fail to realize that their silence on race further exacerbates the problem of racism in our country. Although talking about race is uncomfortable for many white people, in order to promote anti-racism, one must actively make an effort to interrupt systems of oppression instead of pretending these systems do not exist (Boutte et al., 2011).

Research conducted by Pahlke and colleagues (2012) found that European-American mothers frequently adopt a colorblind approach with their children. The researchers recorded mothers reading race-themed books to their preschool-aged children and surveyed both the mothers and the children about their own and each other's racial attitudes. When reading the race-themed books with their children, only 11% of the mothers commented about race. Often, they completely ignored their children's statements regarding racial themes in the books. However, the data revealed that 83 out of the 84 children could accurately label pictures of African-American and European-American people by race. As hypothesized by Pahlke and colleagues, the children held a pro-European American bias and anti-African American bias. The mothers, who personally expressed pro-African American attitudes and previously believed that

their children were blind to racial differences, were surprised and distressed to learn of their children's biases and accuracy with labeling by race. Their unwillingness to discuss race with their children led them to be unaware of their children's racial attitudes. Pahlke and colleagues argue that colorblind approaches result in missed opportunities to positively influence the development of children's racial awareness. They suggest that adults should explicitly ask children about their racial beliefs and frequently share one's personal anti-racist attitudes to reduce children's racial biases (Pahlke et al., 2012).

In another study, Vittrup (2016) asked 77 preschool through second-grade teachers whether they discussed race with their students, how they teach about race, and whether they think the topic is important. Ninety-three percent of Black teachers, 85% of white teachers, and 78% of Hispanic teachers reported that it is important to discuss race with children. According to Vittrup's coding methods, 30% of teachers fell into the color-conscious category, meaning that they discussed relevant topics related to race, such as discrimination and bias. However, many of these teachers taught about racial inequality only from a historical perspective. The other 70% of teachers used color-mute methods, meaning they deliberately did not discuss race or did so in a superficial manner, focusing only on heroes and holidays. Some teachers stated that their students were colorblind, so it was unnecessary to discuss race. Curiously, most of the participants reported that their students did not harbor racial biases; yet 48% of teachers reported that they had observed their students exhibit racially discriminatory behavior such as group exclusion. Participants cited several additional reasons for the nonexistence of race-related conversations in their classrooms, including a lack of time and district approval, along with an emphasis on testing and academics. Twenty-three percent of teachers in Vittrup's study also cited parent resistance and curriculum restrictions as a barrier to teaching about race. Husband

(2010) faced pushback from families when using critical, anti-racist pedagogy to teach his first graders about African American history. Husband described the resistance he encountered from white parents concerned that they did not have adequate strategies to discuss racism with their children and that their children were too young and innocent to learn about the topic. Husband (2010) attributed this apprehension to the tendency of white people to respond with guilt, denial, and avoidance when presented with the reality of racism.

Children's Understanding of Race

Research spanning the past five decades has documented young children's awareness of race along with their preferences for whiteness at an early age (Aboud & Doyle, 1996; Clark & Clark, 1946; Corenblum & Annis, 1993; Doyle & Aboud, 1995; Katz & Kofkin, 1997; Kelly et al., 2007; Ramsey, 1991; Vittrup & Holden, 2011). Children develop racial biases for several reasons, including the influence of parents and other adults, their environment, and the media. Children's self-esteem and categorization skills also impact their tendency to recognize and evaluate others based on race. Most relevant to this study is the finding that it is possible to influence young children's attitudes so that racial biases do not continue into adulthood.

Exposure to media with race-related themes and conversations with adults and less-biased peers have been shown to positively affect young children's racial attitudes (Aboud & Doyle, 1996; Vittrup & Holden, 2011). These findings highlight the importance of race-related conversations in early childhood classrooms and their potential to interrupt the development of racial biases.

Awareness and Bias

The famous "doll study" conducted by Clark and Clark (1947) revealed that Black children showed a preference for whiteness. The researchers presented children between the ages of 3 and 7 with dolls that were identical except for their skin color. The children were more

likely to assign positive traits to the white doll and negative traits to the Black doll, expressing that the white doll was “good” and the Black doll was “bad”. When the children were asked, “Which doll looks most like you?” participants frequently chose the white doll or exhibited distress at the prospect of identifying with the Black doll (Clark & Clark, 1947). The tendency for young children to exhibit racial awareness or hold racial biases has been further established in numerous studies (Aboud & Doyle, 1996; Clark & Clark, 1946; Corenblum & Annis, 2007; Doyle & Aboud, 1995; Katz & Kofkin, 1997; Ramsey, 1991; Vittrup & Holden, 2011) and documented in children as young as 6 months of age (Kelly et al., 2007).

A longitudinal study conducted by Katz and Kofkin (1997) began when the participants were six months old and followed them through their 6th year of life. The participants included 100 European-American infants and 100 African-American infants and their families. The researchers evaluated the racial awareness of the infants at 6 months old by first familiarizing them with a series of faces of the same race and gender. Then, the researchers presented the infants with a new face of the same gender and race, or a face of the same gender but different race, or a face of the same race but different gender. The researchers found that the children spent a significantly longer time looking at photographs with novel race or gender cues, indicating that infants are able to categorize people based on race (Katz, 2003). At age 3, Black and white children showed a same-group preference. When asked to select a playmate, 86% of white children selected peers of the same race. At 5 and 6 years old, the children were tasked with sorting photographs of people using a method of their choosing. Interestingly, 68% of children sorted by race while only 16% sorted by gender. At the end of the study, white children, but not Black children, continued to demonstrate an in-group preference (Katz, 2003).

A more recent study conducted by Vittrup and Holden (2011) confirmed previous findings that young children develop an awareness of racial differences at a young age. Vittrup and Holden used the Black/White Evaluative Trait Scale (Hughes & Bigler, 2007) to measure the attitudes of children between 5 and 7 years of age towards Black and white people. Participants were asked how many members of each racial group possessed positive, negative, or neutral traits. For example, researchers asked “How many Black people are dishonest?” (Vittrup and Holden, p. 89). Vittrup and Holden found that both Black and white children viewed white people more favorably than Black people. This study again demonstrated that young white children display in-group favoritism and hold biases against the outgroup, attitudes that can manifest into racial prejudice in adulthood. According to Vittrup and Holden (2011), to prevent these biases from becoming concrete adult beliefs that perpetuate the problem of racism, it is crucial to intervene in the development of young children’s racial attitudes.

Theories

There are several possible theories as to how and why young children form racial attitudes. These theories address the cognitive, social, and affective factors that may contribute to racial bias in children. In *The Nature of Prejudice*, Allport (1954) argued that people are predisposed to develop prejudice due to the nature of humans to categorize and favor the in-group. Due to their undeveloped cognitive structures, young children can categorize people by one trait, such as race, but struggle to recognize humans’ multiple dimensions. Thus, children use transductive reasoning to assume that people who share one perceptual cue are alike in all other dimensions as well. Young children's lack of multiple classification ability means that once a child has categorized a person based on race, it is extremely challenging for them to classify that person in another respect, resulting in the formation of stereotypes (Katz, 2003).

Additionally, numerous social factors can potentially impact a child's awareness of race, including their experience with intergroup contact and the influence of parents and authority figures. Children are influenced by their parents, either through direct instruction or by imitating their parents' behavior and beliefs in the absence of concrete conversations about race (Katz, 2003; Pahlke et al., 2012). Pahlke et al. (2012) expected that white children whose mothers did not engage them in explicit dialogues about race would instead be influenced by observations of their mothers' behaviors. This hypothesis was confirmed by the finding that "the percentage of the mothers' personal friends who were non-European American served as a positive predictor of their children's racial attitudes" (Pahlke et al., 2012, p. 1776). Children are attuned to their parents' social choices and observe their parents' behavior around people of other races to make conclusions about their racial attitudes. These findings are consistent with Intergroup Contact Theory (Allport, 1954), which posits that positive interactions with members of the outgroup are negatively correlated with biased attitudes. However, Pahlke and colleagues (2012) point out that contact must be "personal, sustained, and cooperative" to result in significant changes in bias (p. 1167).

Patterson and Bigler (2006) tested their hypothesis that adults' use of labels impacts children's development of biased in-group attitudes. Sixty-four children between 3 and 5 years old were assigned a blue or red shirt to wear daily at their daycare center. In control classrooms, the children's teachers did not mention the novel color groups. In the experimental classrooms, teachers frequently labeled and organized the children according to their color groups. However, these teachers treated both groups equally and discouraged competition and discrimination between groups. After three weeks, participants were administered several post-tests to evaluate their intergroup attitudes. Patterson and Bigler found that intergroup bias was significantly more

common among the preschoolers than neutral attitudes or outgroup bias. Data also revealed that teachers' use of the groups to organize and label children was correlated with higher levels of in-group bias among the participants in the experimental group compared to those in the control group. These children "rated themselves as happier with their group membership and their group membership as more important" than children in the control group, perhaps indicating that teachers' use of labels prompted students to incorporate their novel group membership into their identities (Patterson & Bigler, 2006, p. 856). The findings of Patterson and Bigler point to the subtle ways that adults communicate group preferences to young children, who attend to environmental cues and show an inclination to develop in-group biases (2006).

Lastly, several affective influences have been proposed to explain children's racial attitudes, including fear of strange people, fear of the dark, and self-esteem (Katz, 2003). Positively identifying with the in-group and devaluing the outgroup is associated with higher self-esteem in children. For example, in a study conducted by Yee and Brown (1992), after children aged 3 to 7 were randomly assigned to a fast or slow team, they exhibited positive attitudes towards their own team. In-group favoritism was especially strong among the 5-year-old children, who revealed they would not switch to the fast team even when assigned to the slow team for a fictional race (Yee & Brown, 1992). The relationship between identity and self-esteem differs for children of color and white children. For children of color, whose cultural attributes are seen as less-than in a racist society, distancing oneself from one's group can preserve self-esteem. In a study conducted by Corenblum & Annis (1993), minority children rated the in-group less favorably and out-group more favorably in an attempt to separate themselves from negative perceptions of their racial group. The opposite was true for white children, who rated their own group more positively than Blacks or Indians (sic). For white

children, positive self-esteem was related to more positive in-group attitudes. Conversely, Indian (sic) children with high self-esteem felt more negative about being Indian. These findings indicate that children of color may experience dissonance as they develop a racial identity along with an understanding of their membership in a low status group, while white children are aware that their racial group is held in high regard by society (Corenblum & Annis, 1993).

Shifting Racial Attitudes

Although racial awareness develops when children are very young, research has highlighted effective methods for shifting children's racial attitudes. Vittrup and Holden (2011) studied the effects of educational television and parent-child conversation on children's racial attitudes. White families with children between the ages of 5 and 7 were tasked with discussing race with their children and exposing them to five racially diverse video segments. Interestingly, two of the original 99 white families dropped out of the study upon receiving directions for race-related discussions with their children. Only 10% of the families reported that they actually engaged in these conversations. Reluctance to broach the subject of race with their children may reflect an overall feeling of discomfort or incompetence. However, children who watched the videos and/or had conversations with their parents about race demonstrated more positive outgroup attitudes than their peers in the control group. These children also demonstrated less in-group favoritism, revealing that it is possible to alter the racial attitudes of young children through conversations and exposure to media (Vittrup & Holden, 2011).

Aboud and Doyle (1996) researched the effect of conversing about race with a peer on children's racial attitudes. Pairs of low-prejudice and high-prejudice children were assigned to discuss their evaluations of three races. The participants were 88 white children between 8 and 11 years old. Researchers presented the children with 60 cards listing positive and negative

attributes and tasked them with sorting the cards into three boxes. One box was said to belong to a same-sex white child, the second box was said to belong to a same-sex Black child, and the last box was said to belong to a same-sex Chinese child. Each box was labeled with a drawing. After the participants sorted the cards, the researchers calculated their racial attitude scores by tallying the number of positive and negative evaluations made. Then, high-prejudice participants were paired with low-prejudice peers and asked to discuss how to sort two cards, one with a positive attribute and one with a negative attribute. After talking together for two minutes, the researchers reassessed each child's racial attitudes.

Aboud and Doyle found that students of both high and low prejudice levels openly expressed their racial evaluations (1996). Low-prejudice children made more negative statements about white people and more frequently mentioned similarities across races, pointing out that all races can exhibit both positive and negative attributes. Both sides often used specific examples of peers to make their evaluations. As predicted, high-prejudice children were likely to show increases in tolerance after engaging in a discussion with their low-prejudice friend. Low-prejudice children did not become more prejudiced after conversing with their peers. Aboud and Doyle concluded that conversations with low-prejudice peers positively impact more prejudiced children's tolerance levels, indicating that children should have opportunities to discuss race (1996).

A systematic review conducted by Skinner & Meltzoff (2019) revealed several additional types of childhood experiences correlated with reductions in intergroup biases. In early childhood, concrete experiences with positive representations of outgroup members have been shown to positively influence children's racial attitudes. Cooperative and positive intergroup contact scaffolded by adults is also effective in reducing outgroup biases in children.

For children who have few opportunities for intergroup contact, stories and imaginative activities about contact with other groups also positively impact children's racial attitudes. Lastly, talking about discrimination and prejudice with children has been shown to reduce racial biases (Skinner & Meltzhoff, 2019).

Teaching Strategies

Teachers who are eager to incorporate themes of race and racism into their teaching require guidance on making these conversations effective and meaningful. Feelings of discomfort and uncertainty prevent well-intentioned early childhood educators from ever directly broaching the topic of race in their classrooms (Boutte et al., 2011). Previous research has highlighted the efficacy of materials, shared readings, and critical conversations in developing students' understanding of race and systems that uphold inequity (Beneke and Cheatham, 2020; Boutte et al., 2011; R. Lee et al., 2008, Hawkins, 2014). While multicultural materials and books can serve as helpful tools in facilitating conversations, their inclusion in the classroom alone is not enough to foster sociopolitical consciousness in young students. Research points to the need for teachers to be deliberate and direct in their efforts to uncover students' current understandings of race and develop their ability to recognize and analyze oppressive forces (Bigler, 1999; Derman-Sparks et al., 2020; R. Lee et al., 2008; Hughes et. al, 2007; Husband, 2010; MacNevin & Berman, 2017).

Use of Materials

In attempts to mitigate racial biases in children, many early childhood educators choose or are required to incorporate materials into the environment that reflect a variety of cultures or ethnicities. Materials such as skin-tone crayons or markers, play food reflecting different cultures, multicultural books, posters, puzzles, dolls, and costumes are common staples in early

childhood classrooms. However, Bigler (1999) argues that these approaches do not typically impact children's negative racial attitudes for several reasons. Bigler suggests that children, especially those with strong biases, may forget the counter-stereotypical information or multicultural knowledge they acquire. While adults can think abstractly about people living in different cultures, time periods, and geographical contexts, children focus on the here and now and think about people in terms of concrete attributes. Young children's limited classification abilities also make it difficult for them to categorize people by more than one trait. For example, once a child has used the perceptually salient characteristic of race to classify a person, they may have trouble understanding this person as a member of another, non-related group like "scientists" (Bigler, 1999, p. 697). Bigler suggests that opportunities to practice cross-classification of people into non-racial groups and attend to the differences among outgroup members are effective strategies to reduce outgroup bias in children. More recent research has revealed that individuation training, which increases one's ability to discern between other-race faces, reduces the tendency to "categorize other-race faces as the racial outgroup" (Setoh et al., 2017, p. 176), decreasing preschool children's racial biases (Qian et al., 2017).

R. Lee and colleagues (2008) observed kindergarten students as they engaged in various anti-bias and multicultural activities to determine which materials and teaching methods are most effective in promoting meaningful conversations about social justice. The researchers introduced activities and materials and then observed the students to identify which learning opportunities promoted conversations about race or social class. R. Lee and colleagues reported that visual activities, such as using skin-tone markers and playing a concentration game with photos of children representing different racial groups, elicited meaningful conversations about racial differences. More passive activities, such as listening to a story or singing a song, were less

effective in generating conversations than active activities. The researchers found that students responded best to the book about Martin Luther King as they had learned about him previously and suggested that books and songs are most meaningful when connected to a familiar theme. Overall, the researchers found that simply offering multicultural materials does not produce stimulating conversations about social justice in children. On the other hand, providing too much direction and structure inhibits students' engagement in critical conversations. Students are most likely to explore issues of race and social class when teachers create opportunities that raise students' curiosity and awareness, and then facilitate, rather than lead, discussions (R. Lee et al., 2008).

Also contributing scholarship, MacNevin & Berman (2017) evaluated the impact of a Canadian policy, which mandates the inclusion of culturally and ethnically diverse materials in early childhood classrooms, on children's interactions. The researchers conducted 29 hours of observations at a combined preschool/kindergarten classroom in an urban childcare center and interviewed 17 early childhood education professionals. Evidence revealed that children clearly preferred white play materials, created racial categories, and used materials to reenact the power structures they observed in society. MacNevin and Berman concluded that providing children with multicultural materials does not automatically decrease their racial biases. They also found that early childhood teachers involved in the study did not recognize that their students had racial biases and preferences, providing alternate explanations for students' race-driven behaviors. MacNevin and Berman purport that observing and joining play with children are avenues for teachers to gain greater clarity about their students' understanding of race. In order to grasp how students embed power structures and racial themes into their play, it is necessary to observe more than an individual episode of social interaction. Engaging in play with children provides teachers

with an opportunity to challenge their stereotypical beliefs and extend their use of diverse materials. MacNevin and Berman (2017) also suggest that teachers thoughtfully choose multicultural materials so that people of color are not just “colorful additions to a predominately white world,” but instead embedded into the environment and emphasized as mainstream (p. 836). Multicultural materials are an excellent addition to any early childhood classroom, and students from various cultures must see themselves reflected in the learning environment in numerous positive ways. However, materials alone are not sufficient in shifting students' racial attitudes and must be accompanied by explicit conversations to make a difference (MacNevin & Berman, 2017).

Shared Reading

Another approach to developing children's understanding of race is shared reading experiences. Hawkins (2014) used participatory action research methods in two Australian preschools to explore strategies to teach for social justice. The study began with an orientation phase during which the research team read a critical picture book to students and debriefed with each student, recording their responses. Through these conversations, the researchers found that the preschoolers held stereotypical beliefs, used exclusivist language, and were interested in upholding the status quo. During the next portion of the study, teachers made story time an integral part of the daily schedule instead of a transitional activity. To introduce the literature, teachers used guided questioning and scaffolding to connect the social justice issues described in the texts to the students' own experiences. As the study progressed, researchers observed students showing empathy for others and using inclusionary language that was not in their vocabularies prior to the study. During the last week of the research phase, teachers reread the stories from the orientation phase and found that students had developed the language to discuss issues of social

justice and fairness and displayed more accepting beliefs. The researchers concluded that the practice of engaging students in critical discussion before, during, and after story time fostered preschoolers' ability to make moral judgments, adopt the perspectives of others, and display empathy (Hawkins, 2014).

In other research, Beneke and Cheatham (2020) studied four teacher candidates' attempts at talking about race in the context of shared reading. The teacher candidates, who were all white and female, were completing a fieldwork course to obtain their early childhood licensure. It is common practice for early childhood teachers to read and discuss picture books with their students. However, when utilizing texts to generate conversations about race, teachers tend to signal expectations for student participation that may limit the potential for critical conversations. Beneke and Cheatham found that teacher candidates frequently restricted student engagement with texts through non-verbal signals like page-turning, final intonation, and emphasizing “correct” responses. Although all four teacher candidates agreed that discussing race with their students was important and that book reading was a viable entryway into their conversations, they “stay[ed] close to the texts,” (p.12), quickly moving on when students commented on characters’ identities. While their students were actively developing racial understandings, the teacher candidates expressed discomfort with regard to leading discussions about race. Beneke and Cheatham posit that by controlling conversations about texts, the teacher candidates did little to dismantle the development of racism with their students (2020).

To develop anti-racist attitudes in children, Kemple et al. (2016) also point to picture books as a powerful tool that early childhood teachers are already comfortable with using in their classrooms. Kemple and colleagues recommend utilizing books that actively and directly highlight physical differences. Choosing both fiction and nonfiction books ensures that social

justice issues are portrayed as tangible, and that information is genuine and concrete (Boutte et al., 2011). Additionally, teachers should employ dialogic reading, a strategy that involves asking a variety of questions, affirming and offering correct responses, repeating and extending children's ideas, and encouraging children to use expanded language. The "Question with Care" acronym is a helpful framework influenced by dialogic reading framework and developed by the Committee for Children (2004, n.p.):

Q= Ask a variety of questions

C= Correct and model language use

A = Affirm children's answers

R = Repeat what children say, have them repeat what you say

E = Expand what children say

Engaging students in shared reading using this framework promotes conversations about race, increasing students' acceptance of human similarities and differences as they are naturally noticing and conceptualizing racial diversity (Kemple et al., 2016).

Fontanella-Nothom (2019) suggests that multiple read-alouds of the same text help generate young students' active engagement in dialogues about race. In her work with 3 to 5-year-old children, Fontanella-Nothom chose to read *The Other Side* by Jacqueline Woodson, a picture book about a Black girl and a white girl who live on opposite sides of a fence and become friends. During the first reading, children responded to the concept of segregation with concrete solutions like a ladder instead of discussing the characters' perceptions. During the second reading, students talked about why the Black character's mother told her it was not safe on the other side of the fence. Fontanella-Nothom's questioning led the students to discuss what could be considered "unsafe" or dangerous" about other people. One student concluded, "The

different skins made them scared," while another related the story to her own experiences by stating, "My neighbor upstairs has different skin than me, but we are friends" (Fontanella-Nothom, 2019, p. 15). By the third reading, students exhibited confidence with directly discussing race and made comments asserting their own racial identities with pride. Through open-ended and small-group discussions about the text, the students demonstrated their ability to make personal connections and ask questions about the relationships between skin color, race, and identity. This research points to the power of shared reading experiences and racially conscious children's literature to encourage preschool students' critical thinking about race.

Critical Conversations

Early childhood educators have found that openly teaching about racism and asking young students about their understanding of race are effective avenues to generate critical conversations and influence positive racial attitudes. Hughes and colleagues (2007) conducted a study on the impacts of learning about historical racism with 6 to 11-year-old, white, students. An experimenter taught history lessons to students for 6 consecutive days, which involved reading two biographies a day about famous African-Americans and European-Americans. In the racism condition, the biographies included details of the racism inflicted on the famous African-Americans individuals. In the control condition, no mention of racism was made. After the series of lessons, the researchers evaluated students' racial attitudes and found that those in the racism condition "expressed stronger valuing of racial fairness" and "endorsed more counter-stereotypic views of African-Americans" (Hughes et. al, 2007, p. 1695). Children in this condition also displayed significantly more positive attitudes and less negative attitudes towards African Americans than those in the control group. The findings indicate that learning about racism is likely to reduce prejudice in white children (Hughes et. al, 2007).

In a study with first-grade students, Husband (2010) explored the use of critical, anti-racist pedagogy to teach about African American history. Husband discovered that his young students possessed a surprising amount of knowledge about this topic before beginning the unit, indicating that young children have a deeper understanding of race than adults typically believe. Husband found that when he involved students in reenacting historical conditions, such as slavery, they did not immediately recognize the injustices of the situation, and some reported positive feelings when playing the role of the oppressor. He utilized critical questioning to increase students' awareness of the inherent inequalities in U.S. history. Husband challenges the belief that young children do not have the ability to partake in serious discussions about race and posits that children simply need to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and observations. He recommends that teachers create "dialogical safe spaces" in their classrooms, places that allow students and teachers to engage in open and critical conversations about systems of oppression, thus deepening their sociopolitical consciousness (Husband, 2010, p. 73).

In another example, Boutte et al. (2011) highlight a bilingual teacher's (JLR) success with using literature and classroom discussions to help her Mexican-American second-graders make sense of their own experiences of racism. On a weekly basis, JLR read books concerning racism with her students and sent home books for children to read with their families. After JLR read books aloud to students in both Spanish and English, students wrote responses and were then encouraged to share their ideas and questions with their small group. JLR encouraged students to make connections between the texts and their own experiences and asked critical questions such as "What does the word racism mean?" (Boutte et al., 2011, p. 337). The students' work samples revealed that they were aware of race and how it related to their own experiences. One child answered that racism was about "hurting people," while another stated, "Blacks sat in

the back of the bus." A third student mentioned mistreatment "because of the color of their skin," and a Mexican-American child described racism as "people that want Mexicans to leave" (Boutte et al., 2011, p. 337). These responses reflect children's color-consciousness and their understandings of the connections between racism, pain, and power. Boutte and colleagues provide recommendations for teachers who would like to create such dialogues about race in their own classrooms. The authors suggest that teachers reflect on their personal views regarding race and racism. For white teachers especially, it is helpful to consider the ways they have benefitted from white privileges and the ways they might be centering their whiteness in their teaching practices (MacNevin & Berman, 2017). Boutte and colleagues suggest that conversations about race should not be isolated events or centered only around holidays like Martin Luther King Jr. Day, as this type of surface-level coverage has the potential to emphasize stereotypes. Instead, discussions must be ongoing and embedded into the curriculum. Teachers should be prepared to face questions from parents and community members when addressing the sensitive topic of race in the classroom and should involve families and administrators in the planning process. Boutte and colleagues (2011) also contend that strong relationships with families lay the foundation for effective conversations about race with children.

Other scholars' work reveals that conversations about race don't need to be pre-planned or part of a larger unit of study (Derman-Sparks et al, 2020, Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2008, Whitney, 2008). As children naturally make observations about the diversity they experience, biased remarks are likely to occur. Instead of staying silent, which sends the message that the comment was acceptable, teachers should view the child's misunderstanding as a teachable moment (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020). Immediately following up with exploratory, but not accusatory questions, such as "What do you mean by that?" helps teachers to gain insight into

the child's thought process. Then, teachers can use this information to create learning experiences that confront children's beliefs and replace potentially hurtful understandings with more appropriate ones (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2008). Derman-Sparks and Ramsey also suggest challenging stereotypes with children by providing opportunities to identify misinformed depictions of people and to consider more accurate and fair portrayals. For example, a game called "Stereotype or Fact" involves students in critically thinking about oversimplified generalizations. The teacher makes exaggerated statements that are obviously false, such as "All girls like bananas" and asks for students to vote on the statement's accuracy. This game develops students' ability to consider other perspectives when they hear a remark about an entire group of people. Teachers can also invite children to critique the stereotypes in children's literature and encourage them to suggest ways the author could more accurately portray diversity (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2008).

Lastly, using persona dolls to invite conversations about race is another effective strategy. Persona dolls, which represent real people and share the same age as the students, are used by the teacher to tell stories about biased behaviors (Whitney, 2008). Teachers keep these dolls separate from dolls used for play and create a unique persona for each one that reflects the diversity in the class or introduces other forms of diversity. When the persona dolls share their experiences with discrimination and racism, students gain awareness of diversity and learn how prejudiced behaviors hurt others (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020). Using persona dolls, teachers can develop students' empathy and critical thinking skills by inviting them to recognize stereotypes, critique biased interactions, and consider ways to solve the dolls' problems (Whitney, 2008). Multiple avenues for nurturing conversations about race with young children exist. Most importantly,

early childhood teachers should not underestimate their young students' awareness of race and their capacity for engaging in dialogue that challenges racial biases.

The existing literature informed the methods and implementation of the current study, which examines early childhood teachers' perceptions of talking to children about race. Previous research has established young children hold racial biases that can be shaped into positive attitudes through conversations that promote an appreciation for diversity and an understanding of social injustices. The present research seeks to expand on previous findings by determining the influences on current teachers' decisions to include or exclude discussion of race in their curriculum. Through surveys and interviews with early childhood educators, this research aims to uncover participants' understandings of the necessity and importance of having race-related conversations. Although the existing literature provides examples of teaching strategies that promote positive racial attitudes in children, preservice and in-service teachers who are beginning to recognize their role in interrupting racism need additional guidance for fostering critical conversations about race with children. Through this research, I hope to build upon previous scholars' findings to provide educators with further meaningful and applicable approaches for embedding anti-racism into early childhood curriculum.

Chapter Three: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to highlight early childhood educators' perceptions and practices with regard to talking about race with their students. This exploration is considered qualitative research because it involved assumptions, the statement of a human or social problem, the use of a theoretical lens, the collection of data to describe the natural setting, and an analysis that established patterns and themes (Creswell, 2007). This study was conducted through the lens of natural inquiry, meaning that there was no attempt to manipulate the beliefs, experiences, or attitudes of the participants (Patton, 2002). Like most qualitative research, this study took place in the participants' natural settings and involved my own interpretation of the meaning of the data through my examination of each teacher's stories. Through surveys and open-ended interviews with teachers, I sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are early childhood teachers' experiences with having conversations about race with young children?
2. What supports do early childhood teachers have in conversations about race? What challenges or barriers exist?
3. What strategies do early childhood teachers use to facilitate conversations about race in their classrooms?

This chapter describes the research methodology used to understand these questions.

Pseudonyms were used to represent participants and locations, and all aspects of this study design were approved by the Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A).

Theoretical Framework

A transformative worldview was the foundation for my study. Transformative research seeks to confront social oppression and provides action steps to improve the lives of

marginalized groups (Creswell, 2014). The participants in this study are white, and thus belong to the dominant group, or the racial group in the United States with the most power. However, my research is focused on alleviating the persistent inequality between white people and people of color in the United States through educational experiences that reduce racial bias in young children. This research aimed to resolve power imbalances by identifying most effective practices for increasing white children's sociopolitical consciousness in early childhood along with pinpointing the obstacles teachers face in discussing race with their students. Today's children are tomorrow's citizens, leaders, scholars, politicians, and activists in a country that is becoming increasingly diverse. Recognizing the potential power of a generation of children who are accepting of racial differences, comfortable with cultures other than their own, and adept at recognizing and challenging instances of injustice, I advocate for change in the ways educators perceive race-related discussions in early childhood classrooms.

Study Context

This study took place during a time of heightened attention on issues of race. Shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic led to the closings of schools, businesses, and workplaces in March of 2020, the police killing of George Floyd sparked world-wide protests against the unjust treatment of Black people by police. When Derek Chauvin, the officer who knelt on Floyd's neck for nine minutes, was convicted of his murder in March of 2021, many viewed this event as a victory, though small, in the fight for equal treatment of Black Americans by the criminal justice system. In the two years that have proceeded George Floyd's death, Americans have continued to draw attention to violence and discrimination against Black people through the Black Lives Matter movement and social media.

In the realm of education, school board members and parents have grown concerned that critical race theory (CRT), “a graduate-level academic framework,” has infiltrated American classrooms (Fortin, 2011, para 3). CRT, which recognizes the systemic ways that racism is embedded in society, is often misconstrued to represent learning about the history of racism or talking about race and privilege in school. Opponents of CRT believe it fosters divisiveness and resentment between white children and children of color, perpetuating racism. Proponents see CRT as an avenue to ending racism, through the understanding of its roots in American culture, law, and history (Fortin, 2011).

At the present time, many school districts have returned to in-person learning and have determined that face masks are optional for staff and students. After almost two years of virtual learning and mandated quarantines in some school districts, the return to almost-pre-pandemic normalcy in schools is a welcomed relief for many children and families. However, recent elections, on the local and national scale, have revealed that Americans are still divided over issues like CRT in schools and pandemic-related safety measures like masking and vaccination. As race is a sensitive and pressing contemporary issue in school systems today, I recognize that this study could be considered controversial or misunderstood as research on critical race theory.

Setting

This study involved teachers employed in the Tyler School District, located in a suburb of a large Midwestern city. The Tyler School District serves over 4,500 students in grades 4K-12 and exceeds academic expectations set forth by the state. I selected this district as I wanted participants to represent the largely white and female teacher workforce in the United States. I was also interested in whether teachers who work with predominately white students found discussions of race important, applicable, and/or appropriate. The student population in Tyler

AN EXAMINATION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS

School District during the 2020-2021 school year was 71.1% percent white; however, a significant population of students are of Middle Eastern decent. Due to the close proximity of a mosque to the Tyler schools, families from India and Pakistan have settled in the area.

There are five elementary schools in Tyler School District, and the participants of this study represent two of these schools, both of which significantly exceed the state's Department of Public Instruction expectations. Emma teaches at Park Place Elementary, where 8.8% of the students are English learners, 9% of students have disabilities, and 22.5% of students are economically disadvantaged. Katie teaches at Stone Grove Elementary, where 5.7% of students are English learners, 8.6% of students have disabilities, and 15.6% of students are economically disadvantaged. Table 1 outlines the student demographics of Park Place Elementary School and Stone Grove Elementary School.

Table 1
Student Demographics of Tyler School District in 2020-2021

School	% White	% Asian	% Hispanic or Latino	% Two or More Races	% Black or African- American	% American Indian or Alaskan Native
Park Place Elementary School	61.9%	17.3%	9.5%	9.2%	1.8%	0.2%
Stone Grove Elementary School	71.1%	14.1%	7.8%	4.2%	2.9%	0%

Participants

The teachers involved in this study represent a purposeful sample of convenience. Purposefully selecting participants permits the researcher to gain rich information about a particular phenomenon. Purposeful sampling does not lend to generalizations about the larger population, rather it produces in-depth findings related to the purpose of the research (Patton,

2002). My sample was convenient as I recruited teachers from nearby districts for ease of meeting them in person for interviews if that was their preference. As a resident of the Midwestern city where this study took place, I am familiar with the local suburbs and school districts, which helped me with recruiting participants that were likely to work with predominately white students. I recruited from districts other than the one at which I am employed in order to avoid any risks of identification or discomfort to participants.

Teachers were eligible to participate if they taught 4-year-old kindergarten, 5-year-old kindergarten, or first grade and had been employed as a general education teacher for at least two years. I collected potential participants' emails through the staff directories listed on their school districts' websites. I reached out to 97 participants from three school suburban school districts via an email that explained the purpose of the study, eligibility criteria, and the time commitment for participants (see Appendix B). One teacher, Katie, responded to the initial email but did not reply when I sent the survey and a request to schedule an interview. I sent her another email after a few weeks to inquire about whether she remained interested in participating. At this point, Katie agreed to take the survey and scheduled an interview over Zoom. After sending a follow-up email to the participant pool, another teacher, Emma, expressed interest in participating. I sent her the survey and scheduled a time for her interview, also over Zoom. I hoped to recruit three to four teachers with the intent of including differing perspectives, a variety of experiences, and representation from more than one school district and grade. However, only Katie and Emma ultimately agreed to participate in this study. At the time of this study, both teach 4K (4-year-old kindergarten) and are employed in Tyler School District.

Emma

Emma is a white, female, 38-year-old teacher with 12 years of experience. She started her career teaching kindergarten in an urban, Catholic school with a mostly Hispanic student population. After spending 6 years in this position, Emma spent 3 years teaching kindergarten in a suburban district where most of the students were economically disadvantaged. When Emma had her own children, she spent several years substitute teaching locally and realized she loved 4-year-old kindergarten. When Tyler Schools started their 4K program three years ago, Emma was hired as a teacher at Park Place Elementary School. Emma currently has 14 students, several of whom are East Indian.

Katie

Katie, a white, female, 52-year-old teacher, has worked in the Tyler School District for her entire 30-year career. She taught kindergarten until Tyler Schools began their 4-year-old kindergarten program. Katie has now been teaching 4K for three years at Stone Grove Elementary. Katie currently has 17 students, eight of whom are of Middle Eastern descent.

Data Collection

Data was collected through an online survey and an individual interview. Surveys were administered online and interviews took place subsequently over Zoom. The online survey allowed me to understand the participants' attitudes towards talking about race before the interview, informing the direction of our conversation together.

Survey

I used the Qualtrics software program to build the survey, which included ten questions and took approximately ten minutes to complete. Participants received the link for the survey via email. After reading the study information, providing consent (see Appendix C), and answering three demographic questions, participants responded to statements designed with a four-level

Likert scale. The scale consisted of the following choices: strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree. The questions addressed participants' beliefs about discussing race with their students, their perceptions of students' racial awareness, and possible challenges or sources of support for teachers in discussing race with their students (see Appendix D).

Surveys provide a “numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population” (Creswell, 2014, p. 296). In this study, the purpose of the survey was to provide information about early childhood teachers' general attitudes towards talking about race with their students. Providing an online survey allowed me to efficiently collect significant data without taking a substantial amount of the teachers' time. The survey granted me background knowledge of participants' beliefs, providing me an approach to guide the interviews. Thus, I was able to further examine and question participants' ideas, providing more illuminating interview findings.

Interviews

When I emailed participants the link to the survey, I also scheduled a time for an interview. Both participants chose to meet for their interview over Zoom. The interviews lasted between 30 and 40 minutes. The interview questions expanded on the survey results to further address participants' readiness to engage in conversations regarding race and the basis for their beliefs. Additionally, the interview questions focused on teachers' experiences with race-related conversations in their classrooms and the challenges or sources of support they have in cultivating these conversations (see Appendix E). From a qualitative perspective, these interviews produced opinions and stories from participants that helped me to establish themes during the data analysis phase. The interviews were valuable as they allowed me to have some control over the conversation through the use of semi-structured questions (Patton, 2002). I purposefully aligned my interview protocol to the research questions to generate related

information from the participants. However, when developing my interview protocol, I also created several follow-up questions for each target question in preparation for the variety of responses I could expect from participants. This format allowed me to ask questions specific to the purpose of this research while also allowing for the flexibility to probe for further information regardless of participants' particular feelings or experiences (Patton, 2002).

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed as it was collected. This simultaneous approach offered opportunities for me to respond to the data and organize it around emerging themes (Creswell, 2014). As soon as participants completed the surveys, I began my analysis by looking at their responses to identify common beliefs in Katie's and Emma's responses. I took a screenshot of both participants' survey results and pasted them beside each other in a new document. This allowed me to compare Katie's and Emma's responses to each question side-by-side to determine where their attitudes were aligned and where they differed.

I analyzed the data inductively by allowing patterns to emerge naturally, building from particulars to general themes (Creswell, 2014). In accordance with this study's lens of natural inquiry, I began the analysis without predetermined notions of the code and with an openness to whatever meaning might emerge from the data (Patton, 2002). After transcribing the audio-recordings, I engaged in a holistic read of the transcripts and made notes summarizing participants' main ideas in the margins. After reading both transcripts, I reviewed my notes and made a list of the dominant or reoccurring points in each interview. Then, I compared the two lists and looked for patterns shared across Emma and Katie's experiences and beliefs. I grouped several ideas together to determine three overarching themes present in the data. With this coding system, I assigned each theme one color. Then, I highlighted data from each of the

participants in these colors, assigning relevant participant responses to one of the three themes. This inductive coding system helped me to efficiently identify themes visually as I continued to analyze data over time. Lastly, I reflected on the three emergent themes in relation to my research questions to determine the findings of this study.

Table 2
Data Analysis Codes

Code	Definition
Students' Racial Awareness	Includes classroom anecdotes describing students' comments or questions regarding race. Involves teachers' discussion of the concept of colorblindness as it relates to their 4K students.
Current Teaching Practices	Includes examples of how participants currently address topics of race, culture, and ethnicity in their classrooms. Addresses topics that teachers have removed from their curriculum to be more culturally responsive.
Obstacles and Areas for Improvement	Involves concerns over parent and administration reactions, uncertainty of how to approach conversations about race, and feelings of being unprepared. Also incorporates teachers' suggestions of sources of increased support.

Rigor and Trustworthiness

I upheld the rigor and trustworthiness in this study in several ways. First, I chose two forms of data collection to ensure a deeper understanding of participants' ideas and experiences than just a survey or an interview alone could provide. The use of two forms of data, or triangulation, and the detailed descriptions of data provided in Chapter Four demonstrate my rigorous data collection procedures (Creswell, 2007). Additionally, I constantly reflected on my position as a researcher and as a fellow teacher. I strove to make sure participants felt comfortable sharing their stories with me and had confidence that I could relate to the feelings of uncertainty and discomfort that come with the important role of an early childhood educator. I built rapport with participants so that they were open to being vulnerable in their responses, recognizing that this subject is considered to be highly charged in a time of heightened tensions surrounding race. It was also of utmost importance to ensure participants trusted me with the

confidentiality of their responses. I took time to explain to participants that their identities would not be linked to this research or available to the public. These steps ensure the trustworthiness of this study, or the credibility and authenticity of the data (Creswell, 2014).

Study Limitations

Limitations of the study included a lack of time and a limited number of participants. Due to the nature of this research as my master's thesis, I had only one semester to complete this study before graduation. Therefore, after receiving approval from the IRB, I needed to recruit participants and collect data quickly to analyze data and draw conclusions before the end of the semester. Additionally, there seemed to be a general lack of interest in participating among teachers. Many teachers are feeling burnt out after years of hybrid or virtual instruction, school closings, and battles over COVID protocols. As an early childhood educator, myself, I recognize that teachers have myriad responsibilities and this study took place during a very busy and demanding part of the school year that allows for limited free time. In addition, the focus of this research on race may have been intimidating to some teachers given the current local and national sociopolitical climate. My recruitment email to teachers did not explain the confidentiality of their participation, so I am concerned that they may have feared harassment or retribution at the hands of parents or school board members for taking part in this study. Furthermore, teachers may have been unsure of their stance on discussions of race in their classrooms due to recent controversial and sensationalized news over CRT and discussions of race in schools. I believe that the highly charged subject of this study and general feelings of stress and exhaustion among today's teachers led to a hesitancy to participate in this study. Thus, I was only able to include two participants in my research, who happened to teach the same grade in the same district. This limited sample size means that the data reflects only two

perspectives and experiences, and cannot be generalized to the wider population of early childhood educators in the U.S.

Researcher Positionality

As an early childhood educator, race and culturally responsive practices are of high interest and importance to me. During my first year as a teacher, I worked in a district with predominately Black students. Recognizing that as a white, female educator, I did not share the same race, culture, and experiences as my students, I strove to make my classroom a safe and validating place for the young learners. I focused on supporting my students in succeeding academically, while also sustaining their cultures and valuing their families and communities in our interactions, in the curriculum, and in the learning environment. When I transitioned into a suburban school district, where all of my current students are white, I wondered how to continue to center race, equity, and culturally relevant pedagogy in my practices. I pondered avenues for talking about race with my students, knowing that they may have been exposed to little diversity in their 4 to 5 years of life.

Through my graduate studies, I have come to understand that young children hold racial biases and that discussing race with young children has a positive influence on their racial attitudes. Despite my enthusiasm and willingness to have these conversations with my students, I have not always felt confident in answering my students' questions in a developmentally-appropriate way. Although I have always intended to embed race-related themes into my curriculum, I have found myself reserving conversations about race for Martin Luther King Day or Black History Month due to feelings of being unprepared. Before I began reviewing literature for this research, I had trouble finding guidance in facilitating these conversations. I found that in my teacher preparation program and professional development experiences, the provided

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resources usually focused on social justice pedagogies in upper-elementary school, middle school, or high school. I have struggled to find research or recommendations focusing on the early childhood years as an opportune time to begin fostering sociopolitical consciousness among children.

My lack of confidence also arises from fears surrounding district or parent reaction to the topic of race in the classroom. The district at which I am employed offered one state-wide optional professional development session on social justice, which I eagerly attended. Besides this experience, I have never heard my administrators or colleagues speak about race in relation to our students. Due to the heightened attention on race and our nation's divisions on issues like critical race theory and police brutality, I also cannot be certain that parents and families would react positively to their children discussing race in school.

Despite the potential for resistance, I believe conversations about race with children are important and I hope to grow more confident in guiding my students in understanding racial justice. I recognize that I am not an expert in this topic, and I wanted to convey to my participants that I am still learning how to be an effective anti-bias educator. Through this research, I hope to grow my own understandings and teaching practices to better serve not only my own students through culturally relevant pedagogy, but also all people who have been marginalized by racism in the United States.

Chapter Four: Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine early childhood teachers' perceptions and practices with regard to talking about race with their students. The questions that guided this research were:

1. What are early childhood teachers' experiences with having conversations about race with young children?
2. What supports do early childhood teachers have in conversations about race? What challenges or barriers exist?
3. What strategies do early childhood teachers use to facilitate conversations about race in their classrooms?

Data was collected through surveys and individual interviews with participants. Survey results revealed that both Katie and Emma believed discussing race with children was important and developmentally appropriate. However, the participants reported that they did not actually engage in these discussions with their students. Neither teacher believed that they had the "knowledge or experience to feel confident discussing race" (Survey Question 6) with their students. Several of Emma's survey responses highlighted possible reasons for the absence of race-related conversions in her classroom. She disagreed with the following statements:

- If I facilitated discussions about race with my students, their families would be supportive (Survey Question 5).
- I have district support in discussing race with my students (Survey Question 8).
- I have the time and resources I need to discuss race with my students (Survey Question 9).

Although Katie reported that she had district and parental support, time, and resources, she still did not engage in race-related conversations with her students. Interestingly, Emma and Katie agreed that their students notice skin color, but both participants strongly disagreed with the statement “My students hold racial biases” (Survey Question 4).

Individual interviews with participants provided further information on the teachers' understandings of their students' racial awareness. Furthermore, during the interviews, Emma and Katie explained why they did not feel confident discussing race with their 4K students and the approaches they use instead to facilitate acceptance and an appreciation for human differences in their classrooms. The findings in this chapter include a) Emma's and Katie's conceptions of their students' colorblindness; b) their current teaching practices surrounding skin color and culture; and c) obstacles and solutions to having conversations about race in their classrooms. Discussions of these findings are to follow.

“It Doesn't Matter What Color We Are”: Teachers' Understanding of Racial Context

In the first finding, I learned that Emma and Katie believed their students noticed skin color but did not think that their students held any negative racial attitudes. When asked about her students' racial awareness, Emma stated, “I don't have any African Americans in my class, but I do have several who are Indian [sic]. And no one has ever said anything about it... I don't think that it's anything that they think about any deeper than just ‘Oh, their skin color is darker than mine’”.

Katie also explained how one of her students understood race,

I have this little boy in my class this year and...his mom is Hmong and his dad is Vietnamese. And I have a book, it's called Global Babies, and its got this adorable little baby, but it's a baby in a Vietnamese cultural outfit. And my little guy from my class

brought the book to me one day and he's like, "Look! It's me!" and I was like, "Oh my gosh, that is you!" So, I shared that with his mom at conferences, and then she said to me, "I didn't even know that he sees race." And I was like, "Well, I guess he wasn't really thinking about it as seeing race, but he was seeing it as recognizing a baby that literally looked like him." And then, she sent me a picture of when he was little and he did have an outfit like that. So, I find that very interesting but as far as [students] actually like understanding in depth [what] race is, I don't think they understand that.

Both teachers acknowledged that their young students noticed their own and each other's skin colors. However, neither teacher believed that their students understood the concept of race or gave skin color much thought. When asked directly about the concept of colorblindness as it relates to her students, Emma elaborated, "As a 4Ker, I just think they're there to make friends, they're there to play and have fun, and I don't think they're really seeing each other's colors." Katie acknowledged that her students see skin color, but expanded, "I wouldn't say it's like a focus...in class, I don't feel like it is something that I've heard them talk about really, without being prompted by a teacher or by someone...I think that they're accepting."

Both Emma and Katie mentioned their students' interactions with the classroom baby dolls. Emma felt like her students did not have a preference for dolls of one race over dolls of another race, despite mentioning her knowledge of the Clark and Clark doll study (1947),

They see a baby doll, but they don't... I've never seen them grab the White one... they just play with all of them. I know there's a very famous video, at least through education, I've seen it multiple times... where they do the study with the dolls and they say like, "Oh, that's the... I don't like that one." So, I've seen that so many times and I've never noticed it with any of my students before, where they're specifically only playing with

one doll and they're leaving the other ones. So, I feel that I'm familiar with colorblindness, just saying "It doesn't matter, we're all friends, it doesn't matter what color we are" and I think that's kind of how they perceive things as well.

On the other hand, Katie recalled a time a student did not want to play with the Black baby doll,

Last year I had a student, who, we have four babies, and the only baby that was left was the Black baby. And she said, "I want to play with the baby," and I said, "Oh, here's a baby. All the babies need love." And she said, "Well, I want a baby that looks like me." And I was like, "Okay, I get it." I provide so many materials and things like that that are to represent people of all nationalities and colors and whatever. But to hear a 4-year-old say that, I was like, "Okay, that makes sense too," you know?

While Emma reflected that her students did not hold any racial biases when playing with baby dolls, Katie had experienced a student exhibiting a preference for the doll that shared her race. Katie's anecdotes especially highlight her young students' awareness of race and skin color. However, as stated in their survey responses, both Katie and Emma were confident that their students did not hold racial biases. Katie believed that her students saw color but did not focus on race, while Emma applied the term "colorblind" to her students, stating that skin color did not matter to them. Both teachers conceived of their students as accepting and believed they thought little about their own or others' skin color.

"We're All Different": Current Practices and Classroom Discussions

Although Emma and Katie reported that they did not have discussions about race with their students, both described using positive messaging and multicultural materials to foster acceptance among their 4K students. Additionally, the teachers aimed to move away from a holiday-focused curriculum and instead, committed to "safe" topics in an effort to be more

culturally responsive. Emma compared the holiday materials at her own children's school to her experiences in the Tyler School district, "[At] my kids' school, they'll come home with Easter bunny [work]... for the most part, it is a white school. We don't do any of that in [Tyler] because there's so many different religions that are not celebrating that kind of thing." She also described her attempts to be inclusive of her Muslim teaching assistant,

[My educational assistant] wears [a hijab] and the kids just have never questioned it. I've drawn a picture before and I drew her with the scarf on and then, we kind of touched base on that, specifically, just like "Oh, well that's, you know, in her culture, you know, something that women wear," and they were... not asking a lot of questions but just like "Oh yeah, she does wear a scarf every day on her head." So... I wouldn't just be like "Oh, I'm going to draw her hair" because we don't see her hair.

Emma and Katie explained that Ramadan was occurring during the time of the interview, which took place shortly after Easter. Emma elaborated, "A lot of the kids in the school do fasting this month as well. I just say, 'Everybody has different beliefs, and some people are fasting this month, which means...' and tell them what it means." Katie described how she shifted children's conversations to honor both holidays,

So now Easter and Ramadan [were] kind of coinciding, so kids were talking a lot about the Easter Bunny, so I would bring those other students in and say "Oh, isn't Ramadan going on right now?" Because they have, at night, family and whatever over. I guess I always just try to really emphasize to them that all families have special things that they do, and that that just depends.

Katie and Emma recognized the religious diversity present in their classrooms and endeavored to make all students and adults feel honored and accepted.

When asked about having race-related conversations with 4K students, both teachers mentioned Martin Luther King Day as the singular time during the year that race was the focus of their teaching. Emma explained, "With Martin Luther King, and talking about how Black children weren't allowed with white children, I always touch on that kind of thing, so they know that's history. But then, it never really goes past that I guess." Katie described how her teaching regarding Martin Luther King has changed as she has gained greater knowledge and perspective about race and racism. She explained,

Five years ago, I saw this activity for Martin Luther King Day, and it was like the brown egg and the white egg, and you crack the eggs and you're like "everybody is different on the outside but the same on the inside." And now, it's pretty taboo to do that lesson because there's so much more that goes into race and your background and your experiences. I feel a little bit like I've learned so much, but I know that there's so much more to learn.

Katie detailed several other ways that her teaching practices have evolved over her career to create a more accepting and welcoming classroom community. For example, she explained, "I stopped doing Dr. Seuss 4 or 5 years ago and people would make fun of me...they thought I was this crazy weird teacher." Reflecting, Katie continued, "And within the last year or so, it has kind of come to light and our secretary asked for pictures from Dr. Seuss Day, and someone had to be like 'yeah, we don't really do Dr. Seuss day anymore.'" In addition to cutting Dr. Seuss' books out of her curriculum, Katie decided to shift her focus away from certain holidays,

I've stopped doing Columbus Day, I don't really do a lot about Thanksgiving. I feel like 15 years ago, or when I taught kindergarten, a lot of our curriculum...was focused around

the holidays. Like the whole month of November, all you did was make turkeys and talked about the Pilgrims and the Indians (sic).

Instead, Katie transitioned to organizing her teaching around children's literature, nature, and dramatic play themes, topics which she considers "safer." She explained that she enjoys designing lessons around a book or particular author. Elaborating on her passion for children's literature, Katie clarified how she selects and uses books to increase students' cultural competence and validate their identities,

I've always tried to use books and things like that that show kids of color doing things that normal kids do. It's not like the trials and tribulations of a child because of their race. It's more like *Jabari Jumps*, do you know that book? Like books where they're doing just normal, everyday things that all kids would do. But then I also do have books like children around the world, and kids from different countries.

Katie also mentioned how she conceives as books as windows or mirrors for her students,

[Books] can be a window because when you look out, you should see things that you don't know. But then you also want books that can be mirrors, so kids can see themselves in the books.

Additionally, Katie focuses themes around nature and animals, rather than social studies topics.

She stated,

To me, it feels safer. I do pretty big themes like we just got done with Pet Shop and so a lot of that was about, you know, like taking care of animals and taking care of making sure that they have food and water and when they're sick they go to the vet.

Realizing that celebrations of holidays and authors like Dr. Suess were not inclusive topics around which to plan lessons, Katie instead centered learning around literature studies that

highlighted diverse authors and illustrators, and natural or community-oriented themes that all her students could relate to.

Katie and Emma also felt like classroom materials helped their students to feel validated and grow comfortable with diversity. Both teachers described their use of multicultural dolls, puzzles, food, and art materials. Emma talked about the crayons in her classroom,

If [students] were to be making a project, they could pick specifically their skin tone. We also have like stacks of paper that are different skin tones too so if they're drawing a picture of themselves, they can use the paper that they feel is closest to them.

Katie appreciated that her materials provided her students with the opportunity to make their own choices, especially about representing themselves through art,

If we're doing a coloring activity... there will be skinny markers, fat markers, crayons, so they always have a choice as to what they're going to use for their art. I always have all the colors of people...and I just feel like in general, like our supplies have gotten so much better with representation.

Katie and Emma provided examples of their messaging around diversity, which emphasized appreciation of individuality. Katie admitted that she kept conversations upbeat, stating, "I don't want to say I sugarcoat it, but I guess I always try to have positivity." Both teachers' comments focused on appreciating and recognizing human differences. Emma provided several examples relating her statements on race and skin color to students' differences in needs or abilities,

I just say "Oh, we're all different. We all have different needs." We have special ed kids that are in our classroom and [I say], "Oh, that's what they need. You have different needs for you as well."

Emma felt that the point of comments like these was to help students “recognize that they’re different and they have different skin colors and... they have to appreciate that with each other, that it’s more fun that we’re all different.” Katie centered her messages around kindness, telling her students “we want to be kind to everyone. And when we do nice things for other people, they do nice things for us. And that everybody has dreams.”

Although both teachers made efforts to respond to the racial and cultural diversity in their classrooms, they largely refrained from discussions about race with their students except on Martin Luther King Day. They made conscious decisions about their curricula, materials, and comments to children, seeking to affirm their students’ identities. Katie, in particular, carefully selected literature to normalize and celebrate diversity. Emma used colorblind messaging, expressing the sentiment that, “I’m special, I’m me, it doesn’t matter what color you are.”

“I Might Get Pushback”: Obstacles and Solutions in Discussions of Race

Emma and Katie conveyed several reasons why they did not directly discuss race with their 4K students, including fear of backlash, a lack of time, and uncertainty about what to say. In addition, both teachers elaborated on the sources of support that might help them overcome these barriers to having race-related conversations. Both teachers taught half-day 4K programs and expressed that with their tight schedules, they didn’t have adequate time to supplement their curriculum with conversations about race. Emma added, “Especially with half-day programs, there’s so much to fit in in the day. It goes so fast. It’s like ‘Oh god, [we] didn’t have time to go outside today’.”

Furthermore, potential reactions from parents were at the forefront of both teachers’ minds. Emma explained, “Because of parents’ beliefs...I don’t want to step on any toes. I don’t want to place anything [on my students] that their parents may not agree with and then end up

having that come back to me in a negative way.” Katie also felt fearful of saying the “wrong thing” and upsetting parents or administrators. She expressed,

With everything that has come to light in the media and all that, I feel like sometimes, things that I might feel are the right thing might be the wrong thing. Because we're kind of ...a strong district... I feel like parents are pretty outspoken. And I always want to have parents and administration on my side and so I wouldn't feel comfortable just going out... and doing something that I didn't know was backed by my district or I felt like I might get pushback from families on. But just the way teachers have been kind of like, I don't want to say attacked, but do you know what I mean?

In an attempt not to upset or offend anyone, the teachers limited their comments about race in the classroom. Emma reflected that racial diversity is now “the world we live in.” She added, having “some of these more basic conversations when they're little, I think is really important.”

However, she explained that not knowing families' viewpoints makes talking about race with students more intimidating. She specified,

It is like a personal thing too... like everyone has their own viewpoints about it. A child could be living with their grandpa... and they might be hearing things from someone who [is] from a totally different era, generation, that could spark thoughts in their mind or make them think a certain way. It would be nice to know specific background knowledge and beliefs of parents. But you know, we don't get that information ever, it is just such a surface level...I think even if you know a family really well, it would never come up.

Due to the current sociopolitical climate where conversations about race are often contentious, both teachers felt unsure about how families might react to the mention of race in the classroom. Katie commented, “trying to keep politics out of the classroom is hard,” recognizing that

conversations about race are politicized. She elaborated with a specific example about a collection of books at her school library,

These are all books about... I don't want to say Black Lives Matter, but these are all diverse books...there's one that's called *Hands Up*...towards the end of the book, it turns into that whole "hands up" with the police and all that. And for me, it just kind of like stopped me, like, well that wouldn't be a book I would really want to share with my students necessarily because I feel like to me that's an adult topic that is so politically charged right now.

Katie called herself a "people pleaser," and stated, "some of those topics should be for families to talk about."

Katie also explained how she did not feel confident talking about race with students without district support or research to support her decisions,

I can back up everything I do in my classroom. Like if you ask me, "why did you read that book?" or "what were they learning when they did this?" I can back every single thing up. But I feel like if I got into sticky topics... I feel like I would have a harder time, because I always want to feel confident that I can back up what I'm teaching. So, I would want specific things that they should be learning before I would address it.

She expanded that she would like to know more about whether conversations about race are developmentally appropriate for four and five-year-old children. Both Emma and Katie commented that race is more of a focus in older grades. Katie disclosed,

I guess I'd like to know the research on it. If we're addressing things in early childhood, if we're addressing things with kids, how do we know what we're saying, if that's the right thing to say?

However, Katie explained that teachers could not be expected to complete this research on their own time, on top of other responsibilities, "I feel like there's only so much time in the day and so much, as teachers, we can look for and find out ourselves."

At the same time, Katie expressed that she "wouldn't even know necessarily how to approach" talking about race with students. Both teachers felt like they were not well prepared to have conversations about race with young children. Discussing her first teaching position at a predominately Hispanic school, Emma reflected, "They never said anything to us about how we should handle talking about race in the classroom." When asked about her teacher preparation program, Katie explained, "I feel like I learned a lot but I don't know how much of it applies now. Back then, it was more about basically just that word *multicultural*."

Emma described several avenues school districts could take to better prepare their teachers to discuss race, including more professional development days focusing on the topic and incentives for taking continuing education classes on race and diversity. Speaking of districts that allow teachers to move up the pay scale in relation to the classes they take, Emma expressed,

I think that would be something I would be interested in doing, if we were like, "Oh you know, I gotta get three more credits this year, what could I do it in? Oh, I could do a class on race." It would help you professionally. I just don't think there's a ton of opportunities to do that.

She also reflected on how current professional development opportunities allow for little discussion of social issues affecting students, stating, "PD days are so data-driven." She added, "[PD content] depends on your principal and your principal's beliefs." Emma recommended that schools provide suggested reading on the topic of race in the classroom or encourage teachers to

make race part of their Professional Practice Goal (PPG) for the school year. She reflected, "It would be really nice to have more support", but added, "I'm not saying to give us more work."

Katie and Emma both spoke of pre-written lesson plans as a possible source of support in facilitating discussions of race with students. The 4K grades at Tyler School District utilize Second Step, a social-emotional program that provides scripted lessons for teachers. Emma explained, "[Second Step lessons] are so written out for you." Making a connection to talking about race, she elaborated, "it would be nicer to have it in a program like that where it is all laid out for you." Similarly, Katie stated "I feel like there should be some type of pre-written lessons." Emma noted that race is "a really challenging topic, especially for a 4-year-old." Tackling such a politicized and highly charged subject in their classrooms felt intimidating to Emma and Katie. They believed that scripted lessons or structured programs would give them the confidence and knowledge needed to address race in their classrooms without the fear of saying the "wrong thing."

Summary

Findings of this inquiry included teachers' conceptions of their students' racial awareness, teachers' current classroom practices regarding race, and their challenges that prevent teachers from discussing race with students. The participants also discussed possible sources of support in broaching the subject of race with young children. These findings reveal that although participants did not think their students held racial biases, their students clearly noticed race and skin color. Furthermore, despite Katie and Emma believing it was important to discuss race with students, they did not often directly address the topic. Instead, the participants demonstrated thoughtful consideration of their classroom environment, language, and curriculum to ensure students felt validated and comfortable with human differences.

Chapter Five: Discussion

The purpose of this research was to illuminate current teachers' perceptions and practices with regard to having conversations about race with young students. Through surveys and interviews with early childhood educators, I sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are early childhood teachers' experiences with having conversations about race with young children?
2. What supports do early childhood teachers have in conversations about race? What challenges or barriers exist?
3. What strategies do early childhood teachers use to facilitate conversations about race in their classrooms?

In this chapter, I will discuss the findings of this inquiry in relation to these research questions, elaborating on the significance of the data. I will also connect Katie's and Emma's beliefs and experiences to the existing literature on teachers' understanding of race and culture in the classroom, young children's awareness of race, and teaching practices involving race and social justice. The findings of this study indicate compelling implications for teacher preparation programs, professional development opportunities, and school leaders. I will conclude this chapter with recommendations for further study and a reflection on the meaning of this investigation.

“The Wrong Thing:” Teachers' Discomfort

Notably, the participants in this study believed that talking to young children about race is important, but neither teacher reported doing so. Both Katie and Emma faced a significant challenge in taking up in these conversations. They expressed that a lack of knowledge and experience led them to feel unconfident confronting the concept of race with young children.

Both teachers were uncomfortable with directly discussing race in their classrooms due to concerns over possible backlash from families or administrators and uncertainty over how to approach these conversations.

The teachers' fear of retribution reflects recent trends in the U.S., where school board meetings have become increasingly confrontational due to parents' concerns over the material taught in schools, especially critical race theory (CRT) (Fortin, 2021). Unfortunately, teachers often receive the brunt of families' frustrations, with some teachers experiencing public shaming or job loss as a result of their classroom decisions. Both participants were aware of current events surrounding race, the politicization of race in the media, and instances of teachers being "attacked" (Katie). Coping with lingering exhaustion from the COVID-19 pandemic and virtual instruction, Katie and Emma hoped to avoid contentious disagreements with parents over their teaching practices. The participants involved in this study were not alone in these fears. In 2016, Vittrup found that almost a quarter of the early childhood and elementary teachers involved in her research listed parent objections and curriculum restrictions as challenges to discussing race with students. Like Katie and Emma, Vittrup's participants expressed concern over negative objections from families who do not agree with conversations about race occurring in school (2016).

Katie noted that it was difficult to keep politics out of her classroom, an inherently difficult feat as "education is a political act" (Schoorman, 2011, p. 341). In an effort to please all stakeholders and stay neutral, the teachers in this study made the choice not to directly engage in conversations about race with their students. While many white teachers and parents adopt the same methods (Pahlke et al., 2012, Vittrup, 2016), the decision not to discuss race with children is a reflection of their ability to step in and out of race-related spaces, a privilege that people of

color do not experience. For example, Emma discussed her interest in taking an elective course on race to further her knowledge of how to talk about race with children. White people *decide* when to engage with race and racism, because they are not personally disadvantaged by their whiteness, nor would they objectively benefit from the end of racial injustice (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Goldstein, 2001). On the other hand, people of color cannot abstain from racism, electing only to confront race when they want to do so. People of color experience the broad reach of systematic racism daily, making race impossible to ignore (Bonilla-Silva, 2015).

Microaggressions, overt discrimination, racial profiling, and unequal access to opportunities and resources are constant reminders of the persistent and systemic marginalization that people of color face in the U.S.

White teachers possess the ability to overlook their race and the race of their students, as they work in institutions where whiteness is upheld as the norm (Goldstein, 2001; Husband, 2010). Teachers who opt to keep conversations about race out of their classrooms or to provide upbeat, colorblind messaging contribute to oppression, despite their best intentions (Boutte, 2008). In fact, Boutte and colleagues (2011) contend that “*anybody* (sic) can contribute to institutional racism unless efforts are taken to avoid doing so” (p. 335). White teachers must realize that the omission of conversations about race in their classrooms is harmful to children, as it allows racism to remain uninterrupted. At the same time, it is important that teachers “distinguish between institutional and individual racism” (Boutte et al., 2011, p. 335) to understand that even “good teachers with good intentions” contribute to racism (Evans et al., 2020, p. 54). When teachers choose to share colorblind messaging, they are ignoring the cultures, histories, and experiences of people of color (Pahlke et al., 2012). The belief that race “doesn’t matter” (Emma) neglects to take into account individuals’ painful and oppressive experiences of

racism. White teachers may fall into a white savior mentality, believing that they are helping their students of color by failing to “see” race or “sugarcoating” (Katie) the ugly truth that racism is endemic in America. However, research shows that race *does* matter to young children (Aboud & Doyle, 1996; Clark & Clark, 1946; Corenblum & Annis, 2007; Doyle & Aboud, 1995; Katz & Kofkin, 1997; Kelly et al., 2007; Ramsey, 1991; Vittrup & Holden, 2011). The practice of ignoring race discounts an integral part of students’ identities and leaves young children to draw their own conclusions about oppressive systems of power and privilege.

“So Much More to Learn”: Teachers’ Growth and Progress

The participants in this study stated that they did not directly talk about race with their students. However, they both recounted several experiences in their classroom involving race, culture, and ethnicity. When considering frameworks like culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and Banks’ model of multicultural education (2008), it is important to note that teachers’ practices exist along a continuum. Although Katie and Emma were not directly confronting issues of social and racial justice with their students, their efforts to create inclusive and culturally relevant learning environments were not meaningless. When teachers take steps like removing holidays or authors with racist histories from their curriculum, expanding conversations to respect students’ diverse experiences, and choosing literature, toys, and art materials that reflect students’ identities, they are creating more culturally relevant learning opportunities.

I argue that the participants in this study had moved beyond the contributions approach of Banks’ model, which involves adding “ethnic cultural components such as holidays” to the current curriculum and often results in a superficial understanding of race and culture (Chung & Miller, 2011, p. 40). Emma and Katie also sought to avoid the additive approach, in which

diverse perspectives are presented as a separate unit of study, distinct from students' experiences (Banks, 2008). Katie was thoughtful in her selection of children's books, ensuring that people of color were portrayed as "normal" (Katie), not as "background characters in someone else's story" (MacNevin & Berman, 2017, p. 836), or noteworthy only because of their race. I believe that both participants were entering into the transformative level, evidenced by their efforts to normalize the diverse perspectives in their classrooms and their cognizance of schools' tendencies to center an Anglo-American point of view (Chung & Miller, 2011). Katie and Emma were careful not to emphasize Easter over Ramadan, understanding that their students' families had different, but equally as important, traditions and celebrations. Katie described her use of children's literature as a window and a mirror, allowing children to see themselves reflected in books while also increasing their cultural competence through exposure to diverse experiences. The decisions that the participants made at this level involved self-reflection and changes to their previous teaching practices, evidenced by Katie's transition to more inclusive themes like nature and animals and away from holidays and authors that center whiteness. Both teachers had not yet reached Banks' social action level (2008), in which students are empowered to resolve social issues, an approach that is often met with the community resistance that Katie and Emma feared (Chung & Miller, 2011).

In consideration of Ladson-Billings' (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy, the participants in this study took up the cultural competence aspect of the work. Katie and Emma strove to make school a welcoming and validating place for their young students. They encouraged students to embrace their identities and cultures, while promoting learning (albeit minimal) about other cultures. However, by focusing only on cultural competence, teachers promote the individual success of their students without disrupting systems of oppression. Ladson-Billings argues that to

prepare today's children for future citizenship in a multicultural world, it is essential to promote critical consciousness, or the ability to recognize and challenge the institutional sources of inequality (1995). Ladson-Billings has noted that many teachers, like Katie and Emma, opt to focus only on cultural competence or academic achievement instead of fostering their students' ability to critique oppressive societal norms, implementing only a narrow version of culturally relevant pedagogy (2014). Teachers' limited awareness of race and dependence on "prescribed curricula" result in those "with good intentions towards the students and [a desire] to embrace culturally relevant pedagogy" to distort Ladson-Billings' central ideas (2014, pp. 77-78). Only when white teachers chose to step out of their comfort zone to confront their own power and privilege, will they create opportunities for their white students to do the same. Examining the dominance of whiteness in American institutions is a necessary step in allowing traditionally marginalized students to succeed in our schools and society, without forfeiting their culture and identities.

For teachers to reach the transformative approach (Banks, 2008) or promote sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995), they must be willing to experience some discomfort and commit to the ongoing work of reflecting on one's practices. While considering the changes she has made to her curriculum over her career, Katie noted, "I've learned so much, but I know that there's so much more to learn." In the words of Ladson-Billings (2014), "culture is always changing" (p. 75), which means the work of educators is never complete. Boutte (2008) recognizes that "many teachers are overwhelmed by the rapidity of changing demographics" (p. 166). However, the task of discussing race with young children does not require early childhood educators to be experts. As long as teachers like Katie and Emma are "open to learning and trying other possibilities," it is acceptable to feel uncertain when

confronting race in the classroom (Boutte et al., 2011, p. 341). Teachers must realize that their personal discomfort is a small price to pay in the fight for racial justice. At the same time, teachers who do not have the experience or the training necessary to feel confident discussing race with students cannot be expected to succeed in the most difficult aspects of this work without practice. All teachers must start somewhere, guided by a pedagogy of care and the understanding that saying nothing at all about race is worse than saying the “wrong thing” (Katie). Boutte and colleagues call on teachers to step outside of their comfort zones and trust that talking about race with children gets easier the more one engages in these conversations (2011). As teachers continue to learn with an open mind and adjust to everchanging nature of our society and our schools, they will grow in their abilities to implement culturally relevant, anti-racist, and socially-just practices in their classrooms.

Implications

Boutte and colleagues (2011) contend that teachers' reluctance to discuss race “does not stem from their unwillingness, but rather from unfamiliarity with the knowledge base and available resources” (p. 335). Many teachers, like Katie and Emma, understand the importance of discussing race with young children, but do not feel well-equipped to venture into these conversations without support or guidance. Furthermore, reluctance to discuss race may come from the belief that young children don't possess racial biases, a common sentiment among ECE teachers despite students' race-driven behaviors (Boutte et al., 2011, MacNevin & Berman, 2017). Although Katie and Emma described multiple instances in which children commented on skin color, they both asserted that race was not important to their students. Similarly, the majority of teachers involved in a study conducted by Vittrup (2016), stated that their students did not possess racial biases, yet 48% of the teachers also reported that they had witnessed their

students exhibit racially biased behaviors. Pre-service and in-service teacher training opportunities have the capacity to 1) address early childhood teachers' misconceptions and unfamiliarity with regard to conversations about race and 2) prepare teachers to feel confident with the sensitive subject matter.

Effective teacher preparation programs should address young children's awareness of race and tendency to hold racial biases, along with early childhood educators' potential to interrupt racism through conversations with their students. Moreover, programs should provide teacher candidates with opportunities not only to learn about other cultures and races, but more importantly, to reflect on their own racial identity. Several researchers have noted that white teacher education students often enter their preparation programs without an awareness of their whiteness or the advantages of their membership to the dominant group (Goldstein, 2001; Picower, 2009). As explained by Ladson-Billings, "Typically, White, middle-class prospective teachers have little to no understanding of their own culture. Notions of Whiteness are taken for granted" (2001, p. 81). White teachers need more than just one class on multicultural education to challenge their previous conceptions of a fair and just society in which all Americans have equal access to opportunities (Picower, 2009). To provide pre-service teachers with a deep understanding of the ways people of color are oppressed by American institutions, including schools, teacher preparation programs must commit to centering critical conscious and social justice in all their courses (Christman, 2010). Teacher educators should provide abundant opportunities for self-reflection across courses, equipping future teachers to consider which students are marginalized and advantaged by their classroom practices. After graduation, teachers still need support in centering social justice in their practices. It is imperative that teacher preparation programs maintain contact with in-service teachers as they begin their

careers, continuing to offer feedback and resources that emphasize a critical lens (Christman, 2010).

Additionally, school districts should not leave the work of developing students' sociopolitical consciousness up to teachers alone. In the current era of fearmongering about the topic of race in schools, teachers need to know they have district support when engaging in discussions about racial justice with students. Emma, in her conversations about professional learning, observed that professional development sessions are often "data-driven," with little concern given to teachers' and students' social justice concerns. Kohli and colleagues (2015) recommend critical professional development (CPD) as a means of engaging "teachers in political analysis of their role as educators in the re-production or resistance of inequality" (p. 11). Instead of top-down, passive PD sessions in which teachers' critical-thinking skills and social-justice attitudes are devalued, critical professional development frames educators as experts on the cultural and societal influences within their school community (Kohli et al., 2015). Districts should recognize the power of education to transform hegemonical structures and enact social justice, and equip teachers with the resources, time, and support they need to take on uncomfortable conversations with their students. Knowing that their administrators believe in the value and necessity of this work will give teachers the confidence they need to engage in conversations about race.

Recommendations for Further Study

An intriguing area for further exploration is the efficacy of curricula and programs that teach about race in early childhood. Both participants explained that scripted lessons would aid them in feeling more confident discussing race with young students. Emma and Katie had experience using the Second Step social-emotional curriculum and appreciated how the weekly

lessons were “laid out for you.” Although a body of scholarly literature centering children in race and social justice has emerged in recent years, early childhood curricula on race is not mainstream at this time. However, highly charged debates currently taking place in many school districts indicate that programs teaching about race would be highly scrutinized by community members concerned with students learning about the reality of racism. In fact, Florida’s education department recently rejected 41% of math textbooks submitted for review, citing concerns over critical race theory (Burnside et al., 2022). As some stakeholders adhere to colorblind mentality grounded in the notion that to teach or talk about racism is itself racist (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Fortin, 2021, Goldstein, 2001), school districts are likely to face backlash in adopting a structured teaching guide on race. Yet, current teachers remain uncertain of how to facilitate race-related conversations with their students and want to know the “right thing” to say. In addition to preparation through teacher education programs and professional development, tangible sources of guidance for teachers ready and willing to take up the work of anti-racist education should exist in the same way that math, literacy, and social-emotional curricula exist. Further research should explore how such programs could be created to effectively generate sociopolitical consciousness in young children while being deemed acceptable forms of education by individuals or groups with diverse belief systems.

Final Reflection

At the time of this writing in May 2022, the U.S. is reeling from a domestic terrorism attack in Buffalo, New York, carried out in a predominately Black neighborhood by a white supremacist. The shooter touted replacement theory online, a racist theory that people of color are a threat to white people’s votes and ultimately, their existence (Jones, 2022). The murders in Buffalo are the latest event in the rise of hate crimes against people of color in recent years

(Burch & Ploeg, 2022). There is no denying that racism subsists in the U.S., evidenced by the words and actions of overt racists and by the subtle language, microaggressions, and covert discriminatory practices of well-intentioned white people. If the centuries-long oppression of people of color is to cease to exist, white people, as members of the dominant group, must first acknowledge the reality of racism and then take action by drawing attention to instances of injustice.

The purpose of this research is to highlight early childhood educators' perceptions and practices with regard to discussing race with children, guided by the recognition that teachers have the power to influence future generations' racial and sociopolitical consciousness. Aligned with a transformative theoretical framework, this study is focused on the potential for today's children, equipped with the ability to resist and critique systems of oppression, to grow into citizens that reject the systemic marginalization of people of color. I encourage teachers, teacher educators, and school districts to heed the call to bring race into the classroom, educating students about equity and fairness, and ultimately contributing a more just future.

The work of an anti-racist educator is not easy, nor is it without discomfort. However, the current state of affairs requires swift action on the part of white Americans. White teachers, many of whom have not yet grappled with their own whiteness and privilege, often don't know what to say about the ills of racism in a country that was founded on justice for all. In reality, a guidebook with specific strategies may not be plausible in a society that is ever-changing. The evolving conditions of life mean that our conversations too must change, adapting to shifting demographics and contemporary means of marginalization. Instead of conceptualizing race as a topic to check off a list, teachers must adopt a dynamic mindset and commit to experiencing discomfort in their practice to tell children the truth about the deleterious systems of power in our

country. To send the message to children that race does not matter does a disservice to the victims of racial oppression, and to our children, who deserve honesty and the opportunity to become critically conscious of injustice. When today's children have the power to recognize and critique sociopolitical realities as unfair and unequal, we can begin to hope for a future in which systematic racism is abolished.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval Letter



Institutional Review Board

uwm.edu/irb
irbinfo@uwm.edu
414-662-3544

Date: April 4, 2022

To: Leanne Evans
Dept: Curriculum and Instruction
CC: Sarah Kubly - Co-Inv (Full Access w/Notify)

IRB #: 22.238

Title: An Examination of Early Childhood Teachers' Perceptions of Teaching Children About Race

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Institutional Review Board has granted your protocol Exempt Status under Category 2 as governed by 45 CFR 46.104(d).

This exemption determination is valid for three years and will expire on **April 3, 2025**. Before the expiration date, you will receive an email explaining how to either keep the study open or close it. If the study is completed before the expiration date, you may notify the IRB by sending an email to irbinfo@uwm.edu.

Any proposed changes to the protocol must be reviewed by the IRB before implementation, unless the change is specifically necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects.

It is your responsibility to:

- promptly report unanticipated problems to the IRB
- maintain proper documentation of study records
- ensure that all study staff receive appropriate training as outlined in the protocol
- adhere to the policies and guidelines set forth by the IRB, UWM, and the UW System, and to all applicable state and federal laws

Contact the IRB office if you have any further questions. Thank you for your cooperation and best wishes for a successful project.

Appendix B

Recruitment Letter

Good Evening,

I would like to invite you to participate in research exploring teachers' perceptions of conversations about race in Early Childhood classrooms. This research will specifically focus on the experiences and beliefs of 4K, 5K, and 1st grade teachers in regards to discussing race with their young students. If you currently teach 4K, 5K or 1st grade and have been a general education teacher for at least two years, you are eligible to participate.

If you would like to participate, you would be asked to complete a ten-minute online survey. In addition, volunteers will participate in one individual interview, which will not last longer than 45 minutes. The interview will take place over Zoom or in-person, at your convenience. I have estimated the time commitment to not exceed one hour total.

Please let me know if you are interested by responding to this email. I look forward to the potential of speaking with you.

Thanks so much for your consideration of this project,

Sarah Kubly

Appendix C

Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN – MILWAUKEE CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

1. General Information

Study Title: An Examination of Early Childhood Teachers' Perceptions of Teaching Children About Race

Person in Charge of Study (Principal Investigators):

PI: Leanne M. Evans, PhD, Associate Professor in Department of Teaching and Learning

Student PI: Sarah Kubly, Graduate Student in Curriculum and Instruction

2. Study Description and Procedures

We're inviting you to participate in a research study. Participation is completely voluntary. If you agree to participate now, you can always change your mind later. There are no negative consequences. Participating in this study is your choice.

Study description:

This qualitative research study will examine the experiences and perceptions of early childhood teachers with regard to talking about race with children. We will collect data through a ten-question survey and an interview with each teacher. We will audio-record the sessions and transcribe the recordings. From there we will code and analyze the data to allow for themes to emerge. Based on these emerging themes, we will shape our findings.

What will I be asked to do if I participate in the study?

You'll be asked to complete demographic information and a ten-question online survey. You will also be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview about your experiences not to exceed 45 minutes.

3. Risks and Minimizing Risks

What risks will I face by participating in this study?

The potential risks for participating are minimal and no greater than meetings, observations, and conversations that exist in the daily lives and classrooms of educators.

4. Benefits

Will I receive any benefit from my participation in this study?

One benefit of this study to the participants is the opportunity to engage in reflective practices that may enhance professional growth.

5. Study Costs and Compensation

Will I be charged anything for participating in this study?

You will not be responsible for any of the costs associated with this research study.

Are subjects paid or given anything for being in the study?

Participants are not compensated for participating in this study.

6. Confidentiality

What happens to the information collected?

All information collected will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. We may decide to present what we find to others or publish our results in scientific journals. Information that identifies you personally will not be released. Only the PI will have access to the information. However, the Institutional Review Board at UW-Milwaukee or appropriate federal agencies like the Office for Human Research Protections may review this study's records.

7. Alternatives

Are there alternatives to participating in the study?

There are no known alternatives available to you other than not taking part in this study.

8. Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

What happens if I decide not to be in this study?

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to take part in this study. If you decide to take part, you can change your mind later and withdraw from the study. You are free to not answer any questions or withdraw at any time.

9. Questions

Who do I contact for questions about this study?

For more information about the study or the study procedures, or to withdraw from the study, contact:

Leanne M. Evans

levans@uwm.edu

Who do I contact for questions about my rights or complaints towards my treatment as a research subject?

The Institutional Review Board may ask your name, but all complaints are kept in confidence.

Institutional Review Board

University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee

414-662-3544

irbinfo@uwm.edu

10. Signatures

Research Subject's Consent to Participate in Research:

To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must check the box line below. If you choose to take part in this study, you may withdraw at any time. By clicking "I consent," you are indicating that that you have read or had read to you this entire consent form (including the risks and benefits), have had all your questions answered, and that you are 18 years of age or older.

Appendix D

Survey Protocol

The survey was administered through a Qualtrics link and the consent form was included at the top of the page. Participants selected a box to signal their consent, and then completed demographic questions followed by the survey. The survey responses will be available to researchers only.

Demographic Information

C. Please select your ethnic/racial group.

_____ American Indian/Alaskan Native

_____ Middle Eastern

_____ White

_____ Asian

_____ Multiracial

_____ Black/African American

_____ Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander

_____ Hispanic/Latinx/Spanish Origin

_____ Prefer not to say

D. Please type your name:

E. Please indicate your age in years:

Survey

F. Please select your response to the following statements.

1. I believe it is important to discuss race with my students.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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2. I believe it is developmentally appropriate to discuss race with my students.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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AN EXAMINATION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS

3. My students notice skin color.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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4. My students hold racial biases.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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5. If I facilitated discussions about race with my students, their families would be supportive.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
----------------	-------	----------	-------------------

6. I have the knowledge and experience to feel confident discussing race with my students.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
----------------	-------	----------	-------------------

7. I discuss race and issues of race with my students.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
----------------	-------	----------	-------------------

8. I have district support in discussing race with my students.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
----------------	-------	----------	-------------------

9. I have the time and resources I need to discuss race with my students.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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10. I have racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse materials in my classroom.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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Appendix E

Interview Protocol

Interviews were conducted after participants had given their consent to participate and completed the online survey. The researcher contacted the participants to set up a convenient meeting time. The interviews took place over Zoom or in-person in the participants' school buildings. The interviews lasted between thirty and forty-five minutes.

Individual Interview Questions

Introduction: Today, you and I will be talking about the topic of race in early childhood education. Anything you share today will be confidential. I will use pseudonyms in my thesis and in any future publications for your name, the district name, and the school name so that you cannot be identified.

Theme 1: Children's Awareness of Race

How would you describe your students' awareness of race and skin color?

Possible Follow Up Questions:

- What experiences have shaped your understanding?
- Can you tell me about a time you observed a student making a comment or asking a question about race?
- What is your understanding of the concept of "colorblindness?" How would you respond to the reasoning that young children are colorblind?

Theme 2: Teachers' Perceptions

What feelings arise for you when talking to children about race?

Possible follow up questions:

- [If participant indicated that they believe talking about race with children is important] Why do you feel it is important to have conversations with young children about race?
- Tell me more about your feelings of [XXX]. Can you provide an example of a time you felt this way?
- How prepared do you feel to have these conversations with your students?

Theme 3: Teachers' Experiences

Have you ever had a conversation with students about race? Can you tell me about that experience?

Possible follow up questions:

- What teaching strategies have you found to be effective in generating conversations about race with students?

AN EXAMINATION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS

- What materials and resources have you found to be helpful in facilitating conversations about race?
- Can you tell me about any other entry points you use to cultivate critical conversations?
- How do you organize conversations about race with regard to when and how it is taught?

Theme 4: Challenges and Barriers

What, if any, barriers/challenges prevent you from discussing race with students?

Possible follow up questions:

- How do you think your students' parents perceive the importance of these conversations?
- How well do you feel your teacher preparation program prepared you to talk about race with children?
- How well does your district support you in talking about race with students?
- Are there supports that do not yet exist that would be helpful for you? Can you describe them? Where would you expect to find these supports?