Developing Positive Racial Identity

Jazia C. Sanders
Kathryn Hardy
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Introduction

America is known as the land of the free, filled with opportunities to do anything a person could put their mind to. It is a place where anyone from around the world can come and pursue their dreams. Because of this, America can be described as a mixing pot of different cultures, and there are many cultures that thrive here. Each American has a unique background and history, and this diversity should be celebrated. Unfortunately, racism and misguided ideas about race too often stop Americans from celebrating our diversity. This begins in early childhood.

Children learn about race and racism from very young ages from family members, their communities, and their peers. In order for children to learn to love their own racial identity, as well as others' diverse backgrounds, schools, families, and community members should promote positive racial identity for all students. This includes explicitly exploring and learning about a wide variety of cultures through discussions about race and racism, altering curriculum to be culturally relevant and inclusive, as well as reading books and watching movies with diverse characters.

In order to highlight the importance of positive racial identity education, this paper will first discuss research on child development, and how a child's upbringing and environment can change how they perceive the world and themselves. Then it will highlight how positive racial identity education can they see themselves as a person. It will end by arguing that other outside sources like school and community should prioritize teaching children about race and identity.

Child Development

In order to understand how, when, and where children learn about race and racism, it is important to know how children develop. From an extremely young age, children begin learning messages about race and racism, whether or not it is explicitly taught to them. The environment that children are in, which include the media, toys, and people around them, can have a strong influence on how children think about themselves and others.

One of the best pieces of evidence to support school integration in the Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* was The Doll Test. The Doll Test was created to see how children can react to society's image of race and how it can affect their way of judging other children. Kenneth and Mamie Clark, two psychologists who focused on child development,

conducted a series of tests and interviews with children under the age of six. These tests and interviews involved asking children about their opinions on a whie doll and a black doll, and what traits the children associate with them. For example, the Clarks asked questions like, "Which doll is the good doll? Which doll is the bad doll? Which doll do you like the best? Which doll looks like you?" The purpose of the Clarks questions was to see how both black and white children perceive race, and how children may pick up on racial biases that are commonly spread around the US.

The results of the Doll Test showed that children favor a white doll over a black doll. The children ranked the white doll as being more kind, pretty, and pure than the black doll. When children were then asked which doll they looked more like, some Black children said the white doll, and others said that they looked like the black doll. When the children were brought aware of their similarity to the black doll, many became upset because they became aware that they or others may think of them negatively as well; two children even ran out of the room crying. The results of the Doll Test showed that segregation and racism were very negative for children because they viewed themselves negatively. Additionally, the Doll Test showed that young children were taking in and acting on the racist ideas that were surrounding them. In order to find out how to prevent children from learning these racist ideas, researchers needed to find out how, where, and when children learn about race and racism.

Since the doll test was first conducted, many other studies have worked to see when children begin to develop racial biases. While every child might have a different amount of exposure to other people and the media, scientists have found that even babies distinguish differences in race. Despite what many adults argue, children are not colorblind, and can learn about race and racism from a very early age (Winkler, p. 1). This may begin when babies start seeing the difference in people who are around them. For example, infants gaze much longer at the faces of people of a different race than them (Winkler, p. 1). By 9 months old, children have trouble distinguishing facial features of unfamiliar races, but if the children are regularly shown children's books featuring different racially diverse characters, they can remember when shown pictures of different races faces (PRIDE Report, pg.5). This is important for the children's future because if families and daycare workers expose children to diverse people, or at least characters, before age one, they will not struggle as much to recognize other people's identities. As early as age two, children already begin categorizing people based on race. One reason for this is because

children that age use, "transductive reasoning." This means that children believe that if someone looks like them, they will act like them, but if they look differently, they will probably act differently (Winkler, p. 2). If left unchecked, this leads to stereotyping that can be harmful for all children before they even enter preschool. However, at this young age racism can be untaught to open a child's awareness of other people's differences.

Families are usually the first place that children can learn about race and racism, and therefore they have a strong impact on what the child's perspective is about themselves and others. Kids' own ideas about race and racism can be formed from their parents' opinions, even if the parents did not mean to teach them a specific opinion. Negative messages about race are harmful for every child, but they can especially confuse children who have a multiracial family and may not know how to identify themselves. This is where the parents have to be intentional with teaching their children about themselves and their family's background. In an interview with Ms. Erin Simpson, a mother of three multiracial children, she stated that she is intentional in teaching her children about themselves, especially when choosing the types of media and entertainment that they are exposed to. She is open with her extended family about questions they ask, and generally feels support from loved ones. However, not all families are free from tension. Taylor argued that in some families, even the birth of a child can teach older children racial biases because of their parents' opinions. If parents express either disappointment or happiness about a child's skin tone, it can impact the older child's opinions, too. These colorist ideas can be harmful (Taylor, 2018, p. 3). Colorism is prejudice or discrimination based on the relative lightness or darkness of the skin and is generally a phenomenon occurring within one's own ethnic group (Taylor, 2018, p. 2). Parents need to be aware that they may be carrying their own racial biases, and they must work to check their biases, especially in front of their children.

Children learn about race and racism from sources other than just their families, though. Multiple studies show that children's racial beliefs do not necessarily match their parents' beliefs (Winkler, p. 2). One reason for that may be that the media that children take in, especially through shows and movies, also send signals about race and racism. Therefore large media companies like Disney, as a major producer of children's movies, are important in forming ideas about race and racism. Children sometimes do not see themselves as the protagonists in Disney movies because there are not a lot of protagonists who look like them. More recently, Disney has used fairytales from across the world, which means they have at points included non-white

princesses and characters such as Pocahontas, Mulan, Tiana, and Moana. However, just including non-white characters is not enough to promote positive racial identity. Disney's original films had a theme of defining what the ideal image of a princess is. Most of their main characters are described as ¨pure,¨ and they are the good characters, while the villains are described as, ¨dark" (Hurley, Dorthy). Ursula, The Shadow-Man, Scar, and Maleficent, for example, are all villains who are portrayed with dark tones, which plays on the stereotypes of lightness and whiteness as good and darkness and blackness as bad. Additionally, red lips, fair skin, and blond hair are symbolic markers of beauty in many Disney shows (Hurley, Dorthy). If children see consistent messages that whiteness is good and beautiful, if they do not look like these characters, they may not feel positively about themselves or develop a strong self-esteem around the way that they look.

Positive Racial Identity

Positive racial identity is feeling good about one's physical appearance, cultural practices, and heritage. Positive racial identity does not just mean feeling good about oneself, though. It also means that a person generally has positive feelings about others' diverse backgrounds and identities, too (PRIDE Report). Promoting positive racial identity in young children can have multiple beneficial impacts. First, by explicitly teaching young children about race and racial difference, it gives them a better understanding at a younger age. Researchers see that this leads kids to develop fewer biases as they grow older (Bologna 2020). While some parents and teachers want to avoid discussing race because they fear they are teaching their children racist ideas, it is clear that children pick up racial messages from society. Therefore, it is better to be explicit about teaching positive racial identity rather than leaving young children to learn biased ideas on their own. Additionally, having a positive view of oneself can help children persevere through discrimnation because it is a reminder of where they started and where they want to go. Having a strong positive sense of identity will help develop not only more accepting children, but more resilient ones, as well.

Teaching positive racial identity does not just socially help children, it also allows children to have higher educational achievements at all ages. Having positive racial identity can help social, emotional, and academic achievement in children of all ages (PRIDE Report, p. 1). This could be especially helpful in Pittsburgh, where in grades 3-5 only 33% of African

American students score at proficient or advanced levels on their PSSA reading tests, and only 17% on the PSSA math tests (PRIDE Report, p. 6). One reason that schools avoid teaching about positive racial identity is that they often feel pressure to meet academic standards, and therefore curriculum surrounding race gets pushed to the side (PRIDE Report, p. 3). Positive racial identity curriculum is seen as less essential than math and reading skills, and teachers may assume that children learn about racial identity outside of the classroom. Teachers and schools should instead make positive racial identity a priority in their curriculum because it benefits students both emotionally and academically.

Children who think highly of their racial identity see many positive benefits in and outside of school. Having a positive view of oneself can actually lead to higher resilience, self-esteem, GPAs, test-scores, and reduced risky behavior (PRIDE Report, p.4). Students with positive racial identity are also more likely to succeed even when they have a teacher who may be displaying racial bias in the classroom (PRIDE Report, p. 4). Not only can positive racial identity build resilience in students, but explicitly teaching it could also foster connections between families and teachers. In PPS this is especially important because in a district where 53% of students identify as African American, 85% of teachers are white, and research shows that currently there is some distrust between black families and white teachers (Pittsburgh Public Schools 2020). Teaching positive racial identity could be a good step to build more trust (PRIDE Report, p. 7).

How to Build Positive Racial Identity

There are a multitude of ways that parents, teachers, and community members can help children develop a sense of positive racial identity. One way of building positive racial identity in children is to just have more open conversations with them about what is happening in the world. Currently, black parents are currently more likely to teach their kids about race and racism at a young age to prepare them for school (PRIDE Report, p. 5) However, this needs to be a conversation for all families. Although it may be uncomfortable, parents should talk to their kids about controversial ideas about racism, and actively see what questions their children may have. Initiating conversations is better than waiting for children to ask questions (Bologna 2020). In fact, children who are taught about racism at a young age are less likely to show racial biases at

school (PRIDE Report, p. 5). This is because they have a better sense of knowing that other people have different backgrounds than they themselves do.

Many adults are afraid to talk about race because they do not have resources or feel like an expert in what they are about to talk about (PRIDE Report, p. 1) Their fear of saying something wrong may prevent them from saying anything at all. Other adults consider themselves to colorblind. These adults may think that they treat everyone equally or fairly by not acknowledging race. But by not acknowledging race, a person may be erasing important experiences that are tied to race. This idea ignores that race does impact the way that people interact with society . Fariba Soetan, a founder of My Mixed Race Family, argues that, "Colorblindness does a disservice to children who are noticeably different colors than [white people]. If you ignore the fact that they have different racial identity, you're invalidating their experience" (Bologna 2020). Acknowledging race does not just have to be about racism, but should also be about celebrating and normalizing other cultures. For example, parents can expose children to different cultures by eating wide varieties of foods, or even spending time in neighborhoods other than their own.

Parents should try to talk to their children about race because it can help them in their future. Educating young children about systemic racism, even if it is a hard topic to talk about, can prepare children to stand up to injustice when they inevitably see it in society (Winkler 2009, 4). Parents should at lease mention race and racism to children because they are going to be exposed to it in society. Black parents are currently more likely to teach their kids about race and racism at a young age to prepare them for school (PRIDE Report, p. 5). As children get older,they will start to have questions about the world around them and its best to answer them. Don't quiet children when they have questions about different races and why people are different.

That being said, parents also have the responsibility to talk about the history and effects of systemic racism. The U.S. and other places around the world have a background of racism, and it is still relevant today. Educating young children about systemic racism, even if it is a hard topic to talk about, can prepare children to stand up to injustice when they see it in society. This education can happen when certain current events occur. For example, if the Black Lives Matter movement is on the news, parents should discuss it with their child rather than turning off the news (Bologna 2020). Systemic racism should not just be discussed as isolated events, though. White families in particular need to increase discussions around systemic racism. It is especially

important for white parents to teach their children about white privilege (Bologna 2020). It is not only the responsibility of parents to teach their children positive racial identity; schools and teachers also play a vital role.

Too often, without even knowing it, schools harm students' senses of identity through monitoring their language. Children who speak in their home-dialect are consistently corrected by teachers to use "standard" English, even in informal instances. This has negative effects on them and can hurt students' self-confidence. Students who are consistently corrected are likely to stop asking or answering questions (Wheeler and Swords, p. 470). Not only does it affect individual students, but it can have a collective harm if there are multiple students who speak in different dialects in a room; if they see one person corrected, they may also shut down (Wheeler and Swords, p. 471). Students generally do not want to be corrected in front of their peers, so the children will stop participating in some class activities.

Instead of constantly correcting the students, teachers should help and reward students for code switching. Code switching is changing the way you speak to others based on the specific situation, like whether a person is in an interview or talking with friends. It is valuable for all students to learn to use different tones and language with different audiences because they might need to code switch to be most effective in their communication with others throughout their lives. It would benefit everyone to learn to explain and express their ideas clearly to different audiences (Wheeler and Swords p. 471). For example, the way someone would speak to their friends would be more casual than with a CEO. Teachers should discuss formal and informal language, and they can explicitly discuss situations where students would wear formal or informal clothes to give students an idea of when to use standard English and when to use informal English (Wheeler and Swords p. 475). Teachers should view code switching is a strength, and help kids develop it rather than punishing them for it (Wheeler and Swords, p. 471). Code switching can also help students develop reading and writing skills in standard English because this is expected in academic settings, but when students are speaking in class or trying to understand a concept, allowing them to speak in their own home-dialect may help them master the content more effectively (Wheeler and Swords, p. 471). As long as the children are able to understand the content in their own language, then they will be able to improve their understanding overall. When students are allowed to speak in their home-dialect in the classroom, they show higher rates of achievement (Wheeler and Swords, p. 471). Teachers can

help students develop language skills by affirming students' answers and repeat the idea in standard English (p. 470).

Even people who are not parents or teachers can help children in their communities develop a positive support system. Universities, racial justice groups, funders, and schools can all partner together to build programming to help young kids learn about racial identity (PRIDE Report p. 3). Even people who are not parents or teachers can help children in their communities develop a positive support system. Universities, racial justice groups, funders, and schools can all partner together to build programming to help young kids learn about racial identity Another Pittsburgh program that focuses on positive racial identity is called the Pursuing Equitable Restorative Communities project. This group helped implement restorative practices in half of Pittsburgh's 50 public schools during the 2015-16 and 2016-17 school years. These organizations encourage children to have complex thinking about their own background and other children. This can reduce prejudice towards other children by looking at and naming unique positive attributes in others, rather than just focusing on their skin color (Winkler, 6). They can also teach children to speak up when others are being discriminated against and fight for social justice. (Winkler, 9).

Conclusion

As children grow up they develop ideas about race and racism based on their environments. Schools, family members, and media all play an important role in helping children shape their ideas about identity. It is important that everyone in this environment helps children develop a sense of positive racial identity about themselves and others. Fortunately, there are many ways to help build positive racial identity, including exposing children to people of many different cultures, answering questions about race and racism instead of ignoring them, and allowing for more opportunities to understand other more diverse history. Helping children build positive views of themselves and learn to show respect to others should be a priority not only for parents, but for all members of our communities.

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