

Anti-Black racism in the early years: the experiences of Black families and early childhood educators in Nova Scotia

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Link to article:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/reports-publications/health-promotion-chronic-disease-prevention-canada-research-policy-practice/vol-43-no-8-2023/anti-black-racism-early-years-experiences-black-families-early-childhood-educators-nova-scotia.html>

Background

- Anti-Black racism is a social determinant of health that has significantly impacted Black children and families.
- Limited research has examined anti-Black racism during the early years—a critical period of development.
- The objective of this qualitative research study was to understand the impacts and manifestations of systemic and interpersonal anti-Black racism on African Nova Scotian children and their families.

Key Findings

Intergenerational impacts of racism

- Parent participants in this study, as well as ECEs of African descent, spoke about the impact that anti-Black racism and racial discrimination has had on their own lives growing up. Parents reflected on their own early childhood experiences and the anti-Black violence they and their families encountered when they were children.

“My mom tells me stories now of you know teachers actually mentioning my hair being too big or how to put it in braids to somewhat tame it so to speak you know or children you know making fun or you know, I was called the N-word. (Parent participant)”

White is always the norm

- Elaborating further on the perpetual threat of anti-Black racism, participants described the heaviness of the “White gaze,” feeling as though Whiteness and Eurocentricity is the default.
- Outside of historically or prominently Black communities, families and children often felt “othered.” This was linked to the anxieties parents had about the appropriateness of their children’s education.
- Parents and many ECEs knew that child care spaces and elementary schools were rarely as inclusive and diverse as they would like. Not only were there few educators who were Black, but many children attended majority-white centres.

“The teacher actually came to me and was very excited to tell me that she let all the kids touch his hair. Because it was different, right? Like, you know, they had fun today touching his hair. Which, of course, I was mortified, you know, like, he’s, like, some sort of—anyway. I was very upset. (Parent participant)”

Methods

- This qualitative research project was informed by Critical Race Theory and Black Critical Theory.
- Early childhood educators (ECEs) who care for Black children and parents with Black children between the ages of 18 months and 5 years (n = 15) participated in virtual, semi-structured interviews.

Anti-Black racism in the early years

- Nearly every parent participant and ECE could recall their or another child experiencing a racist incident across various systems (early childhood environment, medical system).
- This manifested through implicit biases, overt use of hate speech with racially abusive language, over-punishment and racial profiling.
- Parents described negative encounters within the medical system which made them feel unsafe, mistreated and anxious.
- Child care centres were an environment in which many children encountered anti-Blackness, in the form of direct racial violence, over-punishment and maltreatment.

The importance of self-identity, cultural awareness and parent advocacy

- Knowing that they would be raising their children in spaces that were often majority-White and nondiverse, parents felt that the best they could do to support their children was to bolster their self-confidence and sense of Black pride.

“My wife is often sitting with my daughter, and she’s telling her about her hair, she’s telling her about her skin colour, and reminding her how proud the families are that she came from. (Parent participant)”

Conclusions

- This is some of the first research in Canada to document exposure to racial violence in early learning environments.
- These collective findings suggest that preschool children are exposed to racism three-fold: through intergenerational racial trauma, interpersonal racial abuse and systemic discrimination and mistreatment.
- Early interventions and policy change must begin at the early childhood level to ensure Black children are learning and growing in culturally safe spaces.