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# PROMOTING A POSITIVE RACIAL IDENTITY IN YOUNG AFRICAN CARIBBEAN CHILDREN: AN ANTI-COLONIAL APPROACH

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*Abstract: Most empirical contributions on children and race, and the theories derived from this body of work, have focused on American or Canadian children. Some scholars have begun to explore children's attitudes about race in international contexts, but few have investigated racial identity and attitudes among African Caribbean children in the English-speaking Caribbean context. In this article, we first review international scholarship on children and race, as well as research involving Caribbean children and race. Next, we use an anti-colonial perspective to explore specific pedagogical strategies that can support positive racial identities among young African Caribbean children in the region.*

*"Without a strong cultural identity, one is lost"* (Asante, 1991, p. 177).

The topic of children and race has a long-standing history in the scholarly literature. Commencing with early investigations conducted in the United States (Clark & Clark, 1940; 1947), and later in Canada (for a review, see Escayg, Berman, & Royer, 2017), Australia (Black-Gutman & Hickson, 1996; MacNaughton, Davis, & Smith, 2009) and the Caribbean (Bagley & Young; Cramer & Anderson, 2003; Escayg, 2014; 2017; Ferguson & Cramer, 2007; Gopaul-McNicol, 1995), researchers have consistently found that during the preschool years, children develop specific in- and out-group racial attitudes. More specifically, they have identified higher rates of accurate self-identification and in-group positive evaluations among White children, especially between the ages of four and five. In contrast, racialized children, and in particular Black children, tend to exhibit either a positive racial identity or a pro-White bias (Escayg et al., 2017).

Many researchers have focused on age-related cognition to explain the development of children's racial attitudes (e.g., Aboud, 2008; Goodman, 1952/1964; Katz, 1976; Nesdale, 2004). However, while these theoretical frameworks are useful in explicating White children's prejudice to some extent, they have generally failed to reveal how racialized children develop their pro-White attitudes. In response to such limitations, some researchers have questioned the suitability of socio-cognitive theoretical orientations to fully explain how children formulate and enact their racial consciousness. Consequently, some have engaged critical theories such as post-structural (Davis, MacNaughton, & Smith, 2009) anti-racism (Escayg et al., 2017) and critical race theory (MacNevin & Berman, 2017) to deconstruct and problematize the influence of power relations and racial and (neo)colonizing discourse on how young children participate in the process of racialization by assigning socially constructed meanings and values to their own identity and those of others.

While these theoretical perspectives have been brought in conversation with empirical data, most scholarship has been conducted in the American (e.g., Brinson, 2001; Byrd et al., 2017; Perszyk, Lei, Bodenhausen, Richeson, & Waxman, 2019), Canadian (e.g., Corenblum & Armstrong, 2012; Gonzalez, Steele, & Baron, 2017; MacNevin & Berman, 2017) and Australian (e.g., Griffiths & Nesdale, 2006; Nesdale, Maass, Durkin, & Griffiths, 2005) contexts. With some exceptions (Escayg, 2014; Escayg, 2017; Gopaul-McNicol, 1995), very little work has investigated racial identity development among Caribbean children, or used an anti-colonial/Pan-African lens to explore these issues.

In this paper, therefore, we analyze the literature on Caribbean children's racial identity from an anti-colonial Caribbean perspective. Based on this regional and theoretical exegesis, and with the goal of contributing to

decolonizing discourse in early childhood education, we present specific classroom strategies that early childhood teachers can deploy to promote positive racial identity, while subverting the hegemonic influence of colonial racial ideologies on the self-concept of young African Caribbean children.

## **Caribbean Children and Race: A Review**

Although the literature is sparse, investigations of racial identity and in- and out-group attitudes among Caribbean children have yielded results similar to those of American and Canadian studies: children typically impute more positive evaluations to White stimuli such as dolls or photographs. Gopaul-McNicol (1995) used a revised version of Clark and Clark's (1947) doll test, which included additional questions such as "Which doll would you like to be when you get big?" and "Do you have a doll at home that looks like this (point to White/Black doll)?" She found that Jamaican, Grenadian, Barbadian and Jamaican children preferred the White doll, and also assigned more positive adjectives to the White doll.

Evidence suggests that such White preference has remained constant over the years: Cramer and Anderson (2003) observed a pro-White bias among three-year-old Black Jamaican children, and Ferguson and Cramer (2007) built on these findings to examine the relationship between skin tone and self-esteem among 200 children (either in kindergarten or in grades 5–6) in rural and urban Jamaica. Their results revealed a disturbing trend: "children who self-identified as White had higher self-esteem than those who self-identified as Black" (p. 354). However, few other scholars have explored the congruency between self-esteem and racial self-identification among children, particularly in the Caribbean context.

Most empirical investigations on Caribbean children and race have utilized quantitative designs. However, in one recent study, Escayg (2014) employed a photo stimuli set to investigate racial awareness, self-identification and attitudes among preschool Trinidadian children, as well as interviews in which children were asked to self-identify with a racial label and express their understandings of racial terms (e.g., What does the word Indian mean?), to gather more robust data on children's racial understandings. In contrast to previous investigations, the results revealed a higher level of accurate self-identification among African Trinidadian children, although the majority of children did not express clear understandings of racial terms. Some of the author's findings regarding children's racial attitudes, specifically positive attitudes about lighter skin tones, support those of previous studies. Children tended to prefer the photo stimuli of an Indian female child with a lighter skin tone; when prompted to provide reasons for their selection, they often stated skin color or hair texture.

Overall, the sparse yet significant research on racial attitudes among Caribbean children (specifically pro-White preference and bias) has implicated historical legacies such as colonization and slavery (Bagley & Young, 1988; Gopaul-McNicol, 1995) and parental socialization (Escayg, 2014; Gopaul-McNicol, 1995) as the most salient factors underpinning children's racial awareness, preference and attitudes. A more contemporary explanation for the pro-Indian bias, however, points to the societal depictions of Black as opposed to White and Indian identity. Furthermore, the positive representations of Indian identity, due to the power dynamics present in the Trinidadian context at such time, can also account for children's pro-Indian bias (Escayg, 2014). Despite these contributions, more anti-colonial analysis is needed.

## **An Anti-colonial Caribbean Analysis of Caribbean Children's Racial Identity and Attitudes**

An examination of the limited data on Caribbean children and race reveals that for the most part, while addressing developmental constraints, researchers have interpreted the broad range of children's racial knowledge (including skin-tone preferences) as indicative of the psycho-social effects of colonization and slavery as well as the influence of neocolonizing practices: namely, the imposition of Western media and culture.

Previous research has relied on one or all of these explanations to make sense of Caribbean children's racial/skin tone attitudes; the application of an anti-colonial Caribbean theoretical framework (Escayg, 2014; Escayg, 2018; Escayg & Kinkead-Clark, 2018) can bring together and further develop such themes by situating historical analyses within more nuanced exegeses of the psychological violence inherent in colonialism, colonial, and neocolonial childhoods (Escayg, 2014). Specifically, an anti-colonial Caribbean theory drawing on both children's and adults' experiences, applies an intergenerational perspective to delineate specific attributes of the psychological violence of colonization and slavery (such as internalization of colonial racial logic), and examines

how such experiences, through parental socialization, school and societal contexts, provide children with racialized understandings that mirror past colonial and current neocolonial relationships. The emphasis on childhood decolonization is a distinguishing feature of anti-colonial Caribbean theory, and as such, provides conceptual clarity and context from which to understand the relational and contextual dynamics (societal, historical, parental socialization) that influence how children come to identify with, perceive, and assign value to their racial group.

Escayg (2014) has worked to explicate the process of racial identity formation by taking into account the effects of colonialism, slavery, colorism, and the influence of nationalist identity, which constitute the primary defining tenets of anti-colonial Caribbean theory. One of the enduring social and psychological legacies of slavery in the Caribbean is the devaluing of Blackness (Bagley & Young, 1988). To account for such practices, Escayg (2014) engaged in a more psychoanalytic reading, drawing on Fanon's (1967) analysis of the impact of colonization on the psyche of the colonized (specifically, approximation to and desire for Whiteness) as well as Patterson's (1982) theory of social death (the absence of culture and identity due to the physical and psychological violence of slavery), terming such processes as "loss." Simply stated, loss is operationalized on two levels: first, as an internalized self-concept that hinges on and reifies colonial racial ideologies, including the dehumanizing of Blackness; and second, working in tandem with the former, as an attitudinal component that prompts one to either deny or distance one's self from Black/African identity (Escayg, 2014).

Calypso music can be considered a form of social commentary, largely derived from the traditions of African ancestors in the Caribbean. It has often been used as a creative outlet to express and analyze negative collective and individual perceptions about Blackness and African identity. In 1983, the famous calypso artist Hollis Urban Lester Liverpool (better known as Chalkdust or Chalkie) released a song called *They Ain't See Africa At All*:

I see Black women running from their race.  
 They own Black children, they can't face.  
 They don't know their roots have a glorious bloom.  
 .....  
 They does be acting as if they shame of their history.  
 They does take pride in other people's own. (as cited in Davies, 1985, p. 78)

Recent research involving Black Trinidadian and Jamaican children indicates that this kind of distancing from Blackness remains a common cultural practice, although it is important to note that among some adult Trinidadians, Blackness has functioned and continues to function as a social location of both resistance and racial pride (Escayg, 2014).

Similar to the findings of other scholars working to center Afrocentric knowledge, culture and Pan-African identity in the English-speaking Caribbean context, pride in African/African Caribbean identity involves disrupting the lies, myths and tainted histories that position Blackness as inferior. Concomitantly, racial pride is predicated on accurate historical knowledge that reveals the varied contributions of Africans and their descendants throughout the diaspora and the central roles they played in the development of the world. Further, a consciousness rooted in historical accuracy can recognize and disavow the insidiousness of color-consciousness, repudiating the social meanings and assumed supremacy attached to lighter skin tones.

In the African American community (which bears much similarity to the Caribbean context), colorism is "a form of internalized racism that promotes bias and favor for light skin, European features and good (i.e. straight) hair" (Wilder, 2015, p. 6). In the Caribbean, colorism still exemplifies the concept of loss and points to a colonized self-concept (Escayg, 2014), and these societal views and values may inform the racial identity development of Caribbean children. Furthermore, colorism has its historical genesis in colonization and slavery, and should be construed as form of social control and rationalizing ideology. One can also argue that colorism is also a form of psychological violence: it imprints on the psyche that skin color – a feature of one's self that is visible to the self and others – is inferior and lacks value. Such perceptions can and do give rise to many self-destructive behaviors, with one of the most deleterious effects being the high rates of skin bleaching in Jamaica (see, for example, Charles, 2009; Law & Tate, 2015; Wallace, 2009). Results from Charles's (2009) research, for instance, revealed that one of the reasons for skin bleaching among participants was "that dark skin is devalued and light skin is valued in Jamaican society" (p. 163).

The psychological impact of colonization manifests in the adoption of the colonizer's racial logic and accordant behaviors. In doing so, identity construction becomes a discursive process, one which is related to the lived experiences(s), material and immaterial, of colonial and neocolonial violence, as well as the denying of Black/African identity. This in turn sanctions the myth of White supremacy: indeed, this process functions as form of psychological acquiescence to the mechanisms of colonial and neocolonial social/cultural subjugation. As a

result, there is an urgent moral and educational need to promote a positive racial identity in young African Caribbean children.

## **Fostering Racial Pride in African Caribbean children: Anti-colonial Activities**

A diverse body of scholarship on socialization among African American families has documented the ways in which parents instill racial pride in young children and adolescents (see Hughes et al., 2006 for a review), although few studies have explored the racial socialization strategies used by teachers. With the exception of Escayg (2014; 2018), virtually no research has investigated how early childhood educators in the Caribbean promote positive racial identities in young children or create culturally inclusive classrooms. However, the limited data available indicate that addressing race and racial identity in the classroom is not a core feature of teachers' everyday practice (Escayg, 2014; 2018). Young children in the Caribbean, however, continue to be exposed to the racial messages and images of the American media. Constructed out of a "white racial frame," such messages often represent whiteness as superior (Feagin, 2010), and can also influence young African Caribbean children's racial self-perceptions.

One dimension of the decolonized Caribbean early childhood education model (Escayg & Kinkead-Clark, 2018) focuses on children's racial identity. However, we recognize that effective anti-colonial pedagogies in the classroom will require teacher training programs that reflect anti-colonial perspectives, and also offer a wide range of opportunities to develop culturally relevant understandings among children, as well as teaching practices (Escayg, 2018; Escayg & Kinkead-Clark, 2018). Despite the limited scholarship in this area, previous research on the Caribbean and anti-colonial tenets can inform some specific strategies, which educators can apply to foster a decolonizing classroom environment in which young children can learn about and appreciate, value and honor their African ancestry.

Literature on Caribbean children and race has demonstrated that skin color is salient to a child's racial self-identification, and that children impute specific beliefs, attitudes and judgments about skin color (e.g., Bagley & Young, 1988; Escayg, 2014; Gopaul- McNicol, 1995). In light of these findings, pedagogical strategies should foster racial pride through teacher-led activities that affirm the positive value of darker skin tones, enact African cultural ways of knowing, such as storytelling (Escayg & Kinkead-Clark, 2018) and teach children about the contributions of African and African Caribbean societies and individuals. Afrocentric play-based classrooms can also be effective. The teaching strategies described below reflect many Afrocentric and Pan-African principles, so a brief review of Afrocentric education is important to contextualize the pedagogical interventions proposed and demonstrate how they relate to the theoretical literature.

## **African Caribbean Children's Identity and Afrocentric Teaching Practices**

African American scholarship on racism, education and African American children's educational experiences in relation to their identity and overall well-being provide the overarching historical and conceptual underpinnings of Afrocentric education. Asante (1991) defined an African-centered approach to education as one in which "teachers provide students the opportunity to study the world and its people, concepts, and history from an African world view" (p. 171). In essence, Afrocentric education situates African history, identity and culture as the reference point from which to engage in curriculum, teaching and learning practices. Anti-colonial Caribbean theory dovetails with Afrocentric education as both emphasize the importance of centering indigenous (African) knowledges.

Afrocentric education also involves specific constructs or principles, some of which were identified by Shockley and Cleveland (2011): "identity, Pan Africanism, African/African American culture, African values adoption and transmission, Black nationalism, community control/institution building and education as opposed to schooling" (p. 56). With regard to identity, an African-centered education not only disrupts the negative associations attached to Africa and African identity, but also ensures that African children across the diaspora appreciate, honor and value their African identity (Shockley & Frederick, 2010). Afrocentric education avers that positive racial identity, and an awareness of one's culture and contributions, support the psychological well-being of students, fostering self-acceptance, self-esteem, and academic success (Shockley & Cleveland, 2011). In this way, African-centered education is counter-hegemonic and directly linked to Pan-Africanism/unity. The next section presents

specific teaching strategies that are consistent with the central tenets of Afro-centric education: identity and Pan-Africanism.

### *Black is Beautiful!*

One way teachers can usurp the colonial product of colorism (including negative evaluations of African hair texture) in the classroom is to use stories. Few of these have been written specifically about the Caribbean context, but stories about African American children resonate with many Caribbean children. For example, Tarpley's 1998 book, *I Love My Hair*, presents a familiar storyline and vivid images. It teaches children about a girl who embraces and values her hair, and by extension, her identity. Teachers can also use children's literature to discuss the beauty of all darker skin tones, and can expand on these themes by ensuring that diverse drawing materials, such as markers and crayons, are available in the classroom.

Escayg (2014) found that by the time they enter preschool, some children may have already formed incipient negative judgments of darker skin tones, and may even refuse to use darker markers or crayons when creating their self-portraits. To counter this problem, teachers could create a classroom mural with pictures of brown and darker skin tones, and place an index card under each shade with the words beautiful and valuable so that children can connect the visual aids with the written adjectives (the term 'valuable' may need to be defined for younger children). The goal of this activity is for teachers to first challenge the socially ascribed meanings associated with lighter skin tones, and second to reinforce verbally and by way of visual representation an anti-colonial perspective of Black identity: pride in and acceptance of Black physical/racial characteristics and capacities. Teachers could also develop a series of lessons on African queens and kings (see, for example, Boutte, Johnson, Wynter-Hoyte, & Uyaota, 2017) to expose children to the pre-European slavery history of Africa, and provide contradictory evidence to the widely disseminated cultural images/racialized beliefs that denigrate Blackness and exalt Whites as the 'rightful' bearers of humanity.

### *Representation is Resistance: African and African Caribbean Heroes/Cultural Figures and Storytelling*

Anti-colonial teaching and learning involves re-telling history, re-naming the realities of colonization through the prism of lived experiences and highlighting cultural heroes who have critiqued and resisted the colonial violence of anti-Blackness. Anti-colonial methodologies engage in historical analyses of a given social context—as well as the voice of the colonized/formerly colonized (Dei, 2012). For example, teachers in Caribbean early childhood classrooms can incorporate African Caribbean and African historical and contemporary figures into classroom discussions. In doing so, they can guide children through the process of questioning and critiquing prevailing images/stereotypes of African and African Caribbean individuals. It is important that they select both males and females so as to not further elide the experiences and contributions of African Caribbean women. Teachers could approach these storytelling activities in many ways; one is to begin by assessing prior knowledge. For example, they could ask, "What do you know of ...?" "Can you tell me what kind of person you think he or she is?" Posing questions such as these may invite a diverse range of responses, and can also reveal any misconceptions children may have of the individual in question. Additionally, teachers can enhance children's learning across cross-curricular domains, such as drama, by helping them create short skits based on selected events related to African and African Caribbean individuals.

Several historical and contemporary Caribbean individuals have been noted for their resistance against colonialism and neocolonialism. Teachers could focus on one or more of them, creating a lesson or unit in which the individual's life is used as an entry point to discuss the historical context and how former colonial powers contributed to some of the current social-economic issues facing the region. Teachers may create a wide range of anti-colonial lesson plans, but the emphasis should be on explicating terms such as power relationships and injustice(s) by highlighting how these issues manifest in the larger societal context as well as in the socio-cultural experiences of children. Escayg and Kinkead-Clark (2018) noted that anti-colonial Caribbean early childhood education should be informed by a broader framework of decolonization: the goal is to develop a historical consciousness via thoughtful, systemic analysis of current realities.

Among older children, such as those aged eight and above, teachers can present Pan-African connections such as how African Caribbean leaders collaborated with Africans and African Americans to challenge neocolonialism and racism (e.g., the role of Kwame Ture, a Trinidadian by birth, in the Civil Rights and Pan-African Movement). This kind of Pan-African lesson can help students understand the common struggles of African peoples across the globe, including colonization and slavery, methods of resistance deployed, and possibilities for Pan-African unity. By learning about the linkages between self and other, regionally and globally, students will be well-

positioned to challenge the crucible of global White hegemony – and to disrupt the master narrative that contaminates children’s consciousness with dehumanizing falsehoods about who they are, where they come from, and who/what they can aspire to be.

### *An African Caribbean Play-Based Early Years Classroom*

Research on racial socialization practices among African American parents has revealed that the home environment, in particular an Afrocentric home environment, promotes problem-solving skills among young African American children (Caughy, Randolph, & O’ Campo, 2002). However, with the exception of some literature about Afrocentric education, no scholarship appears to have focused on the features of an Afrocentric early years classroom or an African Caribbean early years classroom environment. Still, the Afrocentric Home Environment Inventory (Caughy et al., 2002) can provide some clues about what elements should be included. For example, one item on the inventory is the presence of children’s books about African Americans. Although few children’s picture books have focused on the Caribbean context (Escayg & Kinkead-Clark, 2018), teachers could create a storytelling center where children are encouraged (with the guidance of the teacher) to tell their own stories orally. Teachers can also guide children’s thinking and develop their creativity and literacy skills by using pictures of local contexts such as the beach, and items such as regional foods, as prompts for stories. This kind of approach is consistent with African worldviews and epistemologies, and also contrasts sharply with the colonial teaching pedagogies of passive learning, recall, and regurgitation (London, 2002). Choice and creativity have largely been absent from the colonial education experience (London, 2002), but anti-colonial education techniques can remedy such past injustices by re-engaging the tenets of African epistemologies, including the use of stories as a medium of learning and cultural expression.

For older children, such as four and five-year-olds, play centers could include Kente cloth (Boutte, Johnson, Wynter-Hoyte, & Uyoata, 2017) and Caribbean cultural items such as mini Carnival costumes with masks, feathers and sequins; children could be encouraged to create their own Carnival costumes. To supplement play-based learning, teachers should engage in ongoing whole-group discussions about the history of Carnival in the Caribbean and how it is derived from African cultural art forms. These activities may already be in place during the Carnival season, but it is important to foster a year-round appreciation of Caribbean and African cultural practices in students. Pretend play centers should also incorporate musical instruments from the Caribbean, such as a child’s steel pan, as well as food items that reflect the child’s local context.

In summary, although scholarship focusing on Caribbean children and race is limited, it has consistently shown that African Caribbean children prefer lighter skin tones. Most researchers have attributed this to the effects of colonialism and slavery and their underlying ideological component: anti-Blackness discourse. This paper has briefly examined such exegeses and the interplay between psychological violence and colorism, and has proposed some practical pedagogical activities guided by anti-colonial analyses of racial attitudes among Caribbean children. Decolonizing perceptions – particularly perceptions surrounding color and African identity among young African Caribbean children – will be an ongoing endeavor. Although this will be challenging, it should lead African Caribbean children to a place of self-knowledge, value, pride and acceptance. From this place, a social location typified by agency and a sense of worth, children can resist both past and present colonizing influences. Racial pride begets resistance – and resistance is power.

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