

Addressing Implicit Bias in the Early Childhood System

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The early childhood field has its roots in social justice. Whether it's fighting for more resources and access to services for our most vulnerable children and their families, or advocating for fair compensation and better workplace conditions for child care providers, our field has always acted on doing what's right. Last month, at our annual State and Territory Child Care Administrator Meeting, Dr. Walter Gilliam from Yale, presented a new set of research findings that have given our field a new cause to take on: implicit bias.

In his experimental study, Dr. Gilliam asked early educators to watch a video of children in a classroom and press a button each time they saw a "behavior that may become a potential challenge". The video included four children- a black boy and girl and a white boy and girl engaged in a small group activity. In reality, the video had no challenging behaviors in it. Using an eye tracking device, the research team measured where teachers were looking on the screen. Findings revealed that teachers spent significantly more time looking at the black boy in the video, than any other child.

This research may shed some light on the stubborn disparities we see in expulsion and suspension practices. If early educators are scrutinizing black boys more- looking at them more, expecting more challenging behavior from them- we may expect they may find it, or in



some cases think they've found it, even if objectively it is not there. So, while this study is only one study, we interpret it in the context expulsion and suspension data, and in the context of the research that has studied implicit bias in K12 settings.

More than 10 years ago, Dr. Gilliam's research found that expulsions happens at high rates in our world, and that the early childhood system isn't immune to the racial disparities that plague exclusionary discipline in K12 settings. Indeed, he found that black preschool-aged boys were much more likely to suffer from these harsh disciplinary practices. A couple years ago, the Federal government published its own data on preschool suspensions for the first time. The results were

remarkably similar. Though black boys made up 18% of preschool enrollment, they made up 48% of preschoolers who had been suspended. New Federal data released just this year, again, show that the numbers haven't moved. While black children make up 19% of enrollment, they make up 47% of suspensions. This year's data also reveal that black girls make up 20% of the female preschool population, but 54% of all preschool girls suspended.

Of course, when we see such pervasive and long lasting disparities, many of us consider the possibility of bias in the system. Dr. Gilliam's research is important because it provides us with the first set of data that explicitly finds implicit bias in the educators and directors who work in our early childhood programs. While it is exceedingly disturbing that bias, which is pervasive across all systems, is also present in our early childhood programs, it is not surprising.

All of us have biases- no matter what our profession, no matter where we live, or where we're from. We are all exposed to a society that is full of implicit biases—biases of all kinds. In fact, research shows that while explicit bias has decreased in our country over time, implicit bias has remained stable. And it is instilled in us at very early ages. For example, research shows that children as young as 7 begin to show implicit racial biases. One study found that when 5- 7- and 10- year-olds were asked to rate their own pain and the pain of others, 7- and 10- year-olds rated black children as feeling less pain than others.

So, at the end of the day, the question is not whether or not we have bias. The question is how we can address it. During his presentation Dr. Gilliam said there are two types of people-- people with implicit biases who are willing to acknowledge them and address them, and people with implicit biases who turn away and are unwilling to acknowledge them. I'm confident that the people who make up our field- us included- are the former. I know that for the vast majority of our field, the implicit biases we have are not consistent with the principles or world views we ascribe to. They are not consistent with who we aspire to be as individuals, or as a field. Addressing this difficult issue head on is at the very foundation of who we are as a field. This is a challenge that we must work through together.

The good news is we've started making progress.

As most of you now know, in 2014, the President launched the My Brother's Keeper initiative to bridge pervasive opportunity gaps for boys and young men of color. One of the key recommendations in the effort is to eliminate expulsions and suspensions in early childhood settings and to provide early educators with the support they need to prevent these practices- including supports to acknowledge and address implicit biases. Later that year, HHS and ED released the first ever Federal [policy statement on expulsions and suspensions](#), with a comprehensive set of recommendations to prevent and eventually eliminate expulsions and suspensions and to build workforce capacity to support children's social-emotional development and address implicit biases.

Today, we are continuing that work and releasing informational memoranda, through the Offices of Child Care (<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/occ/resource/im-2016-03>) and Head Start (<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/im>), to support further implementation. We are also

releasing an updated resource guide

https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ece/early_childhood_expulsion_resource_guide_11_4_16_final.pdf

that highlights State and local progress on preventing and eliminating expulsions and suspensions.

Our strategy to support early educators has been multipronged, with a focus on embedding issues of equity and implicit bias in professional development models that are widely scaled. Last year, together with our partners at SAMSHA and HRSA, we launched the new National Center of Excellence in Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (ECMHC). This new TA center aims to develop a state of the art toolkit and provide on-the-ground technical assistance to States and tribal communities. An important part of that work is addressing implicit bias through ECMHC.

In August, HHS and ED launched the Pyramid Equity Project. The Pyramid Equity Project will pilot an enhanced version of the Pyramid Model to support teachers in fostering children's social-emotional and behavior development, while also explicitly addressing issues of implicit bias and disproportionality in discipline.

We also recently transformed our TA system. A critical part of that transformation is embedding principles of equity, inclusiveness, and cultural and linguistic responsiveness across everything we do. That work includes taking a hard look at how we support programs and States on issues of implicit bias.

As our Administration begins to wind down, we're confident that our field will take charge and continue growing the tools and resources available to help us address this issue and live up to the system we want to be for children and families. One that embraces diversity, that is culturally and linguistically competent, that is aware of its own biases and how they affect our work, and is proactive in addressing them.

In the coming weeks, we will be hosting a webinar on this issue to continue the conversation. We hope you can join us.