From *Laissez-Faire* to *Anti-Discrimination*: How are Race/Ethnicity, Culture, and Bias integrated into Multiple Domains of Practice in Early Childhood Education?

Larissa M. Gaias, PhD[a][1]

Diana E. Gal-Szabo, PhD[b]

Eva M. Shivers, PhD[b]

Sharon Kiche, MPH[c]

[a]University of Massachusetts Lowell
Department of Psychology
850 Broadway St
Lowell, MA 01852 USA

[b]Indigo Cultural Center
Phoenix, AZ USA

[c]University of Washington
School Mental Health Assessment, Research, and Training Center
Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences
6200 NE 74th St
Seattle, WA 98115 USA

[1]Corresponding author: Please direct any inquiries or comments to larissa_gaias@uml.edu

Abstract

Pedagogical approaches which aim to counteract discrimination and injustice have been identified as potential ways to reduce pervasive and persistent inequities in education outcomes, which emerge as early as preschool Despite this potential, however, empirical research is limited and suggests a disconnect between recommended practices for counteracting bias in early childhood education and the implementation of such approaches in everyday classrooms. The goal of the present study was to examine the extent to which early childhood education centers who were identified for having an intentional focus on race, culture, and bias actually implemented practices aligned with this approach across five domains of practice: Visual/Aesthetic Environment, Toys and Materials, Activities, Interactions, and Organizational Climate. We conducted classroom observations and focus groups with educators and administrators in five early childhood education centers. Practices within the five domains were interpreted on a continuum from *laissez-faire* to *anti-discrimination* (MacNaughton, 2006). Results demonstrated that educators did not consistently engage in practices consistent with an *anti-discrimination* approach when addressing issues of race and culture. This study provides important insights regarding explicitly addressing race/ethnicity, culture, and bias in early childhood education in a comprehensive and proactive manner with implications for educator training.

Keywords: race; culture; anti-bias, anti-discrimination; qualitative

From *Laissez-Faire* to *Anti-Discrimination*: How are Race/Ethnicity, Culture, and Bias integrated into Multiple Domains of Practice in Early Childhood Education?

Despite initiatives to improve access to and the quality of early childhood education, marginalized students of color, particularly Latinx, Black, and Native American students, continue to demonstrate lower academic skills and are more likely to be expelled and referred to special education classes as early as preschool (Garcia & Zazueta, 2015; Tucker-Drob, 2012; US Departments of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Increasingly, scholars and educators have acknowledged that these disparities stem, to a great extent, from pervasive biases in the US education system. These biases permeate throughout center policies, curriculum, teacher attitudes and beliefs, and classroom norms that reflect the backgrounds, values, and expectations of White, middle-class students and their families (Gilliam et al., 2016; Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005). Consequently, multiple pedagogical and instructional approaches have been developed to integrate a focus on race and culture into early childhood classrooms. Although most of these approaches advocate for explicit attention to be drawn to counteracting individual and institutional biases, as well as to increasing representation for students of color, little is known about the extent to which such practices are integrated into real-world classrooms. The aim of this study is to understand whether the practices being enacted in early childhood centers to address issues of race, culture, and equity are aligned with recommended practices and gold standards for reducing discrimination and counteracting bias.

Addressing Culture, Race, Ethnicity, and Bias in Early Childhood Education

Children develop their own perceptions of social categories and identity from a young age (Patterson & Bigler, 2006). Children's racial prejudice and awareness of racial categories has been found to emerge around age three (see Raabe & Beelmann, 2011 for a review). Although

cognitive developmental psychology suggests that some of these biases may decrease around age seven as children develop concrete and formal operational thinking (Aboud, 1988), evidence shows that many discriminatory behaviors and racially biased attitudes continue long after children reach this cognitive stage (Baron & Banaji, 2006; Doyle & Aboud, 1995; Raabe & Beelmann, 2011). Specifically, research has shown that White children tend to hold more positive attitudes toward other White children, and tend to discriminate against children of color from a young age (Gibson et al., 2015; Pahlke et al., 2012; Raabe & Beelmann, 2011), whereas research on the racial biases of non-White children has demonstrated more mixed findings. In some studies, children of color have not demonstrated preferences for individuals of either their own race or other races (e.g., Griffiths & Nesdale, 2006; Jordan & Hernandez-Reif, 2009; Newheiser & Olson, 2012; Stokes-Guinan, 2011), whereas other studies have shown that children of color demonstrate preferences for White or lighter-skin individuals as compared to individuals of their own racial group (Gibson et al., 2015; Shutts et al., 2011). Together, these findings demonstrate the pervasiveness of racist systems, structures, and individual beliefs that benefit White individuals.

Because children are constructing their own ideologies about race and identity from the messages that are present within their early environments (Park, 2011), researchers, practitioners, and policy makers tend to agree that it is important for early childhood education programs to address these issues. The approaches that early childhood educators take, however, vary greatly in the extent to which they directly address issues of race, human difference, and identity, and explicitly counteract pervasive individual and system-level biases. To capture the variation in these approaches, MacNaughton (2006) advanced a helpful heuristic framework, outlining five broad schools of thought regarding how diversity is addressed in the education of young

children. These schools of thought are arranged on a continuum representing the extent to which they explicitly address diversity and the systems of power that produce educational inequities.

Laissez-Faire. On one end of the continuum is the *laissez-faire* school of thought, where the aim is to treat all students the same, as the cultural majority group would typically be treated. Colorblind attitudes, or the belief that ignoring racial, ethnic, cultural or skin tone differences will foster equality, are inherent to this approach. Educators minimize the role that racial biases play in engendering educational inequity and make no adjustment to their practice according to the backgrounds of their students. However, colorblind attitudes may trivialize the importance of race, ignoring children's unique identity and heritage and perpetuating racial inequity (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Neville et al., 2013; Valli, 1995). Colorblind attitudes can also contribute to children's inability to detect racial discrimination (Apfelbaum et al., 2010), which can maintain racial injustices that are interwoven throughout society (Farago et al., 2019). In the *lassiez-faire* school of thought, learning materials and aesthetics (e.g., textures, styles, colors, sounds) reflect mainstream values. Traditional stereotypes regarding race, gender, and family structure are reinforced through imagery, programming, expectations, and language. Children are assumed to experience their classrooms in the same way, so they are not provided with the opportunity or encouraged to share their diverse perspectives or experiences.

Special provisions. Next on the continuum is the *special provisions* school of thought which recognizes differences between students but aims to provide specialized or separate educational facilities or programs in order to address these differences and to "normalize" the students so they are better able to fit into the mainstream context. This approach is often referred to as a deficit approach, because differences are perceived as deficits that need to be fixed according to the norms and values of the cultural majority instead of placing the onus of

responsibility on the school to address the needs or backgrounds of all students. In this school of thought, educational structures are not critically examined for the ways that they perpetrate inequities and systems of power are maintained and expected to be adhered to even if they do not address the needs of diverse students. In the *special provisions* school of thought, images and materials emphasize sameness and demonstrate how all children can appear, speak, think, and act in the same ways. Unlike the *laissez faire* school, differences are discussed, addressed, and even validated in the *special provisions* schools, but program activities, interactions, and policies are designed to encourage children to "overcome" their differences in order to achieve the norm.

Cultural understandings. In the *cultural understandings* school of thought, racial, ethnic, and cultural differences are recognized, but are celebrated only in superficial ways that often tokenize a group and present stereotypical representations of their backgrounds and identities. The classroom still centers on mainstream norms, but some attention to diversity is integrated sporadically. Learning materials and aesthetics promote cultural tourism where toys and materials reflecting the non-dominant cultural group are presented primarily in special ethnic displays and activities instead of being integrated into the everyday environment. When non-dominant cultures are displayed during special occasions, events, or projects, these activities are focused on stereotypical or tokenistic food, clothing, language, or holidays. No deeper attention is given to the history, values, and identity of, or heterogeneity within, that group. In this approach, individuals from non-White backgrounds are exoticized, highlighting the aspects of their identities that are "foreign" and different from the norm (Eidoo et al., 2011).

Equal opportunities. The fourth school of thought, *equal opportunities*, recognizes that some students experience systematic barriers to accessing opportunities, such as high-quality early childhood, which engenders inequities. Thus, the aim of the *equal opportunities* school of

thought is to remove practice and policy barriers that prevent students from accessing early childhood education. The goal is for all students to be involved and included equally in all aspects of a program, and to have equal access to resources, regardless of their background. In the *equal opportunities* school of thought, children are viewed as passive learners who absorb social messages and values; thus, educators promote messages of equality and inclusion throughout the program activities and environment. The classroom is saturated with diverse images and materials that promote equality, so children are able to absorb positive cultural messages and view diverse individuals as equal. Educators model non-stereotypical and inclusive language to validate students' diverse experiences and perspectives. There is also an emphasis on recruiting staff members who reflect diversity in gender, race, culture, and disability, which in and of itself transmits anti-discriminatory messages. Although positive messages regarding diversity and inclusion are socialized through the *equal opportunities* approach, children are not active meaning makers in this socialization and are not taught to actively resist discrimination.

Anti-discrimination. Finally, the *anti-discrimination* school of thought recognizes and explicitly aims to challenge the power relationships that create and sustain inequities in education. This approach not only intends to change practice and policy in order to challenge existing power structures, but also aims to empower all children to champion diversity and challenge discrimination. As in the *equal opportunities* school of thought, classroom images and materials promote positive messages regarding diversity and inclusion. However, in the *anti-discrimination* school, more emphasis is placed on children's understanding of their own and others' identities, so classroom environments meaningfully reflect the backgrounds and perspectives of the students themselves. In addition, messages that explicitly and proactively counteract discrimination and oppression are communicated both verbally and visually.

Activities, interactions, and policies allow children to participate in decision-making based on their understanding of the world and their place within it.

Applying the Anti-Discrimination School of Thought to Early Childhood Education Practice

  Pedagogical approaches. Multiple pedagogical approaches emphasize the importance for early childhood educators to engage in practices that are consistent with the *anti-discrimination* school of thought. For example, the Anti-Bias Education approach (Derman-Sparks, 1989; Derman-Sparks & Olsen-Edwards, 2010), developed specifically for the early childhood context, celebrates students' identities, including their similarities and differences across a range of biological and social dimensions, and views children as active change agents who can counteract stereotyping and discrimination from a young age. Other scholars, however, have critiqued Anti-Bias Education for its limited focus on systems of oppression, white supremacy, and power and privilege (Escayg, 2019). Escayg's (2018) Anti-Racist Education framework centers the role of institutional systems of oppression, as opposed to individual biases, and affords racism and White privilege primacy, as opposed to combining race with other social identities (e.g., gender, religion, sexuality, socio-economic status). In Souto-Manning's (2013) discussion of Multicultural Education in early childhood settings, she advocates for education to reject deficit perspectives and eradicate teaching practices that are not inclusive of multiple perspectives. Finally, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), although not developed specifically for the early childhood context, advocates for high expectations for students' academic success, the appreciation and celebration of students' cultural backgrounds and gaining knowledge in other cultures, and fostering sociopolitical consciousness by actively questioning and challenges injustices with children. More recently,

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, extends culturally responsive pedagogy to ensure more fluid representations of color and enhance intersectionality (Paris, 2012). Although these pedagogical approaches differ in their scope, focus, and terminology, they all share common elements aligned with the *anti-discrimination* school of thought. They all outline recommendations for how educators can move beyond colorblind ideologies, deficit models, and surface-level representation of diversity in their classrooms by explicitly addressing bias and challenging systems of injustice in their practice. In the current study, we do not aim to evaluate practices according to a specific pedagogical or curricular approach; our goal is to explore how educators address race and racism within their classrooms and center and how their practices align with the principles of the anti-discrimination school of thought, which can be seen throughout multiple pedagogies.

Previous research. Although these pedagogical approaches have been well-established and defined in early childhood, with extensive development of both theoretical writing and handbooks/practice guides, empirical research has primarily focused on kindergarten through postsecondary settings or on pre-service teachers. Two systematic reviews of over 40 studies examining culturally responsive pedagogy found strong evidence of both implementation as well as important implications for student outcomes (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Morrison et al., 2008), but only two studies in each review were conducted in early childhood settings. Most research conducted in early childhood has focused on transforming the training of pre-service educators (e.g., Kidd et al., 2008; Souto-Manning et al., 2019) or has examined practices related to a specific content domain, such as literacy development (Purnell et al., 2007), as opposed to the center's overarching approach. Similarly, some research has only examined anti-discrimination approaches in early childhood education settings by capturing the presence of

multicultural classroom materials or the representation of individuals (e.g., students, teachers) from diverse backgrounds (Gaias et al., 2018; Sanders & Downer, 2012; Sylva et al., 2003, 2006). Although the diversity amongst people and materials within early childhood classrooms has been shown to impact children's racial biases and development more broadly (Gaias et al., 2018; Sammons et al., 2002; Sanders & Downer, 2012), these studies are unable to examine the usage of such classroom materials or the interactions students might have with one another or with teachers directly regarding race, bias, and prejudice.

Previous research that has documented classroom processes aligned with the *anti-discrimination* school of thought in early childhood has found that educators often struggle to address the racial, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds of their students and explicitly counteract racism and discrimination in their classrooms. In one ethnographic study examining culturally responsive practice in early childhood (Durden et al., 2015), identified multiple missed opportunities for educators to incorporate the diverse backgrounds of students into their instructional practices in a proactive and intentional manner. Similarly, Van Ausdale & Feagin (1996) observed 370 significant episodes over the course of 11 months (~1-3 episodes per day) directly involving issues of race or ethnicity, suggesting that these topics are common amongst young children. However, teachers tended to ignore children's comments or discussions regarding race, culture, and ethnicity, and avoided addressing race or racism in response to incidents of discrimination.

These findings are consistent even for educators who received training in anti-discrimination approaches and who conducted their work with the explicit goal to engage in such an approach in their program or classroom. For example, in one investigation, six early childhood directors and 20 teachers received anti-bias training through workshops, conferences,

reading articles, and discussing their practices; however, many still utilized a colorblind (i.e., *laissez-faire*) or tokenistic (i.e., *cultural understandings)* approach in their classrooms (Bullock, 1996). Similarly, in a case study of two teachers who were part of a professional development support group focused on diversity and anti-bias education in early childhood, Farago (2017) described a situation in which a teacher ignored a student's observation that children in a book who were using chopsticks or playing with a piñata "don't look like us." When a black boy exclaimed, "'Police officers kill people. Police officers are bad,'" the same teacher also responded stating "'Police officers are good…Wouldn't you call a police officer if you were trouble?'" (pg. 26). This negated the boy's perspective, instead of engaging him in a conversation regarding how he is processing ongoing current events that relate to his own racial background and identity. Farago (2017) describes these situations as missed opportunities for a teachable moment, where educators could build off students' own observations and experiences to discuss race and racism in society and empower them to counteract discrimination in the classroom and beyond.

Domains of Practice in Early Childhood Learning Environments

As mentioned above, most research that has explored how race/ethnicity, culture, and bias are integrated within early childhood classrooms has either focused on particular content areas or on a specific domain of practice. However, the pedagogical approaches that are consistent with the *anti-discrimination* school of thought call for integrated approaches that span across domains of practice. In fact, scholars have outlined multiple observable domains of anti-discrimination practices that impact child outcomes, namely organizational climate, curriculum/activities, everyday practices/interactions, the aesthetic environment, and classroom materials. (Shivers & Sanders, 2011). Each of these elements of the early learning environment

play a role in impacting the messages children receive about race/ethnicity and culture and the extent to which pervasive biases are counteracted.

The *organizational climate* embodies the intent or mission of a program that dictates the overarching climate, the ways that children and families are supported, policies surrounding communication, and training opportunities for educators; program-wide practices provide a cohesive message regarding how issues of race/ethnicity, culture, and bias are addressed in the center overall impacting children's experiences within their center (Sanders et al., 2007; Wishard et al., 2003). Within individual classrooms, the *curriculum/activities* that teachers facilitate can help children understand and appreciate their own and others' identities, backgrounds, beliefs, and values. Teachers can also proactively integrate lessons regarding justice, discrimination, equity, and bias into children's early learning (Ray, 2000). Similarly, *interactions* that occur within the early learning environment, primarily between teachers and children, but also amongst children, amongst staff, or between teachers and families, provide critical socialization regarding the norms surrounding discussing or resolving issues related to race/ethnicity, culture, or other aspects of identity (Bernhard et al., 1998; Farago et al., 2015; Husband, 2012). Finally, the classroom *aesthetic environment and materials* let children know what is valued and important; through their consistent presence and availability within the classroom, such materials can either remind children of persistent stereotypes regarding their own or others' identity or can counteract them on a regular basis (Sylva et al., 2003). By systematically documenting how an *anti-discrimination* approach is integrated throughout the various domains that impact a child's experience within their classroom or center, the current study can provide a comprehensive understanding of how early childhood centers incorporate a focus on race/ethnicity, culture, and

bias. Thus, in the current study we evaluate practices across five domains of practice –

organizational climate, activities, interactions, toys and material, visual/aesthetic environment

Current Study

Previous literature suggests that there is a disconnect between practices outlined in the

pedagogical approaches consistent with the *anti-discrimination* school of thought and the

implementation of these practices in every day early childhood education centers. The current

study builds off this literature by documenting the extent to which centers who were identified as

having an intentional focus on race, culture, and bias adhere to the principles of the *anti-

discrimination* school of thought. We intentionally chose such centers, because as compared to

the general population of centers, we would expect them to better adhere to anti-discrimination

approaches. Thus, areas of weakness that emerge within these settings may highlight particular

challenges for early childhood education overall, whereas strengths may indicate recommended

first steps for centers who have not yet incorporated any focus on race, ethnicity, and bias.

Our analysis and interpretation of the practices we document is guided by

MacNaughton's (2006) heuristic framework, identifying where they may fall on the continuum

from *laissez-faire* to *anti-discrimination* approaches. Although this paper uses a similar

qualitative approach to previous studies, we contribute above and beyond this prior literature by

systematically capturing multiple domains of practice and applying a well-defined framework to

discuss practices. Whereas some previous research has focused on a particular domain of

practice, we aimed to gather a holistic understanding of children's early learning environments

across five domains of practice: organizational climate, visual/aesthetic environment, toys and

materials, activities, interactions. In addition, we gather data from both teachers and individual

classrooms, as well as from administrators. While teachers can provide insight regarding

specific, day-to-day interactions that occur within classrooms and with specific children, administrators can provide an understanding of the overarching climate and vision regarding equity for the center, as well as discuss incidents with specific teachers or children that may have required administrator attention. The policies, procedures, and systems that administrators put in place impact children's experiences within their early learning environment both directly and indirectly through expectations and supports for teacher practice (Bustamante et al., 2009; Scanlan & López, 2012). For example, administrators may choose to implement a standard curriculum, determine required professional development, or facilitate feedback processes, all of which can impact teachers' interactions with students within their individual classrooms (Bryk et al., 2010). Previous research has found significant correlations between center-wide and teacher-level practices in early childhood education programs designed to serve low-income children and families of color; in this research, together these practices were able to be meaningfully combined into four broader groups of practices, which then were associated with positive child behavior (Wishard et al., 2003).

Our approach provides a comprehensive view of whether and how teachers and administrations are engaging in an *anti-discrimination* approach in all aspects of an early child education program. Mapping our observations onto MacNaughton's (2006) continuum provides insight not only into the gold standard of *anti-discrimination* approaches, but also enhances our understanding of the practices that fall short of this approach. By characterizing practices that are and are not consistent with an *anti-discrimination* school of thought, we provide a more nuanced understanding of how early childhood educators engage with issues of race, culture, diversity, and equity. This provides information for how to best improve current practices that do not explicitly counteract bias and injustice in early childhood education. For example, training needs

likely differ if teachers are engaging in practices consistent with a *laissez-faire*, as opposed to a *cultural understanding*, school of thought.

Methods

The goal of the present study was to examine how practices enacted in early childhood education to address issues of race, culture, and equity across five domains (i.e., visual/aesthetic environment, toys and materials, activities, interactions, organizational climate) are aligned with best for reducing discrimination and counteracting bias. To achieve this aim, this study engaged in a qualitative triangulation of data approach (Flick, 2004) utilizing multiple informants and data sources. We triangulated data from naturalistic observations, focus groups, and interviews in order to understand the extent to which early childhood education centers engaged in practices aligned with the anti-discrimination school of thought. Data triangulation ensured that the themes that emerged within the centers were not only limited to a certain informant (teachers or administrators) and were not biased by the limitations of a certain form of data collection (interviews, focus groups, observations). Triangulation enhances the both the integrity and the quality of the inferences that might be drawn from a single source (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). By applying classical content analysis (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007) to the triangulated data across data sources and across centers, we were able to identify commonalities in practices across centers and understand how practices within each domain aligned with MacNaughton's (2009) continuum.

Participants. Recruitment was conducted initially through a community scan focused on capturing knowledge and beliefs regarding anti-bias practices of early childhood educators (Author Citation, 2014). An online survey was distributed to child care teachers and administrators through two state-wide listservs. Because we were interested in observing

exemplary anti-bias education practices in real world settings, respondents from non-profit centers who indicated that culture, diversity, and race was a direct and intentional focus of their program's practices and policies were screened for participation in the study. However, after gathering more information regarding each center's programming from their websites and local ECE experts, and contacting directors to gauge interest, only one center was recruited into the study. Given the dearth of participants recruited from the community scan, we turned to nominations from community members that were well connected to local ECE programs (e.g., consultants, trainers, organizers, agency directors) for additional recommendations of centers who demonstrated intentionality regarding race, diversity, ethnicity, and culture in their practices and policies. Through these nominations, we were able to recruit four additional centers for the study. Although we had originally aimed to recruit centers based on their use of specific pedagogical approaches consistent with an *anti-discrimination* school of thought (e.g., anti-bias education, culturally responsive/sustaining care), this proved to be restrictive. Educators did not identify as prescribing to any particular approach and were more likely to discuss their practices regarding race, culture, and diversity more broadly. Our final sample of five centers represented a diverse group of programs throughout Arizona. See Table 1 for complete profiles of each center, compiled from administrator reports, highlighting the diversity of child, teacher, and staff demographics within the sample.

Procedure. Participating administrators were asked to consent to a one-hour interview regarding how the goals of their center address diversity, equity, bias, race, or culture and to complete a short demographic survey regarding the population of the students and staff at their center and other notable characteristics (e.g., type of center, location, accreditation status). Administrators were also asked to recommend two classrooms in their center whose teachers

best reflect these goals and practices. Once teachers were recruited, they consented to a semi-structured group interview regarding their how they address diversity, equity, bias, race, or culture in their classroom practices and one three-hour naturalistic observation in their classroom, which began in the morning when the center opened during parent drop-off. One observation was conducted in each of the participating teachers' classrooms, during which a researcher took field notes on the physical and social environment, daily activities, and interactions between students and their peers and teachers as they relate to diversity, equity, bias, race, or culture.

We conducted the administrator interviews first. The classroom observations were conducted next, before the teacher interview, so our conversations did not bias the educators' performance or behavior in their classroom before the observation. At the beginning of the interviews/focus groups, the interviewer defined what constituted an approach consistent with the *anti-discrimination* school of thought to establish a shared understanding of the practices we were hoping to explore; however, we also allowed educators to share any approaches they used to address diversity, equity, bias, race, or culture in their center or classroom. The interviews/focus group began with broad questions that allowed participants to brainstorm any goals or strategies they use in their classrooms or centers to ensure that we were capturing any and all practices that educators might employ. We then probed for any specific practices they employed within the five *a priori* identified domains. Administrators received $75 worth of education materials that addressed race and equity for their centers and teachers received $20 as compensation for their time.

Data analysis. The ten interview transcripts (administrator and teacher interviews from each of the five centers) were imported into and coded with Dedoose, an online software package

for analyzing qualitative and mixed methods research. We engaged in classical content analysis to capture themes within our data and then describe how frequently each theme emerged (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). Our coding protocol followed DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch's (2011) system by coding at the "level of meaning," where each code could include any number of lines, sentences, or paragraphs as long as the unit conveys meaning separate from the context of the full interview. It was possible to have multiple codes per excerpt or excerpts coded within excerpts, as long as the content of each excerpt could stand alone without additional context needed. Team members completed systematic training by learning the definition of each code and practicing coding in Dedoose on two of the transcripts (one teacher and one administrator interview from different centers) until they reached adequate inter-rater reliability (kappas >.80; Cohen, 1960). Due to the small number of transcripts, two team members double coded all of the transcripts in order to ensure inter-rater reliability throughout the coding process. The team members came to consensus regarding any disagreements.

The first round of codebook development and coding was to capture primary codes, which represented the five *a priori* domains of practice (Shivers & Sanders, 2011): visual/aesthetic environment, toys and materials, interactions, activities, organizational climate. After the transcripts were coded for these primary codes, the research team recoded material and identified themes or secondary codes within each of the five domains. Two members of the research team independently read through each of the excerpts that was coded within a particular domain and identified recurring distinct themes. The two members then came to consensus on a set of themes/secondary codes. After the final codes were determined, the codes and their definitions were added to the codebook. This revised codebook was used to code all text within each of the five domains for the presence of each theme.

The field notes from the classroom observations were then examined to see if any additional themes emerged that had not been captured by the focus group transcripts. Given that there were no additional themes, the field notes were analyzed for the presence of the codes derived from the transcripts. The field notes categorized under each code were integrated with transcript excerpts that shared the same codes for the purposes of analysis and interpretation.

Results

Coding revealed the presence of the five domains (i.e., visual/aesthetic environment, toys and materials, interactions, activities, organizational climate) across the majority of focus groups and field notes (Table 2). All of the five domains were mentioned in each of the 10 transcripts, except Visual/Aesthetic Environment, which was mentioned in 7 of the 10. Similarly, all of the domains were observed in all five of the centers' classrooms, except Organizational Climate, which was observed in three of the five. All of the secondary codes were mentioned in at least half of the focus groups, with the exception of Other/General under Activities and Instructional under Visual/Aesthetic Environment. However, both of these codes were observed in at least half of the classrooms, so they warranted inclusion into the final codebook. Overall, the data demonstrated that the codes were observed frequently and were well-represented from a variety of data sources at a variety of centers (see Table 2). This increased our confidence that the phenomena we were documenting were not isolated to a single context or environment.

Below, we describe the ways in which the five centers incorporated a focus on diversity, equity, bias, race, or culture into the five domains of practice. We then interpret with which school-of-thought the practices are most aligned. Figure 1 demonstrates the extent to which we observed practices aligned with each school of thought within each domain, with darker shading representing more consistent and frequent implementation of a certain school of thought. It is

important to note that although our study focused on race and cultural diversity, educators often

discussed gender, family structure, or socio-economic status as part of these conversations. Thus,

our results do incorporate educators' practices regarding how they addressed issues of other

social identities in the classroom.

Visual/Aesthetic Environment. Educators incorporated culture, race/ethnicity, and

diversity into the visual/aesthetic environment of their centers in two unique ways. First, in all

but one classroom, teachers displayed images or items that directly reflected the families,

histories, or backgrounds of children in the classroom, such as family pictures, name stories, and

permanent cultural displays. Two classrooms included elements of Latinx culture (i.e., piñata

hanging from the ceiling, casita in the home play area) embedded as permanent structures in the

classroom environment. Such visual/aesthetic elements were also apparent in the centers overall

– in hallways, entranceways, and program materials. Educators described the importance of

incorporating students' own backgrounds and identities into the center and classroom

environment, so that the learning environment mirrored students' homes and communities. One

administrator stated,

> If we're creating a learning environment for children, then it has to be an
> environment that supports who they are. And that's not who we're making them as
> they walk in the building. That's how we're extending their life at home into the
> school.

The inclusion of images that reflect students' own backgrounds is consistent with *anti-*

discrimination school of thought, by allowing children to see themselves as equals within their

classroom and society.

Second, most teachers (80%) also displayed instructional materials (e.g., posters, labels,

art, and imagery) that reflected diverse groups of society in non-stereotypical roles, even in

homogenous classrooms. These materials included posters teaching feelings, colors, and

numbers that included pictures with children of different races. A sign in the bathroom of one classroom reminding children to wash their hands included images of both white and brown hands. In addition, multiple classrooms had bilingual (English/Spanish) labels. Educators viewed these visual materials as ways to teach children about cultures, identities, and backgrounds that may not be reflected in the classroom and provide stories that might extend beyond their personal experiences. For example, one teacher discussed,

> bringing in like pictures of like the outside world of like I don't know, like when you see a woman who's a mechanic or just different things and just bringing them into your classroom so that the kids are aware that it's not just mechanics are boys and not just monster truck drivers or race car drivers are boys.

These materials display diverse identities, often in a counter-stereotypic manner, and thus socialize positive messages regarding diversity and inclusion consistent with the *equal opportunities* and *anti-discrimination* schools of thought; however, few materials included explicit messaging regarding counter-stereotyping or anti-discrimination.

Toys and Materials. The toys and materials code refers to manipulatives available in the classroom with which children can directly interact that address culture, race/ethnicity, and diversity, whether they were actively used as part of the curriculum for specific activities or if they were present in the environment for students to engage with during free play. The toys and materials included art materials, books and pictures, clothing, food, manipulatives, and other general classroom materials (e.g., blocks). In all classrooms, toys and materials that aimed to represent children's racial and cultural identity were available, including multicultural baby dolls and puppets with varying skin tones, crayons or paints that children could use to match their own skin tone, maps with pins representing students' heritages or ancestries, and books that included characters from diverse and non-White backgrounds. In one classroom, we observed White boys reading books with black, female main characters on their own, indicating that students were

interested and encouraged to learn about the experiences of others. One classroom included a family museum, where students' displayed family trees, family puppets, and family photos. Books were used to discuss various cultural and racial identities. For example, "What is Race?" teaches children about racial differences, and "I am America" demonstrates the diversity of identities that are represented within the United States and are considered American. These toys and materials normalize diversity and provide students with opportunities to explore and express their own identities and learn about those of others, consistent with the goals of the *anti-discrimination* school of thought.

Second, toys and materials that represented specific cultural elements were integrated into the classroom, often via food, clothing, or language. Some classrooms would have various utensils or appliances (e.g., chopsticks, rice steamers) in their kitchen play areas and parents would be invited to bring in a food (e.g., tacos, sushi, and various fruits) that represented their cultural background. Many educators discussed bringing in specific items for certain holidays (e.g., menorahs for Passover, sugar skulls for Cinco de Mayo) that students were celebrating, in addition to having every-day materials available regularly in the classroom. Most educators discussed the importance of having items that reflected the students' cultural backgrounds regularly available as part of the learning environment, so children saw themselves represented in the classroom and would grow accustomed to the diversity in customs across different groups. When elements of students' cultural backgrounds were included in the day-to-day processes of the classroom, these environments reflected the *equal opportunities* and *anti-discrimination* schools of thought by celebrating diversity and children's identities.

In a few classrooms, however, it was clear that toys and materials reflecting students' cultural backgrounds were *primarily* included as part of special occasions, events, or activities,

reflecting the *cultural understandings* school of thought. In this school of thought, toys or

displays that attempt to showcase cultural elements of certain groups can provide a superficial

and stereotypical understanding that ignores heterogeneity within the group. This can also ignore

the ways in which students make their own meaning of cultural elements, and present diversity

as a contrast to dominant, mainstream norms as opposed to a beneficial aspect of everyday

society. This critique was summarized by one administrator's concern with only demonstrating a

dedication to issues of diversity, race, and culture through the use of toys and materials.

> When we very first went for NAEYC accreditation we lived diversity we, you know, we include everybody we have all kinds of kids all kinds of parents all kinds of teachers and we got cited and they gave us $100 so we could go out and buy plastic tacos and plastic sushi. I said, are you kidding me. We make our own tortillas. So I get really like all this like purposeful, you know, you know, you're not diverse unless your baby dolls are different colors and your plastic food comes from so many different countries and all the manufactured diversity I think it, I have a problem with it. I mean I have a problem that people count out that stuff and say here is a diverse center with all the diverse materials as opposed to looking at who the children and the parents and the teachers are and what they're actually doing.

Activities. Activities describe the classroom experiences designed for full-class or small-

group instruction or play that address culture, race/ethnicity, and diversity. Teachers facilitated

some activities that explicitly incorporated the background or identity of their students, such as

activities related to cultural practices, holidays, identity awareness, and family involvement.

These activities often utilized toys and materials that were described above, and similarly reflect

a combination of the *cultural understandings, equal opportunities,* and *anti-discrimination*

schools of thought. Some activities were proactively designed so children would have the

opportunity to pursue their own interests during free play with toys and materials that would

allow them to explore their own identities or learn about elements of diverse cultural groups. For

example, educators described hosting events for certain cultural holidays (e.g., Ramadan,

Chinese New Year, and Passover), where families or center staff would bring in specific food,

toys, or clothing that are traditionally used for that holiday. Families would also be invited to read books about their cultural heritage, as a way to personalize students' exposure to various backgrounds. In addition, many educators described activities where students would create self-portraits, puppets, or other images where they would have the opportunity to express their identity using art materials that reflected a range of skin tones. In many classrooms, students and teachers sang songs and read books in both English and Spanish.

Most educators, however, facilitated activities regarding skin color and racial/ethnic differences only in response to students' questions about the differences amongst themselves. When one teacher was asked about whether she designed any classroom activities explicitly to counteract stereotypes or discuss differences amongst students, she responded,

> No we usually like sometimes it comes about like the children… Just the other day a child was asking why my skin was lighter than theirs. So like we definitely, especially when it comes from the kids we definitely wanna encourage that language and building onto it and talking about it. Letting 'em know like it's okay everybody's different. So we kinda did a little a little lesson. Even though I'm just recent to this school I did a little lesson with them and we were talking about everybody's skin color.

These activities do serve to increase self-awareness and positive social identities as well as comfort with human diversity, two primary goals of the *anti-discrimination* school of thought; however, the reactive nature of these activities signals that they are not regularly or intentionally incorporated into children's experiences, and are only addressed when they arise based on student interest and curiosity. Therefore, there are likely missed opportunities for proactively ensuring that children can recognize unfairness and be empowered to counteract injustice.

In addition to activities where children were able express their identities or learn about various cultures, educators described activities that encouraged student cooperation to work together and build their student group or community. One center's administrators and teachers described how children in classrooms eat meals together family style, where a respectful

environment is established for students to discuss their personal experiences, learn from each other's differences, and practice sharing and cooperation. In these classrooms, each child's family photos were passed out during mealtime, so each child could "eat with their family" and share their family with the other students. A teacher from another center described a community time where teachers and students come together to problem solve regarding conflicts that may have arisen due to differences between children. Multiple teachers described grouping or pairing children who differ on various characteristics (e.g., race, gender, personality) for activities, so they learn to work together with diverse others. In most, but not all, classrooms, emphasis was placed on students solving problems amongst themselves before coming to a teacher. Consistent with the *equal opportunities* school of thought, educators provide students with opportunities to be involved in all activities, work together, and learn from one another, emphasizing their equality with strengths-based conversations and validating individual experiences and perspectives.

Although many educators described various activities that encouraged children to work together despite their differences, only one administrator spoke explicitly about race or culture in this context. This administrator described an activity where children build a community, where they decide which institutions to include (e.g., banks, schools) and can choose what their role would be within their community. This administrator noticed that the children were often choosing roles based on societal representations of their racial or ethnic background. Whereas the White children would choose more "powerful" or "professional" roles such as bankers, the Latino children would often opt, or be instructed by their peers, to take jobs such as landscapers or construction workers. The administrator discussed the need to find ways to reduce discrimination and stereotyping amongst students, without minimizing the role that working-

class jobs, which many of the Latino students' parents held, play in the community. This same administrator described developing a pen pal program between her center's students and another center whose student population was very different racially and socio-economically from her own. She warned, however, about the need for careful facilitation of such "exchange" activities, so that they did not foster alienation or discrimination between the diverse student groups or engender shame amongst less privileged children. These activities addressed issues of power and inequality in a manner consistent with the *anti-discrimination* school of thought. The administrator recognized the need to address and counteract power structures that emerged within her students and between her center and another; however, it is unclear the extent to which this knowledge was passed on to teachers and students, and whether students were then equipped to challenge bias and discrimination themselves.

Interactions. Interactions were coded to represent how educators' direct communication with children, other educators, and parents addressed culture, race/ethnicity, and diversity. Most often interactions referred to educators' reactions to children's questions or conflicts in the classroom. In some of these situations, children simply stated differences that they were noticing, such as skin color, eye shape, or religious garments. Teachers most often responded by acknowledging those differences and stating that differences were acceptable. When these statements were related to language or nationality, but not race, teachers used them as an opportunity for students to dive deeper and learn about their differences. When these statements were related to gender (e.g., "She can't play with us because she's a girl"; "He can't wear that dress!"), teachers encouraged students to include one another in activities and reminded children that they could play with whatever toys and materials they would like. Teachers often tried to find examples of individuals who may defy stereotypical notions of a certain identity (e.g.,

images of a female police officer) in cases of gender-based exclusion or stereotyping.

In instances directly related to race, however, educators often ignored the racialized nature of these incidents. For instance, both administrators and teachers described situations where students segregated themselves according to race or skin tone (i.e., forming a brown club and a white club) and incidences where a student claimed that they hated or didn't want to play with students of a certain race. In many of these situations, educators ignored the racialized nature of these incidents and worked with students to find common interests besides their differences in race/ethnicity, language, or skin color. These responses reflect colorblind practices, characteristic of the *laissez-faire* school of thought, where racial differences, and the power structures in which they are embedded, are minimized or ignored. By ignoring race, children are not equipped to recognize discrimination or act against prejudice. Although it is important for children to identify commonalities amongst themselves, it is also important for children to understand that their peers may have differential experiences on the basis of their race/ethnicity. Teachers who did actively address race in these instances most heavily relied on using books to teach children about race or other cultural differences.

Consistent with the *laissez-faire* school of thought, educators expressed discomfort addressing incidents that dealt directly with race. One teacher stated that she encouraged students "to figure out the answer" when they have questions about skin color and race. When one administrator discussed a situation in which a child stated that they refused to play with people who are Black, she stated:

> We chose not to make a big deal of that because we really didn't want him to become… They were pretty young to really understand in a big way what they were really, the diversity issue so it was probably better not to make a big deal of it.

When race was addressed explicitly, it was done so by a single teacher, who herself was of a

non-White background. In response to the incident above, one assistant teacher

> brought the issue to a head and made and we've done numerous art projects that have had to do with differences different colors and so forth. [The assistant teacher] was able to talk about it with kids. We had one little boy who said to her, this is a gal from Barbados, she was very dark skinned. And he said something like I don't like people that are Black. He obviously liked her. And so she started talking about differences of skin color and we took pictures of us different skin colors and we took pictures of all the kids and their hands and we said can you guess whose hands these are and we just, you know, worked it out in that way. I thought it was, certainly didn't turn negative. And it worked out quite well.

This interaction suggests that although individual educators may be comfortable addressing issues of race, culture, and discrimination in the classroom, this is not necessarily the case of a center overall.

In addition to interactions with students, teachers and administrators discussed incidents where they had to navigate situations related to culture, race/ethnicity, or gender with families. This included situations where they had to build understanding with parents who were not from the United States and who did not speak English. Strategies included conducting home visits to establish trust, sending out a questionnaire at the beginning of the year to get to know families and their traditions/customs, and integrating specific routines for naps and meals that were more aligned with a child's practices at home. One center hosted an ongoing "Family Academy" where parents came to the center to learn about early childhood development and how to navigate the US public school system, especially the transition to kindergarten. These practices reflect a dedication to reducing the misalignment between children's home and educational contexts, as well as increasing opportunities for families to participate in center activities and support their own child's early learning and development.

In addition, teachers and administrators described mixed experiences when they contacted parents regarding the fact that their child was using derogatory racial language, was

excluding other children on the basis of race/ethnicity, skin color, or language, or was being excluding excluded on these categories, as described above. Although they were often able to connect directly with the parents of the children who were directly involved, there were concerns from other parents whose children were now exposed to the language or exclusion. These incidents fostered distrust amongst families and centers that was difficult to repair, especially considering historic discrimination and oppression that some families have experienced. These interactions highlight the discomfort that many educators face when directly addressing race or discrimination within their classrooms and center; although they hope to promote equality and inclusion, opportunities for actively counteracting bias with both children and families are often lost.

Finally, some educators mentioned needing to navigate cultural differences between the values at their center and those of some families. For example, although teachers across all centers encouraged all students to play with any toys or use any classroom materials they wanted, some families were concerned with their boys dressing up in dresses or playing with baby dolls. Other families were concerned with their girls being taught by a male teacher, especially for tasks like changing diapers or potty training. In most cases, centers held meetings and workshops for families to describe their child-directed philosophy and approach to early childhood education. Consistent with the *equal opportunities* school of thought, the centers prioritized their dedication to allowing all children to participate in all activities and recruiting diverse center staff and attempted to navigate some families' resistance to this approach; however, issues of power, bias, and discrimination were rarely addressed in these conversations.

Organizational Climate. Organizational climate refers to program-wide goals, norms, and rules that address culture, race/ethnicity, and diversity. Aspects of organizational climate

include philosophy/policies, curriculum, family support, child/family demographics, staff support, and staff demographics. Most centers did not make intentional efforts to recruit families of any particular background to their center. They cited shifting demographics in the center's surrounding neighborhoods or word of mouth amongst families from a certain community as the driver for who enrolled in their program. In these centers, the cultural and racial/ethnic backgrounds of their students and families informed how they develop and implement programming and curriculum. The activities they designed to address cultural differences or racial/ethnic identity were developed as response to the backgrounds of the families who happened to enroll at their center. In more homogenous centers, teachers and administrators developed programming specific to the needs of the dominant group(s), often with the input from families or staff members who were part of that community. In more heterogeneous centers, programming was designed to highlight a range of backgrounds and encourage cross-cultural exchange and intergroup connections. This approach most closely reflects an *equal opportunity* school of thought, where center administrators and educators respect the diversity within the community, remove barriers for diverse families to enroll in their program, and promote inclusive messages consistent with the backgrounds of these families. Only one administrator described their center's intentionality in building a diverse center, with a range of cultural, socio-economic, and racial/ethnic backgrounds and identities represented. This center had an explicit goal to bring together children and families of varying backgrounds, allowing them to facilitate activities that fostered children's skills in getting along with diverse others.

The centers varied regarding the extent to which their philosophy or approach to culture, race/ethnicity, and diversity permeated throughout their entire program. Administrators from two centers described the importance of having all staff recognize the importance of diversity,

incorporate students' identities and backgrounds into the classroom, and respond to family's needs in a cohesive manner. In these centers, an enthusiasm for and ability to adhere to the mission and vision of the center related to issues of diversity, culture, and race/ethnicity were major factors in teacher recruitment, hiring, and retention. In addition, teachers and administrators from these centers explicitly discussed the importance of having adults in the center who reflected their student population to be able to build a connection and relationship with children and families. Administrators at one center spoke about a recent shift they had made to be more intentional about ensuring that their commitment to an anti-bias and culturally responsive framework was more systemic throughout their program. They established a Family Council, where parents/caregivers were involved in decisions regarding hiring and termination of employees, reviewing monthly financial records, and approving curricular choices and standards. The primary goal of this center was to incorporate student and family backgrounds into the educational experience, individualize programming as much as possible to the needs of the child and family, and build self-esteem and self-awareness for all children. This clearly reflects an *anti-discrimination* school of thought, by shifting power structures from the predominantly White center administration to empower families, who are predominantly low-income and Latinx, to make decisions regarding their child's education and increasing representation to be more reflective of the community. In other centers, however, the approach was more haphazard. Even if an administrator was clearly able to articulate her dedication to incorporating cultural diversity into the center, it was not a predominant priority amongst all staff. Some teachers were better at reaching certain students and some teachers incorporated students' cultural backgrounds and racial identity into the curriculum, but this was not necessarily expected of all educators. It was clear at these centers that administrators relied on non-White staff members to address issues

of culture and race/ethnicity regardless of the circumstance. Administrators expressed a goal of having a diverse staff, but were less able to articulate the importance and value of diversity. Despite efforts of individual teachers, this approach can represent a *laissez-faire* approach at the system (i.e., center)- level; there is little intentionality around addressing issues of race counteracting injustices. These centers assume that all children and families can succeed within already existing structures and processes, and thus goal is to treat everyone the same.

Discussion

The goal of the present study was to identify how early childhood education centers, particularly those that were identified as having an intentional focus on race, culture, and bias, address issues of race, culture, and bias in their center and classrooms across five domains of practice (i.e., visual/aesthetic environment, toys and materials, activities, interactions, and organizational climate) and the extent to which these practices were aligned with an *anti-discrimination* school of thought. Recognizing that all observed or discussed practices were not aligned with an *anti-discrimination* approach allowed us to identify where practices within each of the five domains fell on the continuum from *laissez-faire* to *anti-discrimination*. Our results demonstrated that educators consistently exhibited and discussed concrete ways in which they address issues of race and culture within their centers; however, in doing so, they engaged in a mixture of approaches across the different domains and did not consistently apply principles of the *anti-discrimination* approach. In fact, we found evidence of all five schools of thought throughout the interviews and classroom observations. Although principles of an *anti-discrimination* approach were implemented to some extent, these were applied inconsistently and often in a reactive, as opposed to proactive, manner. Our results are consistent with previous research that has documented discrepancies between ideal and real-world implementation of

anti-discrimination education practices, even amongst educators who are dedicated to issues of inclusion and equity and have received training in related pedagogical approaches (Bullock, 1996; Duffy & Gibbs, 2013; Farago, 2017).

Adherence to Anti-Discrimination School of Thought

       Alignment between practices and an anti-discrimination approach. Principles of an *anti-discrimination* approach were demonstrated to some extent, particularly within the visual/aesthetic environment and toys and materials domains. Most classrooms and centers displayed pictures, toys, and materials that reflected the students' backgrounds and that presented counter-stereotypical information about diverse individuals. This ranged from posters on the wall to food and toys that reflected various cultural backgrounds and skin colors. The importance of having an aesthetic environment and toys/materials that reflect students' backgrounds and provide counter-stereotypical information was communicated both by individual teachers and demonstrated in individual classrooms as well as emphasized by administrators regarding the center as a whole. This aligns with the *equal opportunities* and *anti-discrimination* schools of thought as it could promote children's confidence and positive social identities and can help foster comfort and joy with human diversity. Simply having materials available and for display, however, is a somewhat shallow application of this approach if use of the materials is not guided with intentionality.

       Some classrooms, however, extended their practice beyond these shallow applications, and demonstrated a more cohesive and meaningful application of the principles of anti-discrimination. For example, books explicitly about racial differences and discrimination help children increase their understanding of inequity and move beyond passive diversity on display. Activities that encourage children to explore and express their own identity, often through art

projects, can socialize positive self-esteem as well as respect for difference. Additionally, involving families in the classroom to celebrate specific cultural holidays or to talk about their cultural backgrounds can bring diversity to life, foster deep and meaningful connections between children of different cultures, and open the door to potential conversations about discrimination and bias, which were observed in some classrooms. One center even demonstrated intentionality in challenging existing power structures by including the center parents on a council that is meaningfully involved in the decision-making processes of the center. This commitment to rectifying power imbalance is indicative of an *anti-discrimination* school of thought.

Lack of alignment between practices and an anti-discrimination approach. Despite the fact that these centers were chosen for their expressed commitment to addressing race, bias, and equity, in practice, intentionality and proactivity in creating learning opportunities that actively counteract discrimination were largely missing. As previously mentioned, many classrooms contained diverse materials and toys and educators emphasized the importance of celebrating diverse cultural traditions. Although aspects of these practices are aligned with *anti-discrimination* practices, the focus on diversity in holidays, food, and clothes is superficial and does not emphasize the complexity of individuals and the richness of the range of diversity. Although involving families is a useful practice for initiating student engagement with diversity, these practices can also tokenize individuals as the sole representor of their groups (Eidoo et al., 2011), which also is not aligned with an *anti-discrimination* approach.

Furthermore, there was very little evidence of classroom activities and interactions that reflected an *anti-discrimination* approach. Teachers and administrators consistently reported color-blind interactions with children which de-emphasized differences and encouraged children to play together and find commonalities. Although encouraging collaboration among children is

a positive practice, these types of interactions are missed opportunities to facilitate conversations about stereotypes, discrimination, and power structures and thus cannot be classified within the anti-discrimination school of thought. It is important to note that educators' tendency to gloss over differences was particularly pronounced in cases when race was the dividing factor between children (as opposed to gender or language). This particular discomfort when addressing race is a hallmark of color-blind racial ideology which is at odds with a truly *anti-discrimination* educational approach (Bonilla-Silva, 2015).

When teachers did discuss interactions or activities that explicitly addressed race or discrimination, it was often in reaction to student curiosity or issues in the classroom, as opposed to being proactive or intentional. In addition, although teachers and administrators were able to identify specific examples of anti-discrimination activities and interactions that occurred within certain classrooms, it was clear that many of these practices were not enacted by the majority of teachers. The reactivity and inconsistency demonstrated in the five centers is also supported by the fact that the organizational climate was one of the domains with the least consistent representation of the *anti-discrimination* school of thought. Most centers reflected a *laissez-faire* approach to program-wide practices and policy, fostering inconsistency in implementation across classrooms and missing out on a critical opportunity to structure the entire center in ways that combat injustices. This suggests that the responsibility for addressing racism and other forms of discrimination/bias is not embedded within the overarching systems and structures of a center, but instead is placed on individual educators who either have demonstrated expertise in addressing such issues or who may need to react to a specific incident that occurred within the classroom. This burden frequently falls on teachers of color, who are often already providing extra support to children and families of color and are likely navigating their own experiences of

racial discrimination (Kohli, 2008; Moule, 2005; Mabokela & Madsen, 2003). Although administrators discussed their overall philosophy for diversity, inclusion, and equity in their centers, it was unclear how teachers were supported to engage in practices consistent with these visions via center-wide programs and policies. Educational initiatives and approaches, especially those related to diversity, inclusion, and equity, are most effective when they are implemented systematically with strong leadership support (Bustamante et al., 2009; Sugai & Horner, 2006).

Implications

The present study highlights important implications for improving the ways in which race, culture, bias, and discrimination are intentionally and explicitly incorporated into early childhood education settings. In particular, by characterizing the domains in which educators are engaging in an *anti-discrimination* approach, as well as the ways in which they fall short of that approach, we provide some suggestions for future training of early childhood educators.

First, although both teachers and administrators were comfortable discussing diversity and inclusion broadly throughout the study, most of these conversations focused on surface-level aspects of race and culture, including food, holidays, and language. However, educational approaches aligned with the *anti-discrimination* school of thought (e.g., anti-bias education, culturally responsive/sustaining pedagogy), call for deeper discussion of identity, power, and privilege, and explicit action to combat more issues of current and historical discrimination and systems of oppression. Thus, trainings in such approaches must incorporate ways for educators to examine their own identities and biases and identify meaningful and developmentally-appropriate ways to address these topics with young children (Ullucci & Battey, 2011). This can have implications for both how individual teachers develop and conduct classroom activities and interact with their students on a daily basis, as well as for how administrators plan strategically

for center-wide policies and practices. Extant research has demonstrated how implicit biases impact how educators interact with, support, and discipline students (Gilliam et al., 2016; Halberstadt et al., 2018; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015); however, educators' resistance to addressing their own biases as a means to reduce disparities has also been well-documented (Carter et al., 2018). Some recent interventions focused on reducing teachers' racial biases have demonstrated promise for decreasing disparities in classroom processes and student outcomes. Most of these interventions train teachers on concrete strategies to interrupt the processes through which biases can impact disparate student outcomes (e.g., promoting perspective gaining, increasing expectations of students, reducing stereotypes Gaias et al., 2020; Okonofua et al., 2020) and neutralizing the influence of racial biases on educators' decision-making especially regarding discipline (Cook et al., 2018; McIntosh et al., 2014). However, a need remains for interventions or trainings that integrate a greater focus on long-standing systems of oppression and how they persist through societal structure, such as education, as opposed to only focusing on individual biases. Such programs are more likely to prepare educators to empower their students to develop a strong sense of identity and counteract prejudice and discrimination (Sleeter, 2001).

Second, our study suggests a need for increased consistency of the implementation of anti-discrimination principles within both an individual teachers' practice and across multiple teachers within a center. For one, given our findings regarding the tendency of teachers to address race primarily in reaction to children's questions or comments, attention should be given to enhancing teachers' proactive use of anti-discrimination approaches. Similar to strategies focused on proactive behavior management in early childhood (Smith et al., 2011; Stormont et al., 2005, 2007), teachers should be trained in how to set classroom norms and expectations

related to diversity, equity, and inclusion, how to plan activities that actively facilitate inclusion and counteract bias, and how to anticipate and progressively respond to instances of discrimination and exclusion in the classroom. Improving consistency in teacher practice can also be enhanced through more opportunities for ongoing professional development for teachers, as opposed to single trainings. Evidence from across the education field has demonstrated the limitations of professional development initiatives that do not emphasize how practices and behavior change will be sustained beyond an initial training (Fixsen et al., 2009). For example, in an examination of a culturally responsive classroom management intervention in elementary schools, only teachers who received ongoing coaching throughout the year in addition to a 5-part professional development workshop demonstrated improved behavior change and student outcomes (Bradshaw et al., 2018). Finally, our results also demonstrated inconsistency across teachers within a center, highlighted by the lack of anti-discrimination principles in the organizational climate of most centers. Changes to individual teacher practices can also be supported through increased attention to the equitable organizational climate of a center. Administrators can develop center-wide policies, programs, and systems that are designed to explicitly counteract inequities, impacting which teachers are hired and retained, the professional develop opportunities they receive, and how they are expected to counteract discrimination within their individual classrooms (Bryk et al., 2010; Bustamante et al., 2009; Scanlan & López, 2012).

Although not directly examined, it is also important to situate the implications of these findings within the broader context of equity in early childhood education. Enhancing the depth and consistency with which individual early childhood teachers and administrators engage with issues of race and bias in early childhood can promoting strong academic, behavioral, and social-

emotional trajectories for children and thus increase equity within early childhood systems. Current national discourse regarding early childhood education has centered issues of racial equity, and the role of both structural racism and individual biases in contributing to pervasive disparities (My Brother's Keeper Task Force, 2016; U.S. Department of Health and Health Services & U.S. Department of Education, 2014). In particular, scholars, educators, and advocates have called attention to the fact that marginalized children of color have less access to early learning programs; further, even as these programs become increasingly accessible, individual and structural biases contribute to disparities in program quality. Additionally, children from marginalized racial identities are more likely to be pushed out of these programs through exclusionary disciplinary practices (e.g., suspension, expulsion), as compared to their White counterparts (Meek & Gilliam, 2016). These disparities impact the pervasive gaps seen in school readiness at the start of kindergarten (Reardon & Portilla, 2016), which consequently have serious long-term implications for both individual- and society-level economic, educational, and health outcomes. Thus, ensuring that educators are able to explicitly reduce bias and discrimination and enhance equity in their early childhood classrooms is essential.

Limitations and Future Directions

It is important to note some limitations of the present study. First, the study only took place in five centers in one geographical region, thus limiting generalizability. This concern is somewhat abated by the fact that centers were recruited to represent a range of student racial/ethnic and socioeconomic compositions; however, we were not able to draw conclusions regarding the differences in practices according to center characteristics due to the small sample size. In addition, one three-hour observation is a limited window during which to evaluate a

teacher's performance. Although previous research has established reliability and validity of 20-
and 40-minute classroom observations (Mashburn et al., 2014), we opted for a longer

observational window, due to the exploratory nature of this research (i.e., not using a validated

rating scale) and the likelihood of capturing low-frequency behaviors. In addition, the

complementary nature of the observational and focus group data contributed to the

comprehensiveness and validity of our conclusions. Finally, our study was not able to examine

the impact of these practices on student outcomes, such as child socio-emotional, behavioral, and

academic well-being and indicators of in-group bias and prejudice. Most research on the

integration of culture and race into the classroom more broadly across education is qualitative in

nature (see Bottiani, Larson, Debnam, Bischoff, & Bradshaw, 2017; Young, 2010 for reviews).

Recently developed measurement tools that systematically capture practices related to

challenging inequity and bridging sociocultural connections in early childhood (Curenton et al.,

2020) can be used to better examine the associations between the practices described in this

study and student outcomes. Future measurement work could also apply a continuum framework

such as MacNaughton's (2006) to develop, validate, and implement a self-rating scale for both

research purposes and teacher professional development.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, the current study provides insights regarding how issues of

race, culture, and bias are integrated into early childhood education settings with implications for

practice. Through the application of a well-developed heuristic framework (MacNaughton,

2006), our study was able to identify common practices of early childhood education programs

that are both consistent with the *anti-discrimination* school of thought as well as highlight

domains in which there are persistent gaps. The centers included in the current study were

diverse in population, but the practices observed were relatively consistent, with centers attending to issues of race and cultural differences primarily through their visual/aesthetic environment and toys and materials. There were examples of *anti-discrimination* principles demonstrated in the other domains, but these were implemented inconsistently, often only in reaction to student's questioning or interest or only by a handful of educators. The results of this study underline the need for more comprehensive pre- and in-service training regarding explicitly addressing issues of race and bias in the classroom. Moreover, additional research is needed to explicate the associations between indicators of the *anti-discrimination* school of thought and student outcomes to inform practice and policy initiatives aimed at enhancing positive development for all children. These implications and future directions are essential as our society grapples with how to reduce the persistent and pervasive educational inequities in early childhood and beyond.

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Table 1. Participating Program Characteristics

	Program 1	Program 2	Program 3	Program 4	Program 5
Type	Non-profit	Non-profit	Non-profit & Early HS	Non-profit	Non-profit
Accreditation	NAEYC	NAEYC	None	NAEYC	NAEYC
Num. of Classrooms	4	2	9	4	3
Num. of Children	65	25-40	100	61	50
Age of children	2-K	3-5	0-5	3-5	2.5 - 5
Child ethnicity (%)					
White	50%	70%	3%	40%	50%
Latinx	30%	25%	85%	10%	20%
Black	17%	3%	11%	10%	5%
Asian	3%	2%	0%	35%	20%
Middle Eastern	0%	1%	1%	5%	5%
Income of most families	$35,000-$47,000	$23,500-$35,000	$23,500-$35,000	Above $70,500	$23,500- $35,000
Dual-Language Learners (%)	20%	30%	85%	75%	10%
Children w/ special needs (%)	9%	5%	10%	10%	0
Children in foster care (%)	3%	25%	4%	0	0
Num. of teachers	4	5	23	9	3
Num. of staff	15	6	17	14	25
Teacher & Staff Ethnicity (#)					
White	9	3	14	7	16
Latinx	6	1	24	0	3
Black	1	1	2	0	6
Asian	0	0	0	1	2
Native American	3	0	0	1	1
Teacher & Staff Gender (#)					
Female	17	4	36	9	28
Male	2	1	4	0	0
Teacher & Staff Years at Center (#)					
1-5 years	13	4	28	4	22
5-10 years	6	1	8	7	0
10+ years	0	0	4	4	3

Table 2.

Presence of codes across focus groups and observations for each program

Center / Data Sources	Program1 T	A	O	Program 2 T	A	O	Program 3 T	A	O	Program 4 T	A	O	Program 5 T	A	O	Total FG	Total Obs.	Frequency
Activities	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**100%**	**100%**	**67**
Cooperation/Group building		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x				x	70%	80%	14
Cultural Activities	x	x	x	x			x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	90%	60%	25
Family Involvement	x	x		x			x	x		x	x		x	x		90%	0%	24
Holidays		x		x			x	x		x	x		x	x		80%	0%	16
Identity/Awareness	x	x		x	x	x		x		x	x	x	x		x	80%	60%	19
Other/General				x					x	x	x	x			x	30%	60%	5
Responsive	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x				x	80%	60%	18
Interactions	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**100%**	**100%**	**211**
Child - Child	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	100%	100%	69
Teacher/Staff-Child	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	100%	100%	86
Teacher/Staff-Parent	x	x		x	x	x	x	x		x	x		x	x	x	100%	40%	80
Teacher/Staff-Teacher/Staff		x		x			x			x	x		x			60%	0%	27
Organizational Climate	**x**	**x**		**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**		**x**	**x**	**x**	100%	60%	**124**
Child/Family Demographics		x		x			x	x		x	x		x	x		80%	0%	34
Curriculum		x					x			x	x		x	x	x	60%	20%	19
Family Support	x	x		x	x		x	x	x	x	x		x			90%	20%	37
Philosophy/Policies	x	x		x	x			x		x	x		x	x		90%	0%	49
Staff Demographics		x		x	x	x	x	x		x		x				60%	40%	15
Staff Support		x		x	x		x	x		x	x		x	x		90%	0%	23
Toys and Materials	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**100%**	**100%**	**66**
Item/Material	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	100%	80%	66
Art Materials		x	x		x			x			x			x		50%	20%	7
Books and Pictures	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	100%	100%	39
Clothing	x		x	x			x	x	x	x				x	x	60%	60%	10
Food	x			x		x	x	x		x	x		x			70%	20%	17
Manipulatives	x	x	x		x		x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	80%	80%	21
Other/General materials		x			x		x	x						x		50%	0%	6
Purpose	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	100%	60%	54

Category																FG%	Obs%	Count
Cultural Items	x		x	x		x	x			x	x	x	x	x	x	70%	80%	25
Gender	x	x	x	x		x	x		x	x			x		x	60%	80%	10
Identity	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x		x	x	x	90%	80%	23
Use	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	100%	80%	49
Child initiated	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x			x	x	x	70%	80%	14
Curriculum/Activities	x			x		x	x	x		x	x		x	x	x	90%	40%	30
Environmental	x	x	x	x	x	x			x	x	x	x	x	x	x	70%	100%	13
Visual/Aesthetic Environ.	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**			**x**		**x**	**x**	70%	100%	**17**
Child Background/Identity	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x					x	x	70%	80%	12
Instructional	x	x	x	x		x			x			x		x		40%	80%	7
Total Unique Categories Coded Per Data Source	**29**	**33**	**21**	**33**	**24**	**28**	**29**	**31**	**18**	**33**	**32**	**15**	**32**	**33**	**28**			

Note: T = Teacher Focus Group, A = Administrator Focus Group, O = Classroom Observation, FG = Focus Groups, Obs. = Observations, Environ. = Environment
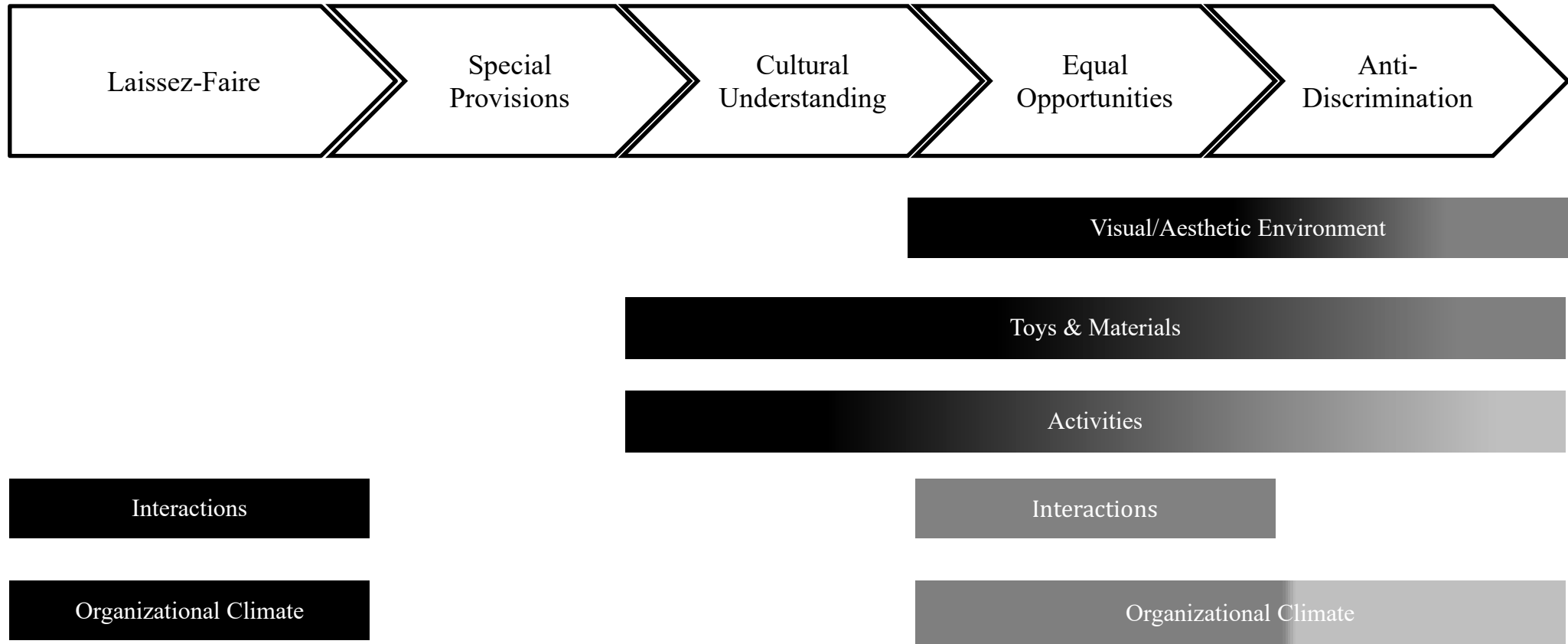
Figure 1. Visual representation of results, outlining how practices observed or described by educators align with each school of thought on MacNaughton's (2006) continuum. Darker-shaded areas represent higher levels of consistency or alignment across centers with a certain school of thought. Lighter-shaded areas represent low consistency or alignment with the given school of thought. Areas with no shading indicate that that domain was not observed to be aligned with the given school of thought for any center.