The Impact of Colorism on Early Childhood Learners

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Racism within the United States of America has transformed itself countless times to make itself virtually undetectable to those who have the privilege to remain ignorant of its monstrous effects. However, the children of the affected communities are often introduced to the reality of racism fairly young as a means of survival. Unfortunately, children of color no longer have the luxury of remaining oblivious to how the world will treat them. This has become abundantly clear in recent years as child victims of police brutality like Tamir Rice and Andre Green have become frequent (Bump, 2021). From an early age, children of color now must come to terms with the knowledge that they will not always be treated in the same ways as their white counterparts. This inequality may even be exposed to them by their early childhood educators.

Mass incarceration, ugly stereotypes, and a general lack of empathy towards communities of color are embedded in American culture. One of the ways that racism continues to manifest itself is the division of communities of color through colorism. Colorism is described as the social stratification that works to lend privilege to those of lighter skin complexions over those of darker skin complexions. Stratification impacts reach across racial and ethnic groups, education levels, and socioeconomic status (Harris, 2018). Colorism's disturbing history is deeply rooted in the European colonization of African and Indigenous Peoples. This hierarchy has its roots in the global era of slavery when white owners gave privileges to slaves with Eurocentric features or known white heritage (Hannon et. al, 2013). At the height of colonialism in Hispaniola, both Spanish and French colonizers worked together to create distrust amongst slaves to prevent uprisings or community building. Europeans accomplished this by purposefully ranking individuals of color based on their physical appearance. This "ranking" would result in people of color with the most Eurocentric features being treated marginally better than those with African or Indigenous features (Napoleon, 2021). This classification of people of color led to the belief

that if a child were born with Eurocentric features, they would potentially live a better life and have the opportunity to assimilate into the dominating European culture. Hundreds of years later, this belief can still be seen in how colorism impacts families of color with young children.

Colorism profoundly affects young children and their families due to how ingrained it is in communities of color. The concept of "whiteness" being the standard for acceptance, beauty, and success is introduced to children early in life. The glory of "whiteness" is enforced through children's exposure to cultural beliefs, social media, and public institutions such as schools. From a young age, children may be subtly encouraged by their families to appear white. "Whiteness" in communities of color is portrayed as a key that can unlock any door, that if a person of color has a lighter skin tone, they will be given better opportunities. The idea of light-skinned superiority has become common knowledge amongst people of color (Hannon et al., 2013). Due to this, children of color that have lighter-skin tones are usually exposed to one of two extremes. Children are put on a pedestal, or they are ostracized due to colorism. Although communities of color reinforce this ignorance, it is important to note that colorism is not just a "brown and black" issue. Colorism is grounded in racism and the inhumane treatment of people of color in American history, which began with European colonialism. Therefore, educators need to know the internal struggles of communities of color, like colorism, since they are connected to larger systemic issues. Colorism is intertwined with racism, and white privilege is central to both (Hannon et al., 2013). These conflicts within the black and brown communities are prevalent, and unfortunately, the perpetuation of this stigma occurs within schools.

Colorism invokes many issues for young students, such as struggles with cultural identity, insecurity, and feelings of misrepresentation. It may seem like children of color are

gaining more representation on television shows, advertisements, and video games. While any representation of communities of color is a step in the right direction, it is important to consider whether this is inclusive to children with darker skin tones. Regarding current events, when images from the movie "Ralph Breaks the Internet" were released last year, it appeared that Princess Tiana, Disney's first black princess, was animated with a lighter complexion and more Eurocentric features. This led to Anika Noni Rose, who voices Tiana, meeting with the animators to speak on the importance of dark-skinned girls being represented in media (Associated Press, 2016). The demand for young dark-skinned girls to see themselves represented led to the film's studio consulting the Color For Change civil rights group. Following consultation, proper adjustments were made to the character design, and the movie continued without a hitch. In the media, it is clear that "light-skinned" people of color are more widely represented than people of color with darker skin tones. People of color have essentially been fighting for scraps of representation in the media they consume. In the last fifty years, non-white people have only just started seeing themselves represented in starring roles, which has been wonderful for children of color. Having representation leads to children being able to envision their futures as bright and promising while simultaneously building their self-esteem. However, there is plenty of room for improvement in the representation of different ethnicities and complexions.

Educators need to be mindful of the messages their students of color are both consciously and unconsciously receiving regarding their physical appearance. In data provided by a study of men and women of color with varying complexions, it was found that self-efficacy among men weakened as complexions darkened, and self-esteem was extremely low among dark-skinned women who were frequently described as unattractive throughout their lives (Monroe, 2016).

Although this study did not include children, educators should seriously consider what messages students of color may be receiving while in their classrooms. Educators must reflect on how they treat students of color compared to students who are white, but it does not end there. Treating students of color with the same respect that is already given to white students is only the first step in providing a quality education for all students. Educators need to consider how they may treat students of color with darker or lighter skin tones. There are many layers to biases, and they are multi-faceted. Teachers who are diligent regarding treating students of color with equity may forget to self-assess, which can lead to patterns in their behavior becoming overlooked.

There are many ways that educators can take a positive approach to dismantle the colorism that exists and thrives within schools. This includes self-assessing biases and reflecting on the language they use while interacting with the parents of their students of color (Beneke, 2018). Teachers should dispel any overtly positive or negative expectations before they genuinely get to know the parent. Educators should not expect higher levels of intelligence from those with lighter skin tones and should especially not have those types of expectations regarding students. After interactions with students, some engaging questions that teachers can reflect upon may include inquiries centered on positive feedback, formal and informal validation, and the diversity of the curricular materials being used (Monroe, 2016). Extensive anti-bias training, keeping up with current events, and taking a genuine interest in different cultures are all positive approaches to staying educated on colorism.

In an interview with "A," a woman of color from a biracial family, she explained the effects of colorism on her and her loved ones. Her parents have different skin complexions; she was raised to embrace her mixed heritage and described that she received negative messages from her extended family, friends, and even strangers growing up. While she has a lighter skin

tone, her sister is of a darker complexion. She explained that while at family functions held by her mother's side, her extended family commented about her and her sister not looking anything alike. These same family members also state that the two of them are: "Pretty for black girls." Strangers assume upon first meeting them that they are half-sisters due to their different skin tones. She often feels like others expect her to pick between being black or Hispanic. Those who pressure her often insinuate that she should identify more with being Hispanic rather than black due to her lighter skin tone. Her sister receives the opposite message that she should identify more with being black rather than Hispanic due to her darker skin tone.

     Improvements begin with teachers educating themselves on systemic problems and holding themselves accountable when they act on their biases. Anti-bias training is accessible and provides a wealth of knowledge on people of color and struggles that are specific to them. Self-reflection is essential for teachers to practice; becoming too comfortable in the "known" blocks opportunities for further education of cultural differences.

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