Confronting Racism and Ableism Within Early Childhood: Reflections and Strategies from a Preschool Teacher with Cerebral Palsy

Introduction

In the United States, 96.7% of the early childhood education workforce is female, and about 60% of the teachers are primarily non-Hispanic white women (Coffey, 2022). However, studies have shown that the population of young children is getting more diverse each year in the U.S. More than 53% of children under the age of six years are non-white (US Census Bureau, 2023). Therefore, U.S. schools frequently mirror a white-centric culture that may not adequately support students who do not conform to this dominant norm. Some children are more likely to be considered “bad students” in school because they do not fit into their teacher's perception of cultural norms (Velasco Beltrán & Velasco Beltrán, 2023). Racism and other forms of bias have deleterious effects on young children (Shonkoff, Slopen, & Williams, 2021). These biases can adversely affect a child’s early childhood education by fostering prejudice in the classroom. These underlying prejudices can hinder children's learning experiences, especially children with disabilities (Kołłątaj et al., 2025).

This paper explores racism and ableism in early childhood education, with an emphasis on how teachers' implicit biases affect children's learning in the classroom. It draws on the first author's year-long experience as a preschool student teacher with cerebral palsy in two prekindergarten classrooms. As a person with a disability, the first author offers a critical insider perspective on how quickly non-disabled individuals form judgments based on her appearance. This paper will first define structural racism and ableism and propose three strategies to reduce and prevent these biases and ableism in early childhood settings.

Structural Racism

Structural racism is defined as a system that comprises values, policies, and practices separating all children of color from the class, thus establishing a dominant white culture in school settings (Boone et al., 2021). These systemic inequities contribute to the exclusion and segregation of children of color in early education contexts. Research indicates that Black and Latinx children experience some of the lowest levels of inclusive classroom participation, with many spending 80% or more of the school day in specialized or separate settings (Boone et al., 2021). Such disparities undermine principles of inclusion, participation, access, and full membership in school communities for many children of color.

Boone et al. (2021) discuss how social class and structural racism surrounding children can adversely impact a child's development in the school system. For instance, children belonging to marginalized groups, such as Black children, children with disabilities, or those at risk of having a disability, and those from low economic backgrounds, often have a history of trauma that affects their learning and development (Boone et al., 2021). These children bring different experiences into the classroom compared to their white peers. As a result, they may encounter prejudice from their peers and teachers due to implicit biases.

This prejudice can perpetuate a cycle of discrimination within the school environment. Specifically, students with disabilities were 200% more likely to be subject to restraint or seclusion relative to their peers; students attending elementary schools were more likely to receive restraint or seclusion than students attending secondary schools (Gage et al., 2020). Similarly, Black students were almost 200% more likely and Hispanic students were 45% more likely to experience restraint or seclusion than their white counterparts (Gage et al., 2020).

Ableism

“Ableism is a set of assumptions and practices promoting the differential or unequal treatment of people because of actual or presumed non-typical functioning (i.e., disability)” (Feldner et al., 2022, p. 5). Ableism manifests in multiple ways, including “non-disabled people controlling disabled people's narratives, judgements on the reality and quality of disabled people's lives, and assumptions that disability is static or unchanging" (Feldner et al., 2022, p. 5). If a non-disabled person looks at the appearance of a person with a disability, assumes their abilities are limited before knowing who the person is, then that is ableism.

Ableism in education may look like this: intervention specialists are biased toward children with disabilities and believe that a child with disabilities is unable to perform tasks that a typically developing child can. As a result, teachers, school administrators, and intervention specialists may limit the child's potential based on what they perceive as the child’s limited ability to understand classroom material. Educators should not underestimate a child's ability to learn, as this can stifle the child's creativity (PAV FunBall Academy, 2018). Educators should consider their cultural biases before passing judgment on a child's behavior or capacity in class.

Research Goals

This paper calls on early childhood teachers to take action to combat biases through continuous reflection on their teaching. As teachers, we must understand each child's background to support their learning and help them thrive in our classroom. According to Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1986), each child’s development is shaped by multiple nested systems. These systems are unique to each child, and it is important to recognize that children from specific backgrounds (e.g., children of color and linguistic minorities) may be affected by structural racism. Our environment has a significant impact on people and can perpetuate racism or ableism over time. As early childhood educators, we need to think about how to create a more

inclusive learning environment for children of color and those with disabilities, while also being mindful of our own implicit biases.

Lalvani and Bacon (2019) remind us that, "Ironically, even when young children with disabilities are physically present in general education classrooms, they are likely to remain on the social periphery and, when compared with nondisabled students, are at greater risk for social isolation and bullying" (p. 3). Lalvani and Bacon (2019) argues that when young children learn to classify disabilities, they often label those with disabilities as "bad stigmatized". As a result, nondisabled students do not interact with children with disabilities and miss the opportunity to learn about social justice for individuals with disabilities. Additionally, if children with disabilities are placed in a community school, they may face this "bad stigmatization" within the classroom. This prejudice may manifest as bullying and social isolation for those children with disabilities in school settings. The nondisabled students learn how to bully these children because they do not know how to handle the differences between them and the children with disabilities. Therefore, children with disabilities often have an added traumatic experience from bullying and being isolated from their peers in a school setting (Lalvani & Bacon, 2019).

This exclusion persists when teachers do not intentionally cultivate a safe and open classroom environment for discussing disability. When nondisabled students develop prejudices toward peers with disabilities, it is often because disability is absent from the curriculum, leaving students without meaningful opportunities to learn about difference, equity, and inclusion (Lalvani & Bacon, 2019). To address this issue, this paper calls for teachers to take active steps to confront structural racism and ableism in early childhood systems. This paper presents the first author's firsthand observations of these prejudices in early childhood classrooms and discusses strategies for creating inclusive classrooms for all children.

Research Methods

This study adopts the Autoethnography approach (Ellis & Bochner, 2010) to systematically describe and analyze personal experiences and to understand specific communities and groups. The Autoethnography approach focuses on "what people do". It aligns with the goal of this study, which is to uncover how teachers may consciously or unconsciously perpetuate racism and ableism toward young children with disabilities in early childhood classrooms. Using an Autoethnographic approach, this paper thoroughly examines the first author's teaching experiences and observations of authentic teacher-child interactions, offering detailed, contextual descriptions of current issues and proposing solutions.

The data was collected during the first author's student teaching in 2024-2025 at two early childhood centers. The first student teaching site is called Laurent Clerc and Sicard's Early Learning Center (pseudonym). The first author worked in a self-contained special education classroom that serves exclusively children with disabilities ages 3-5. The first author worked with one lead teacher and one assistant teacher for three months.

The second student teaching site is called Abbe Stark (pseudonym). It is a small child care center with four mixed-age classrooms that adopts a Reggio Emilia-inspired approach. This approach emphasizes that children have three teachers: the parents, the classroom teachers, and the environment (Edwards et al., 2012). Therefore, teachers and families work together to create an enriching environment for young children's learning. Most of the children and families are middle-class. The first author interned in the classroom with children aged 3-5, working alongside two lead teachers and two assistant teachers for three months.

In each site, the first author spent 10 weeks, roughly 220-240 hours in each classroom. The data sources include daily journal reflections, observation notes on classroom teachers and

children, teaching reflections, feedback from university faculty and mentor teachers on teaching, and conversation notes between authors.

The findings of this paper will center on the first author's observations, reflections, and actions at her student-teaching sites. The second author serves as a critical friend (Appleton, 2011), engaging the first author in critical, reflective analysis of what she observed and did during her student teaching. A critical friend can be viewed as a research tool for enhancing integrity and reflexivity in qualitative research (Appleton, 2011). The authors analyzed the data using thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2016) and identified three themes that are helpful for teachers in creating inclusive classroom environments in early childhood settings.

Positionality Statement

This research adopts qualitative methods to collect and analyze data. Researchers are viewed as research instruments in qualitative research because their identities, experiences, and beliefs shape how data are collected, interpreted, and understood. In this section, we depict the first author's positionality statement and discuss how her disability and life experiences impact her perspectives when working with young children.

Cerebral Palsy

My mother gave birth to me at 36 weeks. During her appointment, the OB/GYNs measured my growth at just 30 weeks and informed her that I had stopped growing in the womb. I was delivered via emergency C-section, weighing 3 pounds and measuring 12 ounces. I spent nine days in the NICU. It was not until I reached four months old that my mother became concerned about my developmental milestones. She took me to doctor after doctor, but they dismissed her concerns about my development. Eventually, one doctor agreed with my mother that I had missed many of my milestones by the time I was one year old. The doctor then ordered

a CAT scan of my brain and informed my mother that I had a stroke before I was born, which caused me to have cerebral palsy.

Growing up with cerebral palsy, I have often experienced being judged solely on my appearance. Fortunately, some people look beyond my disability and see me for who I am. I recall that my early childhood teachers expected me to advocate for myself. For example, I remember that my teachers allowed me to take risks, played with me, taught me how to manipulate objects, and encouraged me to explore on the floor. The assistant in my early childhood class, named Chata, was a great influence on my early learning because she recognized how smart I was and respected me. She knew how stubborn and intelligent a little girl I was. My stubbornness had to blossom into perseverance. My team of early childhood interventionists helped me overcome my barriers and fight for my educational rights.

My early childhood experiences reinforced my belief in the importance of the teachers' role. I was trusted as an independent individual capable of overcoming any challenge and being successful. This is the kind of teacher I want to be. I believe every child is capable; they should have the opportunity to advocate for their needs and rights, and every child should be treated with respect, regardless of whether they fit cultural norms. Every child should be seen as a person as a whole instead of being prejudiced based on their disabilities.

Experiencing Ableism

As a non-verbal person, I faced challenges dealing with ableist biases throughout my life. I was in a job interview when I came across a job opening advertised as open to all individuals, regardless of race or abilities. I introduced myself and learned about the available positions. I explained my expertise in American Sign Language (ASL) and the use of communication devices (AAC) for children in the early childhood classrooms.

The coordinator of the childcare program spoke to me about the job position. I could sense from her facial expression that she underestimated me based on my appearance. Her tone of voice and body language indicated that she thought it was a joke that I wanted to work in a childcare program. She even said, "Oh, this is a program for qualified teachers," while waving her hand dismissively, suggesting that she would not hire me.

She inquired whether I had a registry account with the Department of Human Services, to which I responded affirmatively, stating that I hold an associate degree in early childhood education and that I am currently pursuing a bachelor's degree in early childhood education, as well as a minor in ASL, at Western Oregon University. However, upon sharing this, I observed that the coordinator was ashamed and unwilling to engage with me. This experience illustrated to me that people with disabilities can face implicit biases, whether consciously or unconsciously, that are reflected in both words and actions.

This is one of the many ableist experiences that have shaped who I am as a teacher and how I teach. Since then, I have intentionally examined how ableism operates within the current education system. I noted that the current classroom environment is not always supportive of children with disabilities. I want to advocate for young children with disabilities by pointing out the prejudices and biases toward them. As a teacher, I strive to provide learning opportunities that enable children to build confidence and independence, empowering them to confront injustice in their lives.

Findings: Strategies to Confront Racism and Ableism Within Early Childhood Education

Through systematic analysis of the first author’s student-teaching experiences, we identified recurring patterns of ableism and structural racism embedded in everyday classroom practices. While pointing out these inequitable patterns, we also propose three strategies to help

educators critically examine their own practices and actively disrupt racism and ableism in their classrooms.

Teaching Strategy 1: Teaching should be hands-on, risk-taking, and promote independence and confidence.

When I was a student teacher at Laurent Clerc and Sicard's Early Learning Center, a specialized/self-contained classroom for Disabled students attending the school, I observed that most teachers did not allow students to take risks in the classroom. Risk-taking is an essential aspect of developing independence, as it enables students to experiment and take on tasks independently. To accomplish this goal, the teacher's role should shift to a more observational and facilitative approach (Professional Learning Board, 2025). I believe early childhood educators should emphasize guiding children through reduced direct instruction, thereby encouraging their independent inquiry and problem-solving skills.

However, in this classroom, teachers pre-plan their activities and tightly control children's actions during these activities (with extensive hand-over-hand guidance), rather than allowing students to participate fully through choice or to attempt actions without such restrictions. This practice concerns me because it may lead children to become overly reliant on assistants to do things for them.

Teachers also need to be mindful of whether their kind support may actually take away students' learning opportunities. For example, when I observed that Henry (pseudonym), a 4-year-old boy with cerebral palsy, needed to develop his gross and fine motor skills, I designed an activity to help him improve these skills by mixing ingredients for homemade playdough in a mixing bowl. This mixing process enhances children's fine motor skills by requiring circular arm movements. The activity was designed to develop the practical skills children needed and was

motivated by their interest in sensory experiences. Cooke et al. (2019) say, “give them practice, then, in the trials they will one day have to endure” (p. 9). Repeated practice of these circular movements supports the nervous system and helps create new neural pathways in the brain.

When I implemented the lesson, the teacher's assistant “helped” Henry mix the ingredients for homemade playdough in a mixing bowl. When I observed “The Help”, I felt upset because the teaching assistant did not realize that the activity was intended to help Henry improve his fine motor skills. Instead, she assumed that Henry was too slow, that his movements were too slow to complete the activity in the limited time available. Moreover, she does not believe Henry can mix the ingredients independently. Sadly, in the long run, this underestimation of children’s capabilities could harm their self-confidence and their ability to do things independently.

To develop children’s independence, providing opportunities for risk-taking is necessary. I intentionally designed activities that enabled children to take risks in the classroom. For example, when we dyed rice to support fine motor and sensory development, I handed Henry the watercolor bottle and let him open it himself. I remembered that the lead teacher did not allow him to take risks, such as experimenting with opening the paint bottle on his own. She was worried the mess might happen if Henry spilled the watercolor bottle. However, to me, this is the necessary risk for Henry. I held the bottle in front of Henry, placed my index finger beside the opening, and guided it as if I were opening the bottle myself. Henry watched my modeling, then placed his finger on the open bottle and opened it on his own. This method exemplifies a hands-off approach, in which intervention occurs only when a child needs guidance to complete a task independently.

Teaching Strategy 2: Pushing For An Inclusive Curriculum And Learning Environment

Current preschool curricula often do not cover topics related to people with disabilities (Deriman & Edwards, 2019; Lalvani & Bacon, 2019). For example, Yu and Kim (2020) examined how ableism operates in early childhood classrooms through the lens of the Disability Studies framework. Their findings show that early childhood curriculum lacks disability representation in classroom materials, such as images of children with disabilities or Braille books (Yu & Kim, 2020). As a result, children do not have the opportunity to learn about the historical challenges faced by people with disabilities around the world. Having a disability is often seen in a negative light, leading to the exclusion of this topic from the school curriculum. To create an inclusive learning environment for every child, teachers must develop a curriculum that helps children understand and respect one another's differences and diverse needs. I present three approaches below for teachers to create inclusive curricula and learning environments.

Sharing authentic stories from people with disabilities. Recall my first day at the Abbe Stark child care center. A child asked me why I could not speak with my voice. I explained that I use an ASL interpreter for communication. I sign to the interpreter, who then translates my signs into spoken English so that everyone can understand what I am saying.

I learned that children are naturally curious, which is wonderful because it encourages them to explore and learn about their environment. When children meet someone with a disability, they often want to know more about that person because they find them different and intriguing. One day, during circle time, I had the opportunity to read a picture-book biography about me. The book was written by my fifth-grade teacher's daughter for her special education course. She followed me throughout the day when I was 11. She documented all my daily activities and also took photographs. One page is about my interpreters. I explained to the children during circle time that "my interpreter, Cathy, helps AUTHOR1 (me) talk with the rest

of the world". I said, "Cathy spends three hours a day signing everything to AUTHOR1's teachers and translates everything AUTHOR1 signs". One boy, Billy, all of a sudden, shouted, "I am an ASL interpreter," and looked back at my ASL interpreter, who translated the story. He said, "You are not AUTHOR1's ASL interpreter. I am." We all laughed. From this read-aloud, children learned about the interpreter's role. They also learn that a teacher with cerebral palsy can effectively teach and communicate using ASL.

I have many more stories like this that demonstrate how authentic interactions with people with disabilities help children understand that everyone's life experiences are different. For example, on a cold day in January, a four-year-old boy, Jack, and I took a walk in the park. While in my wheelchair, I allowed Jack to drive me around the park. I use the technique called hand-over-hand. As we drove my wheelchair around the park, I placed my hand on the joystick, and Jack placed his hand over mine. Jack learned how a wheelchair functioned, and we walked together around the park that afternoon. I saw joy in Jack's eyes, and I think that is because of the memories we built together.

Sometimes, even casual conversation and small talk are effective ways to promote inclusion. One time, during a show-and-tell, I brought my small leg braces and hand brace, which my mother had saved over the years as a memory when I was little. Children had the opportunity to try on my tiny hand brace and leg braces. One boy was being silly. He tried on my hand brace and said, "Now I am AUTHOR1." Sharing artifacts about me helps build my relationship with my students. Children learn to listen carefully and respectfully to other people's sharing. They learn that diversity should be the norm in the classroom because everyone's story is different. I am like their other teachers, but I am also distinct. I am the teacher who wears braces, uses a wheelchair, and has cerebral palsy.

I learned that to help children avoid bias toward people with disabilities, educators are encouraged to share a story about a family member with a disability or to invite a person with a disability to the classroom.

Using quality children's books to enrich discussions about disabilities. Another approach for teachers to help young children become less prejudiced toward children with disabilities is to discuss people's differences from around the world through children's books. My mentor teachers wanted to learn more about me and include my stories in the curriculum. They asked me what had caused my cerebral palsy, and I shared my birth story with them. The following day, they read the book "The Abilities in Me" by Gemma Keir (2020) to the children during circle time. This book provides an overview of cerebral palsy and its various forms. It helped the children understand how cerebral palsy can affect individuals differently and what living with cerebral palsy means to me personally.

An inclusive curriculum should include children's books that reflect the diversity of abilities, languages, and races in the classroom. If a teacher reads storybooks that address ableism and racism in the classroom, it can help children become more open-minded and less likely to judge their peers with disabilities. For example, reading "Just Ask" (Sotomayor et al., 2019) encourages children to feel comfortable asking others about their disabilities. This promotes understanding and acceptance. We can eliminate ableism in the classroom to create an inclusive learning environment and help children understand and accept those with disabilities. Eliminating ableism can be done by educating students about the history of people with disabilities worldwide.

Including classroom materials that promote inclusion. Finally, the third approach to creating an inclusive curriculum is to ensure that classroom materials reflect students' diverse

backgrounds and abilities. For example, in a classroom's dramatic play area, it is essential to have dolls that represent all children. Teachers can request access to free resources that provide diverse materials that promote inclusion. For example, companies such as "Toys Like Us," in collaboration with a professor at Roanoke College, develop adaptive equipment for children's dolls and toys. If a child has a G-tube, trach, hearing aids, or cochlear implants, teachers can request adaptive equipment for the dolls or stuffed animals from the professor. This approach ensures that all children feel represented in their play and develop a sense of belonging in their classroom community.

In addition, providing props that represent children's diverse backgrounds and abilities offers the teacher an opportunity to facilitate an open and in-depth discussion of topics on inclusion, such as family diversity. Some families have two moms, two dads, a single dad, or a mom as the primary caregiver. Some families have a variety of skin colors or abilities among their members. These conversations are essential because feeling different or singled out can be frightening, especially for young children. Teachers must respect their students and validate their emotions, helping them identify feelings such as frustration, sadness, or happiness. Teachers must communicate to children that their feelings are valid and that they have the right to experience them. To support children's emotional needs, teachers can establish a "comfort corner" in schools. This designated space may include pillows, blankets, and chairs, as well as calming activities such as playdough, fidget spinners, timers, kaleidoscopes, and books. Providing materials and physical spaces that align with children's diverse needs helps ease children's minds, develop their self-identities, and create inclusive learning environments.

Teaching Strategy 3: Embracing The Whole-Child Approach When Working with Children

The whole-child approach views schooling as a means of cultivating future citizens and empowering every child to reach their full potential. It focuses on the holistic development of students, addressing their social, emotional, cognitive, and physical needs (Slade & Griffith, 2013). When supporting young children, teachers need to see them as a whole, considering the assets they bring into the classroom, their life experiences, and the people in their lives. This comprehensive perspective is essential when supporting young children, particularly those with disabilities, as it prioritizes relationships and interactions.

I learned firsthand the importance of the whole-child approach during my student teaching experience. The story centers on a child in a self-contained early childhood special education preschool classroom who is Deaf, has cerebral palsy, and exhibits behavioral challenges. On my first day, he screamed and threw his bowl of yogurt across the room. I initially thought he had a "spicy" attitude. During a planning session, without any children present, the lead teacher shared details about his family background and birth story. He was born 26 weeks premature, and his biological father was not involved in his life until recently. His mother has been working a lot and had full custody of his older brother and him until the court granted shared custody of both brothers to the biological father.

Upon learning this information, I began to understand the reasons behind his challenging behavior in the classroom. He is forming a new relationship with his biological father and wife, who were strangers to him until last week. One day, he had a massive temper tantrum. He threw himself on the floor and screamed because he did not want to participate in the activities. Initially, I thought he might be feeling overwhelmed after spending the weekend at his father's house and after transitioning between homes and school. I asked the assistant teacher if he had

been at his father's house, and she said no. However, during snack time, she mentioned that the child was observing his older brother's behavior and copying it.

Her words remind me of the whole-child approach and how the Deaf boy's behavior is shaped by the people in his life, including his brother. The two brothers have experienced their parents' divorce and later reunited with their biological father. This situation is considered a risk factor in the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) studies (Lanier, 2020). They also face societal prejudices related to ableism, particularly because one brother is Deaf and has cerebral palsy. Although the brothers are not children of color, I am suggesting that the discrimination that they may face due to ableism and the trauma of switching households could be considered ACEs and contribute to forms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

According to Lanier (2020), researchers in the ACEs study focused on adversities in the home, including abuse, neglect, and various household challenges. However, they concluded that exposure to racism—including discrimination, stigma, minority stress, and historical trauma—is an important area of research that should be included in an enhanced ACE measure. These negative health outcomes can be connected to Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (CPTSD). Without intervention for their behavioral challenges at home or school, children may develop CPTSD over time, impacting their overall well-being. According to Davis (2022), 33% of children have been exposed to community violence. Individuals with CPTSD typically have a history of ongoing stress during childhood, involving psychological and physical abuse, as well as neglect from family members or friends.

My experiences observing and supporting this Deaf boy who has cerebral palsy reinforce the importance of embracing the whole-child approach when working with young children for three main reasons. First, children's development is shaped by family, community, and broader

systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). The whole-child framework recognizes the resources and challenges children need to navigate across different systems. To understand the cause of the boy's challenging behaviors and traumatic experiences, simply examining the school environment is insufficient. A comprehensive understanding of children's life environments is essential for developing effective support plans. Building strong partnerships across children's various systems, such as school and family, and family and community, ensures consistent support across all environments.

Second, the whole-child approach emphasizes the interconnectedness of children's learning and development domains, recognizing that progress in one area affects all others. Observing the Deaf boy, I learned that his emotional stress prevented him from engaging in any academic learning. The whole-child approach intentionally fosters a sense of belonging, peer relationships, and emotional safety. Addressing social-emotional needs is particularly crucial because children with disabilities face an elevated risk of social isolation and bullying, even within inclusive educational environments (Lalvani & Bacon, 2019). Teachers can develop activities or provide resources to support mental health, stress regulation, and physical well-being, thereby enhancing young children's overall learning outcomes.

Finally, the whole-child approach reminds educators to use a strength-based perspective rather than deficit thinking when working with young children. Children with disabilities do not need to be "fixed". Instead of defining a child by a diagnosis, the whole child framework views disability as one aspect of a child's identity and emphasizes their assets, interests, and capabilities (Slade & Griffith, 2013). Teachers can focus on what a child *can* do and promote their self-efficacy, independence, and resilience. Teachers who show "trust" in children's

capabilities significantly influence classroom participation and outcomes for children with disabilities (Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005).

Discussion: Moving Beyond the Classroom—Interrogating Structural Racism and Ableism in Early Childhood Systems

While teachers play an important role in confronting ableism and racism in classrooms, Bronfenbrenner (1986) reminds us that children's development is also shaped by broader macrosystems, including societal values, laws, and institutional policies. Addressing inequity, therefore, requires examining how structural racism and ableism operate within early childhood systems. Patterns in special education referral, identification, and access can reveal how these systemic forces shape children's educational opportunities.

Linguistic Marginalisation

Children from diverse linguistic backgrounds (e.g., first-generation immigrants whose first language is not English) may have cultural norms and language acquisition patterns that differ from those of their predominantly white-identifying teachers. These children are often placed in restrictive settings (e.g., separate intervention sessions outside their home classrooms) (Sullivan, 2011) and have limited opportunities to feel a sense of belonging, access, participation, and support in their regular class. English Language Learners are assessed for special education because they do not speak English well (Luelmo & Bindreiff, 2021). For example, Spanish-speaking young children are more likely to be referred for special education due to differences relative to dominant cultural norms and language-acquisition needs (Cycyk et al., 2022).

Teachers sometimes mistakenly refer students to special education (SPED) for attention and focus issues when the real problem is an unaddressed language barrier, particularly when

students struggle to follow directions or read homework assignments in English. Furthermore, the disproportionate placement of Latinx students into special education is also fueled by standardized academic proficiency tests, like the QI test, being administered in English, which results in lower scores compared to English-speaking students. Nguyen & Hajek (2022) define this as linguistic marginalisation: “the use of one language as the national/official language and the exclusion of minoritized languages from the public life of a society, resulting in the social, economic and political disadvantage of their speakers” (p. 200). Luelmo and Bindreiff (2021) emphasize that analyzing the intricate relationship between language acquisition, culture, and language can help reduce disparities in special education.

Rethinking Special Education Services: Supporting Children Or Labeling Children as Incapable

Special education services are indeed helpful when provided appropriately. Teachers and school administrators should recognize that Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education (EI/ECSE) is a system in which children can choose to participate. If a child needs EI/ECSE services, they should receive the support they need. This program introduces new professionals to the child's microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), helping the child navigate and thrive in the home and school environments. This service is designed to assist young children who require additional help in the classroom. An intervention specialist will collaborate with classroom teachers to plan activities that ensure children with disabilities can fully participate alongside their peers. These specialists and teachers involve children with disabilities and their families in these planning meetings to ensure their perspectives are respected and honored when developing individualized learning supports.

Despite this collaborative approach, these professionals often appear to wield greater power in deciding on the most appropriate educational strategies for the child. The able-bodied people–often teachers and interventionists–want to "fix the problem" of children with disabilities from an ableist perspective. For example, able-bodied adults want to "fix" a Deaf child's hearing disability by providing hearing aids so the child can "hear like normal people" and learn like hearing people. However, this approach neglects the needs of Deaf children (e.g., if a hearing aid would cause noise in their ears) and devalues American Sign Language (ASL) as a means of communication.

Furthermore, inevitably, children with disabilities who receive special education services will be negatively "labeled" by their teachers and peers (Lalvani & Bacon, 2019). Although labeling children as having a disability is discouraged in the classroom setting, it is an essential means, as it provides these children with immediate access to free educational services following a diagnosis of a disability. However, early childhood teachers need to be mindful of systemic biases within the intervention service itself. These biases can affect groups of children and families, such as Black families and people of color, who seek services from the intervention system. National data show that Black students and students with disabilities face a disproportionately higher rate of exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspension or expulsion (Gage et al., 2020). If these adversities are not addressed during childhood, they can lead to numerous adverse health outcomes later in life.

Given these long-term consequences, it is imperative that educators critically examine the structural racism and ableism embedded within early childhood education systems. When teachers work with children whose cultural norms and lived experiences differ from their own,

they must intentionally reflect on their assumptions and consider how to respond in ways that affirm children's identities and foster inclusive classroom communities.

Conclusions

This paper describes the prevalence of structural racism, linguistic marginalization, and ableism as foundational elements of the negative impacts of implicit bias within early childhood settings. The first author articulates her positionality, experiences, and observations to model self-awareness and to emphasize the prevalence of these persistent problems for the reader. We argue that it is our responsibility as educators to examine our cultural norms in ourselves and teach the children without assuming that the child needs to be fixed in the white dominant culture. We wish to emphasize that further work remains necessary. Although legal segregation has been abolished and schools are mandated to provide the least restrictive environment, early childhood systems continue to reproduce ableism and racism through everyday practices, decisions, and interactions in classrooms. Meaningful change requires more than policy compliance; it demands sustained self-reflection, accountability, and intentional action. To dismantle these systems of oppression, educators must confront their own implicit biases and commit to cultivating learning environments grounded in empathy, equity, and authentic inclusion. We hope one day there will be no dominant culture in the school and no separatism in American society.

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