Understanding PRIDE in Pittsburgh

Executive Summary

According to critical race theorists, racism in America is so entrenched that it has become ordinary. Although the effects may vary, it impacts all Americans, Black and White, old and young. For young children of color the experience is daily messages, explicit or subtle, from individuals and institutions: you are not as good, not as lovable, not as beautiful, and not as smart as children of the dominant race. Messages from school, such as lower teacher expectations and disproportionate suspensions, begin early and continue as children grow and mature. When the events are repeated, the negative impact on their well-being is compounded. For African American children in particular, these encounters have been associated with increased negative perceptions of themselves and their racial group. Because it is such a deep-rooted problem, a societal level response is required in order to address racism systemically, however there is a place to begin at the local level.

After reviewing available literature; collecting input from teachers, stakeholders, and parents; and observing local early childhood classrooms, this scan identified a proactive, actionable concept with the potential to protect young African American children in Pittsburgh from the harmful effects of racism: supporting their positive racial identity development in early education (PRIDE). For the purposes of this report, racial identity describes a person’s identification with membership in a socially designated racial group. Positive racial identity development has been linked to a plethora of affirming social, emotional, and academic outcomes in children from preschool age through high school, including better problem solving and improved behavior. The conclusions and recommendations presented here aim to help young African American children, ages 3 to 6, develop a positive racial identity, which supports positive self-perception and a sense of belonging to their own racial group and encourages future academic success.

As with other things that are different, children seek to understand and interpret racial differences, for example skin color or hair texture. When they have questions about race, they naturally turn to the important adults in their lives — teachers, parents, other family members — for answers. Yet often adults are afraid to talk
The goals of the scan were to assess if and how parents and teachers discuss race with young children, to determine what developmental issues exist as they relate to positive racial identity, and to generate recommendations and promote collaborations around this important issue.

Focus of the Scan

The Race and Early Childhood Collaborative is a partnership of the Office of Child Development, the Center for Urban Education, and the Supporting Early Education and Development (SEED) Lab within the University of Pittsburgh School of Education. Guided by the literature on race and early childhood, the collaborative focused on understanding the local status of PRIDE in terms of parent, teacher, and stakeholder awareness of PRIDE benefits, the quantity and quality of existing interventions, and current policies.

Goals and Methods

The goals of the scan were to assess if and how parents and teachers discuss race with young children, to determine what developmental issues exist as they relate to positive racial identity, and to generate recommendations and encourage collaborations around this important issue. The process was centered on learning from the research and from parents, educators, and other key informants, what is already known, what currently is being done, and what gaps exist regarding race and young children. This information was gathered through focus groups, surveys, interviews, classroom observations, and literature and curricula reviews. These methods and the resultant recommendations were guided and reviewed by a diverse advisory committee made up of representatives from various disciplines, practices, races, and ethnicities.

* Increasingly referred to as the ‘opportunity gap’ or what Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings calls ‘the education debt’. 
Parents and teachers consistently expressed a need for more resources to build children's positive racial identity and more support in learning what to do and what to say when issues of race emerge. These adults want to know how to initiate thoughtful conversations and activities that will help children feel good about every aspect of themselves—race, ethnicity, skin color, hair texture—and how to encourage them to embrace the differences of others. Likewise, stakeholders representing schools, community organizations, and the child development field, all believe more work is needed to support children's positive racial identity development, which is correlated with multiple social-emotional and academic benefits.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Supporting PRIDE will require consistent work at many levels.

Researchers, teachers, and parents alike believe white privilege and systemic institutional racism must be addressed if young African American children are to ever reach their fullest potential. Similarly, many understand that adults have to address racism through individual means including increased personal awareness of race, and, for educators, through ongoing race-focused professional development.

This scan adds to that understanding the need for concrete, tangible, developmentally appropriate conversations, activities, and curricula that build PRIDE at a crucial time in children's lives: ages 3 to 6. The report demonstrates the degree to which these skills can potentially influence the long term achievements of young African American children and as such how important it is that they are encouraged and supported both at home and in school. It also shows that parents and teachers are hungry for strategies to build PRIDE. Mechanisms for practical application are currently missing and must be implemented now.

Pittsburgh is primed to make a difference for young African American children.

Changing the way all young children understand and experience race will ultimately require comprehensive and systemic change. The challenge, however, is that current theories and best practices in early childhood education have largely ignored race, while groups and organizations focused on race have largely ignored young children. Pittsburgh is uniquely ready to take on this challenge now. Local strengths
The Race and Early Childhood Collaborative include a rich base of expertise in early childhood and a growing community of researchers and practitioners focused on race who both agree that addressing race based inequities is a priority. Together they have a unique opportunity to collaborate and develop needed resources for parents and educators to support young African American children in the Pittsburgh region in knowing just how good, lovable, beautiful, and smart (capable) they really are, and that they can succeed.

Therefore, the scan recommends these steps for achieving this:

1. **Raise community awareness**

The PRIDE scan is just one of many sparks needed to start conversations about race and early childhood—parents, educators, and advisors agree that more is needed. While there are some community leaders, groups, and organizations that already celebrate African American culture locally, specific recommendations to build awareness are:

- **Organize a lecture series on race and early childhood.** Expert speakers will draw attention to the issue, highlight new and critical research, broaden community knowledge, and generate new ideas.

- **Host events that focus on young African American children and their families.** Pittsburgh has a growing base of activities and cultural events that celebrate African Americans. However, many of these programs are designed for adults and older children and do not offer opportunities to help the youngest children celebrate their race and culture. Similarly, there are many rich activities for young children and families in Pittsburgh, but the vast majority are coordinated by white organizations, attract predominantly white families, and rarely focus intentionally on activities that promote positive racial identity. (A couple exceptions are Community Empowerment Association and Sankofa Village.) There is a great opportunity to build on these strengths to incorporate the best aspects of cultural projects into programming for early childhood.

- **Identify potential collaborations** that bring together leaders from multiple fields of knowledge. Pittsburgh has a long-standing and well respected early childhood community plus a growing number of advocates for racial justice who should join forces to enhance the existing conversations about how to

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* Parents is used here to refer to family members (and others) who are the primary home caregivers of young children.
make Pittsburgh great for all children. Our hope is that these discussions will produce opportunities to increase positive racial identity development in young children; African American children in particular.

2. Develop and identify resources for parents, teachers, and schools

A pervasive theme across all respondents was the need for more resources and more support. Positive racial identity development in young children is an important issue, but many parents and teachers do not know where to start. Resources should be developed that will allow people to engage in this work now while helping them to become more aware and better skilled over time. For some, that could be something as simple as reading books to children that contain more diverse characters. For others, that could mean developing policies that promote positive racial identity development and create safe, nurturing environments where all children feel valued and represented. Some places to start this work include:

**For Parents:**
- **Create and provide multimodal materials** (e.g., books, videos, and songs) that foster children’s racial and cultural pride, including diverse children’s films, and African American stories.
- **Develop concrete implementation strategies** for parents that explain the importance of positive racial identity development.
- **Develop curriculum and training for parent groups/family groups** where parents can learn skills, share resources, and provide each other with support in helping their children develop positive racial identity and where parents and children can come together for positive experiences such as group readings of racially and ethnically diverse books.
- Provide resources, training, and modeling that will **support parent-child and parent-teacher communication** about race.
- **Provide access to affordable means to trace family ancestry.**
- Offer tools, resources, and information to **help families evaluate their children’s learning environments** for culturally relevant teaching.
- **Engage family support centers, early childhood programs, and other parent gathering places** to offer these groups and resources.

**For Teachers:**
- **Expand training opportunities that increase racial awareness**, including pre-service preparation (classroom and placement) and ongoing in-service professional development (traditional trainings and informal learning communities).
- Develop and support the use of more resources that allow teachers to **intentionally foster positive racial identities for all students.**
- Provide resources, training, and modeling that will **support teacher-child and teacher-parent communication** about race.
- Offer support to **develop and maintain racially responsive classrooms and teaching practices**.

**For Schools:**
- Make available increased opportunities for teachers and parents to have **conversations about race in the classroom**.
- Provide more school-wide **supporting materials and technical assistance**.
- Offer increased opportunities to **partner with community members who are knowledgeable about race** including leaders within organizations or parents and teachers at the school.

3. **Call to Action for researchers, practitioners, and policy makers**

**For Researchers:**
- Conduct more **research on positive racial identity development** and its impact on child development outcomes with a focus on young children ages 0-6.
- Produce more research on **teaching practices** that support positive racial identity development.
- Explore children’s development of **race-related skills** and outcomes as a mechanism for creating racially responsive classrooms.

**For Practitioners:**
- **Develop networks and learning communities** to gain more knowledge and awareness about race and young children.
- Provide **training and learning opportunities on race** for professionals, paraprofessionals, and others who work with families.
For Policy Makers, Funders, and Supporters:

- Encourage grantees to include PRIDE activities in their work.
- Require racial awareness training for teacher certification.
- Recommend early childhood education advocates join conversations about race, thereby focusing race discussions on the youngest population.
- Ensure positive racial identity development and racially responsive classrooms are incorporated into standards.
- Incorporate training on race into evaluations and career lattices for teachers.
- Expand opportunities for African American teachers and mentors to engage with the youngest students, both in school and through community and out of school time activities.

Findings of the scan confirmed that there is a critical need for parents and teachers to support positive racial identity development among young children of color and to help teachers to move away from a “colorblind” approach. The information gathered also demonstrates that there is a broad gap between the need and desire on the one hand and the awareness, supports, research, programs, and policies available on the other. It is clear that to have the largest impact for children, efforts to address positive racial identity need to be developed and addressed at multiple levels across the community. Parents, educators, and key stakeholders stated that the networks available to better understand and support each other in this work need to be stronger and broader. In addition, efforts are needed that will address disparities, while creating wide-ranging change. The hope is that these scan findings will contribute to the knowledge developing around race and will be used to find solutions to educational inequalities, particularly those impacting our youngest children.

The vision that has emerged from the work of the collaborative is for funders, the early education community, racial justice groups, universities, and community based cultural institutions to begin to work both on their own and collaboratively to develop ways to support parents and educators in helping our youngest and most vulnerable children. The hope is that the efforts and projects that are created will become models for other communities engaging in this work.

Endnotes

1 Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007
3 U. S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection, Data Snapshot: Early Childhood Education Issue Brief No. 2 (March 2014)
7 Wijeyesinghe, C. and Jackson, B. W. New Perspectives on Racial Identity Development: Integrating Emerging Frameworks. 2012 NYU Press
Cue Education

Cue.pitt.edu

Contributors

The Center for Urban Education’s (CUE) vision is to be a transformative institution for asset-based discovery, knowledge sharing, and service to urban communities in order to improve educational experiences and the human condition. Our mission is to impact urban education on local, regional and national levels. We focus our research and service through people, products, projects and events in three core areas: Educator Preparation and Development, Community Partnerships and Engagement, and Student Academic and Social Development.

The Office of Child Development (OCD) is a university-community partnership dedicated to improving the lives of children, youth, and families. Through interdisciplinary collaborations across research, practice, and policy, we strive to turn knowledge into action and respond creatively and collaboratively to challenges facing children in Pittsburgh and around the world. Work on this scan was an outgrowth of Ready Freddy (readyfreddy.org), a collaborative project with Pittsburgh Public Schools, community organizations, and parents designed to support transition to and through kindergarten.

The Supporting Early Education and Development (SEED) Lab is directed by Dr. Shannon Wanless and consists of undergraduate and graduate students in the School of Education at the University of Pittsburgh who are interested in early childhood research and practice. Recent projects include providing local professional development, collaborating with the Fred Rogers Company, and studying psychological safety across contexts.

University of Pittsburgh

School of Education

Office of Child Development
400 North Lexington Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15208

ocd.pitt.edu

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