

An artistic illustration featuring four children of diverse backgrounds. A girl with a large, dark, curly afro is the central figure, wearing a white t-shirt. To her right is a girl with dark hair in a ponytail, also in a white t-shirt. In the bottom left, a boy with curly hair and a girl with short, curly hair are both wearing white t-shirts. The background is white with dark, ink-like splatters and dots. Overlaid on the right side of the image is the text "DON'T LOOK AWAY" in large, bold, black capital letters.

# DON'T LOOK AWAY

**Embracing ANTI-BIAS Classrooms**

Iheoma U. Iruka, PhD • Stephanie M. Curenton, PhD • Tonia R. Durden, PhD • Kerry-Ann Escayg, PhD

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# **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

We stand on the shoulders of others who paved the way for us to be early childhood scholars, researchers, educators, and advocates for social justice. We thank our parents, spouses, and children, who continue to support our work, mission, and goal to ensure that our communities prosper and thrive while also dismantling racism, discrimination, and inequities. We thank all of the parents, families, children, communities and community leaders, colleagues, and organizations that have supported our research on supporting the well-being and achievement of Black children and other children of color.

# INTRODUCTION

In this book, we seek to support program leaders, providers, teachers, and others who are interested in strengthening the early care and education sector to provide the best care and learning environment for all children. Most importantly, we seek to honor the history of early care and education, which started with President Lyndon Johnson's 1965 War on Poverty. That effort strived to ensure that poor children, the majority of whom were Black, were able to start school at the same level as their White peers. While early care and education has made great strides in creating supports for children's school and life success, there is still a long way to go when many children—especially Black children and other children of color—do not have the same access to high-quality early care and education programs as their White peers.

As you read, we will encourage you to think about your *unconscious biases* (those negative thoughts, feelings, and stereotypes we have that are outside our awareness) toward race, class, and gender identities. We all have them! In fact, left to their own devices, our brains will automatically create such biases, but it is our job to *actively control* our thinking by catching ourselves when our minds wander toward negative stereotypes. We must purposefully reteach our brains that those biases are not true. We will also encourage you to reflect on your past and present experiences, both inside and outside the classroom. We will encourage you to imagine what it would take to be an early childhood educator who strives to change the world by intentionally seeking to make the upcoming generations less biased and more inclusive toward marginalized and underrepresented populations due to race, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, or gender identity. We challenge you to take action by speaking up and advocating for the rights of children and aiming to influence those policies and practices that have children's well-being in mind.

Early childhood educators have a pivotal role in changing the future, because the early years of life, birth to age eight, are the most critical time period in our human

development. These early years are a sensitive period for the growth of children's language, self-regulation, cognition, physical development, moral development, and self-identity. When children experience trauma caused by toxic stress and negative life events, including stress caused by bias and racism, the consequences can continue into later life. Even though children are resilient in the face of many adversities, early childhood professionals can make the road a little smoother, especially for those children who face a lot of bumps, bruises, and hardships due to their race, ethnicity, culture, language, or religion. Research has taught us about the lifelong benefit of early childhood education, but we are also learning about the lifelong impact of trauma, especially when it is experienced during this sensitive period of development.

One such trauma experienced by young children, especially children of color, is exclusion. Often, this takes the form of suspension and expulsion. Two hundred and fifty children are suspended from school every day, and many of them are children of color. When we consider the achievement gap and third-grade reading scores, we realize that these are the children who need education and support the most. Children of color are not experiencing high-quality early learning the same way or at the same rate as White children. (We will discuss this further in chapter 2.)

It is urgent that we deliver on the promise of equal education by providing equitable early care and education. To do this, we must address bias, racism, segregation, low expectations, and trauma, and ensure that early care and education programs and educators are engaging in culturally responsive anti-bias education with children, especially Black children and other children of color.

## **HOW TO USE THIS BOOK**

The authors aim to provide a resource to help those working with or on behalf of children. We seek to unpack and address the implicit biases (also known as unconscious biases) that paint how we treat and see each other and the biases that harm children, whether intentionally or unintentionally. For example, how do you perceive a mother who is always ten minutes late in dropping off or picking up her child? How does this behavior influence how you see this child? Does your

perception change if this mother has similar attributes to you or your mother? What if you know the lateness in the morning is due to the father who wants to spend a few minutes with his son because he works the graveyard shift (10 p.m.–8 a.m.) every day? What is the emotional harm done to a Black child when he is often getting the message that he is scary and no one wants him around? What is the emotional harm done to young girls who are told they are too loud and have too much attitude? Are we laying a foundation that ensures they will be successful or one that says there is something wrong with them?

This book seeks to support early educators in recognizing, addressing, and eliminating bias and in practicing culturally responsive, anti-bias pedagogies to ensure that trauma is not being revisited upon the children we are expected to protect, nurture, and educate. In each chapter, the author of that chapter offers information and research to help you understand and recognize bias. We discuss anti-bias education and culturally responsive pedagogy to give you the tools to teach children equitably. And, we offer questions for reflection, to help you think critically about bias and ways to implement culturally responsive practices and anti-bias pedagogy.

You can use this book as a personal exercise to develop your own understanding, or in a community of practice, or as professional development with staff. We hope the information we provide will help you see the children in your care with new eyes as you do the very important work of nurturing and encouraging them and preparing them for success in the future.



CHAPTER 1:

**EARLY CHILDHOOD  
EDUCATION'S  
ROOTS IN  
SOCIAL JUSTICE**

This chapter examines how early childhood became part of the national discourse on social justice through its establishment during the War on Poverty and how this lens of socioeconomic and social justice continues to be woven through early education.

## **THE REALITY OF IMPLICIT BIAS**

*“What could it be this time?” Dr. Regina Williamson sighs and puts her palm on her forehead as she looks at the number on her cellphone. Her son Reginald’s child-care program, Promise Academy Child Development Center, is calling. She wonders what they could be calling her about in the less than 30 minutes since she dropped off her two sons. This is the third call in three weeks! The other two calls had forced her to cancel her office hours with students to rush to pick up one of the boys because the school indicated he was being aggressive with other children. She quickly looks at her calendar to see what appointments she would need to cancel.*

*Regina breathes a long, overwhelmed sigh. She and her husband have worked hard to provide their boys with the best education possible. They want their sons to be understood and well-liked by the teachers and students; this isn’t always easy, given that the boys are typically the only African American children in predominantly White preschools. She knows it can’t just be her boys, because she has heard other moms in the school talking about how their own children behave. They behave even worse than Reginald and Dawaan, yet they don’t get suspended. What is it about her boys? It just seems as though the teachers are too hard on them.*

*She slowly answers her cellphone. “Hello, Ms. Shaunda.”*

These are questions that often ring in the minds of many Black parents. What could and should they be doing to make sure their children, especially boys, are not being suspended? Should they put them on medication to control their behavior? Should they just find relative care or homeschool their children? The truth is that even if Black parents medicate their children or pay for a behavioral specialist, there is still a high likelihood that their children will be suspended or excluded from learning for

the same behaviors that barely register when White boys do it. Why is this the case? Both research and the lived experiences of Black families and other families of color indicate that Reginald and Dawaan receive inequitable experiences because they are Black and because their behaviors are seen as more threatening and uncontrollable compared to White boys.

A seminal study conducted by Yale researcher Walter Gilliam asked early education teachers to watch a video in which a Black boy, a Black girl, a White boy, and a White girl were seated at a table (Gilliam et al., 2016). The teachers were told that they would see children misbehaving and were asked to press a button when they saw a misbehavior. (Unbeknownst to the teachers, there were no misbehaviors from any of the children.) Teachers of all races pressed the button the most for Black children, indicating that the children were misbehaving. As part of the study, the teachers wore eye trackers so the researchers could collect data on where the teachers were looking. The data indicated that teachers were more likely to watch the Black children, especially the Black boy. This shows that the teachers were thinking that the Black boy was most likely to misbehave.

After participating in the study, the teachers were informed that the children actually were actors and that they were not misbehaving at all. When the teachers were asked why they thought the Black children misbehaved the most, they indicated they pressed the button because they thought they saw misbehavior or they anticipated a particular problem. For example, when the Black boy asked to share a toy, the teachers anticipated that he would become mad and aggressive in the near future. This video provides some level of confirmation for US Department of Education data that show Black public-preschool children are 3.6 times more likely than their White counterparts to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions (US Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Black children represent only 18 percent of preschool enrollment but represent 48 percent of preschool children who receive one or more out-of-school

**Implicit bias:** a set of automatic and uncontrolled cognitive processes that affect our attitudes toward others. These biases are thought to be involuntary and not under the conscious control of the individual and can lead to either favorable or unfavorable characterizations of others.

suspensions. In comparison, White children represent 41 percent of preschool enrollment but only 28 percent of such children receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions. This disparity makes it clear that Black children are overrepresented in expulsion and suspension. The data have led researchers and many others to conclude that the reason for this is implicit, or unconscious, bias.

## Perceptions of People of Color

For centuries, Black and other non-White peoples, including indigenous populations, have been viewed as less than human and even animal-like in some instances, incapable of emotions, intelligence, and social skills. This perception has been the rationale for enslavement, internment camps, and genocide. The legacy of viewing people of color as threatening continues today in representations of these groups as criminal, dangerous, lazy, and unintelligent. Therefore, early childhood educators who see young Black boys as threatening, dangerous, and incapable of learning can view suspension and expulsion as reasonable courses of action.

*Implicit bias* is a set of automatic and uncontrolled cognitive processes that affect our attitudes toward others. These biases are thought to be involuntary and not under the conscious control of the individual and can lead to either favorable or unfavorable characterizations of others. Implicit biases can result in stereotyping along dimensions such as class, race, ethnicity, appearance, age, sexuality, religion, or disability. Implicit bias can be seen, for example, when we spend time talking to people who are similar to us and avoid those who don't seem like us. It can be seen when teachers allow White children the independence to choose their work but don't provide those choices for Black children because they worry that Black children may become uncontrollable. It is very important to stress that implicit bias is unconscious to the offender but is often obvious to the victim and may have deep and lasting effects. These biases and lack of learning opportunities for Black children are not what early program designers and administrators were thinking or worried about when they designed early childhood programs such as Head Start. While we all engage in biased behaviors, and many people face different experiences of bias, in this book we are particularly focused on and sensitive to the bias,

racism, discrimination, and exclusionary practices against children, families, and communities of color, especially those of Black children. Bias against Black people is particularly salient and pervasive.

## **HEAD START'S ROLE IN** **EQUITABLE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES**

In his first State of the Union address in 1964, President Lyndon Johnson proposed the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA), which we now refer to as the War on Poverty (Zigler and Valentine, 1979). At the time of this proposal, there was a 19 percent poverty rate among families in the United States. The legislation established the Office of Economic Opportunity, which housed numerous programs designed to alleviate poverty, such as VISTA (now known as AmeriCorps VISTA), Job Corps (offering free education and vocational training to people sixteen to twenty-four years of age), and Head Start. Head Start was conceived as a community-based early childhood program intended to provide comprehensive services—cognitive, emotional, social, health, and nutrition—to preschool-age children from low-income households. As a former teacher in a one-room schoolhouse in Texas, President Johnson believed in the power of education to eradicate poverty.

At its inception in 1965, Head Start was an eight-week summer program located in community child-development centers throughout the country and serving more than 560,000 children (Administration for Children and Families, n.d.). Today, Head Start is a full-day, full-year program and serves infants and toddlers (in Early Head Start) as well as preschoolers (Bosland et al., 2011; Zigler, Gilliam, and Barnett, 2011). The War on Poverty legislation reminds us that, to truly support children, we must support their families as comprehensively as possible and not focus on just the child or the parent.

*As Regina drives to her sons' child-care program, she continues to think through the conversation she just had with Ms. Shaunda. The words keep ringing in her head: "Reginald is a big, hulking, five-year-old kid" (even though Reginald is three years old). Ms. Shaunda went on to explain that he may need to be in a different school that "fits his needs."*

*She wonders what she and her husband can do to stop their sons' aggressive behavior in school. The boys are never aggressive at home. She starts thinking about who among her friends she could call on to help her find a therapist. She thinks about all the child-care programs her sons have gone to, from ones housed on the university campus where she works to others that were close to her family's home. She knows her boys can be boisterous, but she has never thought they were aggressive children.*

*As Regina continues her drive to her sons' child-care program, she also thinks about how finding new care is going to impact her family and her job. She worries about how Reginald will feel about having to change schools again and the stress he would feel with no longer seeing his friends and teachers. Mothers are supposed to protect their children and keep them safe, but Regina wonders how she can protect them in a world that sees them as angry, older, and Black.*

## Reflection Questions

- What is the responsibility of the teacher and the school in creating responsive environments for all their students?
- Think about Ms. Shaunda's perception of Black boys. What are the historical roots of such representations? How do those perceptions play out in contemporary life? Studies have noted that many teachers view Black boys as more threatening and older than they actually are, and often anticipate that they will become aggressive and angry, even if that is not the case.
- What are the mechanisms that allowed for such representations to be so pervasive in American society? Also consider, for what purpose did they develop?
- Consider your calls or texts with parents. Do you typically contact parents to share good news or bad news about their child?
- Which families do you often call or text with bad news? Are they families of color or those with boys?
- Are there one or two children you often have problems with? Who are they, and why do you think you have a problem with them?

# Deliver on the **PROMISE** of **QUAL EDUCATION**

Every day, 250 children are suspended from school. Many are children of color who are deprived of opportunities to experience high-quality early learning at the same rate as white children. Many families don't feel heard and respected in their children's schools. The question is, How can we dismantle inequities and provide nurturing, responsive care and education to all children?

*Don't Look Away: Embracing Anti-Bias Classrooms* leads early childhood professionals to explore and address issues of bias, equity, low expectations, and family engagement to ensure culturally responsive experiences. Importantly, this book will challenge you to consider your perceptions and thought processes:

- Identify your own unconscious biases—we all have them!
- Recognize and minimize bias in the classroom, school, and community
- Connect with children and their families
- Help close the opportunity gap for children from marginalized communities

The early years are an especially sensitive period for building lifelong skills. While children are resilient, early childhood professionals must make the road a little smoother, especially for children who may face adversity due to their race, ethnicity, culture, language, or religion. *Don't Look Away: Embracing Anti-Bias Classrooms* offers strategies, tools, and information to help you create a culturally responsive and equitable learning environment.

With honest examination, thoughtful discussions, attention, and practice, you can make a difference.  
**The children in your care are counting on you.**



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