

Pursuing Justice-Driven Inclusive Education Research: Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) in Early Childhood

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Abstract

Multiple scholars have argued that early childhood inclusive education research and practice has often retained racialized, ableist notions of normal development, which can undermine efforts to advance justice and contribute to biased educational processes and practices. Racism and ableism intersect through the positioning of young children of Color as “at risk,” the use of normalizing practices to “fix” disability, and the exclusion of multiply marginalized young children from educational spaces and opportunities. Justice-driven inclusive education research is necessary to challenge such assumptions and reduce exclusionary practices. Disability Critical Race Theory extends inclusive education research by facilitating examinations of the ways racism and ableism interdependently uphold notions of normalcy and centering the perspectives of multiply marginalized children and families. We discuss constructions of normalcy in early childhood, define justice-driven inclusive education research and its potential contributions, and discuss DisCrit’s affordances for justice-driven inclusive education research with and for multiply marginalized young children and families.

Keywords

inclusive education, equity, justice, racism, ableism

The purpose of this article is to highlight the ways racism and ableism intersect in early childhood and the potentials of Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit; Annamma et al., 2013) to imagine and enact justice-driven inclusive education research with and for young children and their families. We focus on aspects of early childhood, including early childhood education, early intervention, and early childhood special education (abbreviated here as ECE/ECSE), that have sought to remediate disability or “risk” that is viewed as being inherent in the child (Baglieri et al., 2011; Ferri & Bacon, 2011) or family (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009). As Ferri and Bacon (2011) state, early childhood institutions regularly judge children’s bodies and minds based on socially constructed ideas of normalcy or typical development, a reference point which positions some children as disabled (see Note 1) and requiring remediation or intervention. DisCrit, an intersectional theoretical framework with seven tenets, helps examine how social co-constructions of race and ability uphold such notions of normalcy, consequences for multiply marginalized children (e.g., children of Color with dis/abilities), and ways to dismantle racism and ableism within institutional processes and discourses to advance justice (Annamma et al., 2013).

In effect, some well-intended early childhood programs and practices have served a “normalizing” function that aims

to bring young children closer to widely accepted developmental norms using standardized disciplinary knowledge and practices (Antonsen, 2020; Arndt et al., 2015). Child Find legislation and eligibility assessment practices (e.g., assessments normed on primarily white populations, teacher referrals or reports that may reflect racial or cultural biases) are examples of how established developmental expectations used to identify children who may benefit from additional support can subject children to surveillance, categorization, or remediation (Baker, 2002; Ferri & Bacon, 2011). Young children of Color, (see Note 2) including those from additional marginalized backgrounds (e.g., children experiencing poverty, multilingual children), have an increased likelihood of being labeled as requiring remediation and intervention because developmental assessments and accepted milestones that teachers base referrals on largely reflect predominantly white,

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middle-class ways of thinking, learning, and behaving (Brown et al., 2010; Dyson, 2015; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018).

Arguments that aim to combat such inequities often place an onus on individual “bias” (Tate & Page, 2018; Vaught & Castagno, 2008). Yet, bias (i.e., prejudicial attitudes and behaviors) is the micro-level consequence of systemic racism and ableism, which perpetuate differential valuing of bodies and minds based on perceived race and perceived ability (Thorius, 2019). Positioning some children as requiring remediation based on narrow socially constructed behavior norms reflects ableism (Ferri & Bacon, 2011). Simultaneously, the use of white cultural norms, values, and practices to identify and “normalize” children with dis/abilities (that is, bring them closer to what is considered normal, or typical, development) reflects an intersection of racism and ableism (Baglieri et al., 2011; Brown et al., 2010; Dyson, 2015). Thus, individuals’ biases are perpetuated and sustained by their participation in institutions that structure habits, thoughts, and policies regarding “normalcy” (in thinking, behaving, and learning). A focus on individual bias alone obscures historical and persistent institutionalized policies and practices that perpetuate bias by idealizing white, middle-class ways of being and positioning young children of Color, children experiencing poverty, children with dis/abilities, and those at the intersections of these identity markers, as requiring remediation. Ultimately, such vagueness slows efforts to advance inclusive education because it absolves educational institutions of their role in reproducing bias and their responsibility to address it.

We explicitly use the terms “racism” and “ableism” to explicate the relation between macro-level institutions (educational systems, policies, and discourses) and micro-level interactions (bias). We focus on how those systemic ideologies get reproduced in our research and practice of inclusive education, and the contributions of DisCrit as one potential lens through which to examine and dismantle such ideologies and envision new possibilities for justice-driven inclusive education research. First, we discuss how institutional constructions (i.e., perceptions) of children are grounded in racist and ableist notions of ability (children’s capacity to think, learn, and behave). Then, we address the need for justice-driven inclusive education research in ECE/ECSE to counter marginalizing processes perpetuated by said constructions. Finally, we discuss how DisCrit’s tenets can be applied to advance the conceptualization and enactment of justice-driven inclusive education research.

Racialized and Abled Constructions of the Child

In the context of early childhood educational institutions, discourse, and intervention practices intended to remediate

children with dis/abilities (Ferri & Bacon, 2011) and those deemed “at-risk” or “not ready” for school (Baglieri et al., 2011; Dyson, 2015) can reinforce established beliefs about childhood that are grounded in white, middle-class cultural norms (e.g., Baker, 2002; Brown et al., 2010). For instance, many early childhood classrooms subscribe to narrowly defined behavior management practices and norms for participation, such as requiring children to sit quietly as a part of a large group and only speaking after raising their hand and being called on, despite their need and ability to participate in different ways and cultural differences in verbal turn-taking, movement, and expression. Practices intended to support children’s participation in such widely accepted classroom routines without allowing for different ways of being assert narrow bounds for how children might learn and contribute to a classroom community, and position children as passive receivers of intervention (Antonsen, 2020; Arndt et al., 2015). By remediating children’s behavior and promoting their participation based only on dominant expectations and routines, institutional practices can reinforce whiteness (Brown et al., 2010). That is, such institutional practices extend expectations that primarily align with white communities’ behaviors, values, and expectations to all children, including children of Color, who are expected to assimilate. In addition, through such institutional processes, dominant perspectives about ability are reinforced and disability (any deviations from notions of ability) becomes viewed as a problem to be fixed, an ableist perspective (Baglieri et al., 2011; Ferri & Bacon, 2011). When predominantly white ways of behaving and learning are deemed indicators of ability, children of Color become more likely to be labeled as disabled, and because of deficit perspectives of disability, they are subsequently seen as requiring remediation, intervention, and/or exclusion (Brown et al., 2010; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011). Scholars have noted that even recommended practices such as positive behavior supports may not address disproportionate exclusionary discipline for children of Color when behavioral expectations based on white, middle-class cultural norms are universally applied without culturally responsive practices and supports (Allen & Steed, 2016).

As dominant institutional norms go unquestioned, deficit-based assumptions regarding dis/ability, race, and socioeconomic status become taken-for-granted truth (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014; Dyson, 2015). Yet, such assumptions ignore the role of race in determining dis/ability (Artiles, 2011; Ferri & Connor, 2014) and the ways both racism and ableism contribute to exclusion (Adjei, 2018; Reid & Knight, 2006). For example, Black preschoolers, particularly Black boys, are significantly more likely to be suspended or expelled compared to their white peers (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). The disproportionate exclusion of Black children from early education settings can, in part, be attributed to implicit

and explicit racism whereby early childhood educators (most of whom are white women) expect Black children to exhibit “challenging behaviors”—behaviors deemed deviant compared to normative institutional behavioral expectations (Migliarini & Annamma, 2020). Subsequently, early childhood educators may look for affirming evidence of such assumptions and use it to justify remediation and exclusion (Gilliam et al., 2016). As this example illustrates, ableist constructions of “normal” behavior justify the exclusion of young children of Color, particularly Black children. Children of Color—perceived as “other” based on race (consciously or unconsciously)—are particularly subject to ableist processes and exclusion. In sum, when child expectations are based on a racialized, abled fixed binary (i.e., ability vs. disability), the resolution of perceived inability becomes an unintended outcome of ECE/ECSE practice, justifying exclusion (Antonsen, 2020; Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010; Holt, 2004), particularly the exclusion of children of Color (Reid & Knight, 2006).

Toward Justice-Driven Inclusive Education Research in Early Childhood

Justice-driven early childhood inclusive education research is a pathway through which researchers can help dismantle racism and ableism in early childhood institutions. Here, we define justice-driven inclusive education research, its contributions to addressing racism and ableism in early childhood, and why it benefits from an intersectional lens, such as DisCrit.

Defining Justice-Driven Inclusive Education Research in Early Childhood

The Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) conceptualized early childhood inclusive education as: (a) access to a variety of learning opportunities; (b) individualized modifications that facilitate participation with adults and peers; and (c) systems-level supports that undergird classroom efforts (DEC & NAEYC, 2009). This conceptualization supports early childhood research focused on matters of inclusive *practice* and opportunities to support children across a variety of contexts (Love & Horn, 2021). However, this definition of inclusive education does not explicitly address potentially marginalizing assumptions regarding typical development or inequities that may shape the learning opportunities children access or the institutions they participate within. Enacting justice-driven inclusive education research requires explicit troubling of deficit beliefs about dis/ability, the othering of children (e.g., based on race, dis/ability, and socioeconomic status), and the recycling of institutionalized practices to neutralize differences.

Accordingly, we take up Waitoller and Artiles’ (2013) conceptualization of justice-driven inclusive education, defined as an iterative, responsive *process* of critically reflecting and acting on unjust educational systems through: (a) redistribution of meaningful learning opportunities; (b) recognition and valuing of differences in content, pedagogy, and assessment; and (c) representation of marginalized groups in decision-making processes. This conceptualization of inclusive education animates, rather than competes with, prevailing notions of early childhood inclusive education. Namely, research that attends to dynamic *processes* positions inclusive education as an ongoing endeavor in which *practices* are reflectively applied in ways that are actively responsive to children and families marginalized by dominant systems and ideologies.

Taking up Waitoller and Artiles’ (2013) conceptualization of justice-driven inclusive education to animate DEC and NAEYC’s (2009) definition in early childhood research has multiple affordances when endeavoring to support multiply marginalized young children (e.g., children of Color with dis/abilities). First, examining *access* to learning opportunities in early childhood systems requires ongoing reflection on the ways learning opportunities and supports have been inequitably distributed based on race and class (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2006), dis/ability (Reid & Knight, 2006), and intersections thereof (Beneke & Cheatham, 2020; Collins, 2011). For example, young children of Color with dis/abilities may have fewer opportunities to participate in expansive or inquiry-based curriculum compared to white en/abled peers (e.g., Beneke & Cheatham, 2019; Martínez-Álvarez, 2019). Therefore, assuring *access* to learning opportunities requires *redistribution* of learning opportunities in ways that explicitly counter racism and ableism. Accordingly, justice-driven inclusive education research may continuously examine and reflect on the types of learning opportunities provided to children with various marginalized identities or ways to support teachers in differentiating expansive learning opportunities for multiply marginalized children, thereby redistributing learning activities to ensure equitable opportunities.

Similarly, while DEC and NAEYC (2009) named *participation* as a cornerstone of inclusion, efforts to advance justice-driven inclusive education must address how early childhood institutions identify and treat difference (e.g., based on race, class, dis/ability) in ways that may affect children’s participation. For example, as young children navigate institutional expectations in early childhood classrooms, white children are regularly perceived as “smart” and “good” because expectations are defined in alignment with predominantly white, middle-class ways of being and learning (Broderick & Leonardo, 2016; Souto-Manning, 2013), which actively support their participation in learning opportunities (Hatt, 2012; Souto-Manning, 2013).

Meanwhile, perceptions of children of Color as “at risk” contribute to educators significantly structuring or limiting their participation (Adair et al., 2017; Martínez-Álvarez, 2019), or excluding them from learning opportunities in the name of remediation and intervention (Baglieri et al., 2011; Broderick & Leonardo, 2016). Thus, justice-driven inclusive education research that supports the *participation* of multiply marginalized young children requires acknowledging the harm done by dominant constructions of difference and explicitly *recognizing* and *valuing* difference through changes in content, pedagogy, and assessment. For example, justice-driven inclusive education research may examine the processes through which educators make decisions that affect multiply marginalized children’s participation, including the ways educators design classroom environments, curriculum, and individualized supports to value multiply marginalized children’s ways of being, incorporate knowledge and preferences from families of Color, and continuously adjust classroom space and instruction over time.

Finally, it is essential for marginalized groups to *represent* themselves in decision-making, including in research, because constructions of dis/ability have often ignored the benefits of dis/ability (Martínez-Álvarez, 2020) and interpreted differences as deficits inherent in the child (Baglieri et al., 2011; Ferri & Bacon, 2011) and/or family (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009), as opposed to locating deficits in inequitable systems. Thus, what DEC and NAEYC (2009) referred to as systems-level *supports* undergirding classroom efforts must be explicitly grounded in the expressed priorities, expectations, and values of multiply marginalized children and families to shift conceptualizations of difference and dis/ability, and reject ability-based binaries (i.e., ability vs. disability). Justice-driven inclusive education research iteratively incorporates and responds to the voices of marginalized children and families to determine the goals of education, what works well, and what changes can be made to ECE/ECSE institutions.

Need for Justice-Driven Inclusive Education Research

Although attempts to mobilize inclusive education in ECE/ECSE aim to address the exclusion of young children with dis/abilities, traditional conceptualizations of inclusion retain institutionalized beliefs about development norms and the need to regulate and “normalize” children who deviate from said norms (Dalkilic & Vadeboncoeur, 2016). For example, scholars have noted that inclusive education research largely does not address the fact that disability labeling can itself lead to a child being excluded from general education classrooms (Baglieri et al., 2011; Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014). Thus, in many states, the very

process for accessing special education services can affect children’s access to inclusive education. Viewing children with dis/abilities through a deficit lens (Beneke & Cheatham, 2019; Dalkilic & Vadeboncoeur, 2016) and adhering to narrow notions of normalcy that do not account for difference (e.g., based on race, dis/ability, class) preclude the promise of justice through inclusive education by continuing to marginalize the very children who should benefit from it (Artiles, 2011; Baglieri et al., 2011). Justice-driven inclusive education research necessarily considers how conceptualizations of normalcy and disability have, and can be, used to exclude. Moreover, justice-driven inclusive education research eschews a singular focus on remediating perceived deficits to help researchers and practitioners envision supports that honor difference as a prompt for innovation. Doing so can help realize inclusive education ideals, which center around honoring all forms of human diversity as beneficial, recognizing and supporting every child’s capacity for learning, and resultantly, promoting justice that counters historic and ongoing exclusion (Beneke et al., 2019; Ferri & Bacon, 2011).

Taking a justice-driven approach to inclusive education research is necessary to ensure equity for those who have been historically and contemporarily excluded because it exposes the problematic ways difference has been perceived and treated, attends to inequitable access to learning opportunities, and privileges the voices of marginalized groups to envision innovation. In effect, justice-driven inclusive education research can help shift the purpose of ECE/ECSE from one centered on normalization to one centered on equity and valuing diversity.

Need for an Intersectional Lens in Justice-Driven Inclusive Education Research

While justice-driven inclusive education research helps extend established notions of early childhood inclusive education, it has primarily focused on young children’s marginalization in relation to race (Beneke & Cheatham, 2019; Kemple et al., 2016) *or* dis/ability (Holt, 2004; Watson, 2018), limiting applicability for addressing the unique needs of multiply marginalized children (e.g., children of Color with dis/abilities) and their families. Such an endeavor requires an intersectional lens that addresses both constructions of difference, broadly, and racism and ableism, specifically (Adjei, 2018; Annamma et al., 2013). DisCrit is one framework that allows such an examination of race/racism and ability/ableism and therefore, can contribute to an intersectional reimagining of the purposes and processes of early childhood inclusive education research. Next, we further discuss the tenets of DisCrit and its affordances for justice-driven inclusive education research in early childhood.

Using DisCrit to Facilitate Justice-Driven Inclusive Education Research

Introduction to DisCrit

Drawing from Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Disability Studies (DS), among other scholarly thought, DisCrit is an intersectional theoretical framework that helps investigate how race and ability are co-constructed, or given meaning, and the ways racism and ableism interdependently uphold notions of normalcy through institutional processes and discourses (Annamma et al., 2013, 2018). DisCrit is particularly useful for pushing the boundaries and possibilities of inclusive education research because it advances simultaneous examination of both macro- (e.g., social, institutional) and micro- (e.g., individual) level exclusion (Annamma et al., 2018). As such, DisCrit helps illuminate how educational programs and reforms have functioned to label, sort, and “fix” multiply marginalized children based on white, middle-class norms, thereby undermining inclusive education and reinforcing inequities (Baglieri, 2016; Waitoller & Annamma, 2017). Finally, by illuminating interlocking systems of oppression that manifest in everyday standards and processes, DisCrit helps envision innovative practice, identifies new avenues for collaboration, and ultimately, advances justice-driven inclusive education (Kozleski et al., 2020).

DisCrit Tenets and Their Implications for Justice-Driven Inclusive Education Research

DisCrit includes seven tenets that represent its intersectional analytic lens (Annamma et al., 2013). These tenets reflect the framework’s affordances and principles. Table 1 (Supplemental file) illustrates how DisCrit’s tenets conceptually align with the three components of justice-oriented inclusive education research. Here, we discuss each tenet and how they apply to ECE/ECSE. In addition, we provide examples of research topics and approaches that could use DisCrit to advance justice-driven inclusive education research in early childhood. While each tenet is discussed separately, they often overlap and work to clarify and refine each other.

Tenet 1: Racism and ableism are interdependent and operate in often obscured or neutralized ways to uphold notions of normalcy. Inclusive education research has largely left intact unquestioned expectations about what children should know or do by certain age markers and assumptions that children with dis/abilities should work toward reaching certain milestones or exhibiting certain behaviors within the general education classroom (Baglieri et al., 2011; Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014). An emphasis on children’s perceived deficits and a need for them to attain dominant developmental expectations to access

learning opportunities reflects ableism (Ferri & Bacon, 2011). Primarily basing such expectations on the values and perspectives of white communities reflects an intersection of ableism and racism that uniquely affects the early learning opportunities of children of Color with dis/abilities. While this is not the intention of the ECE/ECSE field, a critical framework, such as DisCrit, explicitly attends to the impact that dominant expectations and practices have on marginalized groups (e.g., whether practices contribute to greater access and participation, a sense of belonging, and equitable outcomes).

The perception of children, particularly white children, as innocent and not developmentally ready to learn about race, dis/ability, and injustice is one example of the obscured dual influence of ableism and racism on dominant child development expectations (Garlen, 2019; Lalvani & Bacon, 2019). Teachers position children as innocent to ableism and racism when they use classroom materials and pedagogy that simplify and/or misrepresent history, withhold knowledge about racial injustice, minimize or negate racial incidents, and avoid conversations about dis/ability and race (Beneker & Cheatham, 2020; Berman et al., 2017; Garlen, 2019; Lalvani & Bacon, 2019). However, young children actively construct meaning about race and dis/ability from explicit and implicit messages in their worlds (Compton-Lilly et al., 2017; Lalvani & Bacon, 2019). They use such reasoning to understand and negotiate their racial, linguistic, and ability identities (Compton-Lilly et al., 2017; Derman-Sparks, 2008) and to make choices about whether and how to interact with others (Derman-Sparks, 2008; Yu et al., 2015). Moreover, parents of Color have expressed that understanding race and racism is critical for their young children’s development (e.g., Anderson et al., 2015). Thus, assumptions about children’s innocence of race/racism and ability/ableism reflect narrowed child expectations while ignoring the experiences and needs of children of Color.

Research can inadvertently minimize or obscure the effects of racism when race/ethnicity is not considered as an influence on the experiences of young children with dis/abilities and/or is simply reported as demographic information without consideration of its meaning. For example, multiple systematic reviews of early intervention and ECSE research have found that participants’ race/ethnicity is often not reported (e.g., Baril & Humphreys, 2017; Steed & Kranski, 2020). Steed and Kranski (2020) found that race/ethnicity was reported in less than half of studies examining interventions to address young children’s perceived challenging behavior. When race was reported, Black and Latinx children were overrepresented in participant samples, which could be illustrative of other research findings that the behavior of children of Color is disproportionately interpreted in deficits ways (e.g., Gilliam et al., 2016; Wright & Ford, 2016). As Steed and Kranski (2020) noted,

leaving out racial information limits the field's understanding of who practices do and do not benefit. From a DisCrit lens, that call may be expanded to question both the impact of said practices and their goals (i.e., what is considered a beneficial outcome of behavioral support practices, *given* the prevalence of racism and ableism). For example, researchers using DisCrit to advance justice-driven inclusive education research may explore how teachers make decisions about what is considered "challenging behavior," whether such reasoning and subsequent practices are differentially applied across multiple race and ability groups, and the multiple potential effects of said practices on multiply marginalized children. Thus, a beneficial outcome would not just be determined based on whether an undesirable behavior decreased or a desirable behavior increased. Instead, it would be determined based on whether a child's needs were met, the impact on their participation and subsequent opportunities, and whether their cultural or linguistic expression was restricted or sustained. Such findings and interpretations would help explicate how notions of typical or desired behavior perpetuate racism and ableism, and therefore, how behavioral expectations and supports could be changed to address inequities, particularly for children with multiple marginalized identities. As a result, researchers could make recommendations for how expectations and practices could be expanded to reflect more diverse ways of learning and behaving (component 2 of justice-driven inclusive education research). ECE/ECSE research that has explored other types of decision-making processes has contributed to a greater understanding of potential causes of participation inequities and ways to make early childhood processes more responsive to multiply marginalized children and families (Hancock & Cheatham, 2020).

Tenet 2: Identities are multidimensional and cannot be reduced to singular categories or dimensions (e.g., race or dis/ability or class or gender). The very act of labeling a child based on a single marker of difference (e.g., "disabled," "English Language Learner," "at risk") can obscure the diverse experiences of individuals within those categories (Baglieri et al., 2011). A DisCrit analysis considers how multiple oppressions converge in the lives of people labeled along multiple lines of "difference" (Annamma et al., 2020). Multiple scholars have noted that inclusive education research has primarily focused on children with dis/abilities as a single dimension of identity without deeply examining how multiple oppressive ideologies (e.g., ableism, racism, sexism) inform educators' attitudes and practices (Baglieri et al., 2011; Waitoller & Annamma, 2017), or how inclusive practices may need to be differentially applied for multiply marginalized young children with dis/abilities (Bartlett & Mickelson, 2019).

Research using single-dimension analyses has contributed to the unique experiences of multiply marginalized children

(e.g., children of Color with dis/abilities; multilingual children with dis/abilities) being obscured, which can allow deficit narratives to go unchallenged. For example, scholars have argued that research addressing "school readiness" for young children with dis/abilities has largely not considered how conceptualizations of readiness are grounded in white, middle-class developmental norms that may contribute to the disproportionate labeling of children of Color, those experiencing poverty, and multilingual children as "unready" (Dyson, 2015; Ferri & Bacon, 2011). Research and policy that adopts narrow conceptualizations of "readiness" can lead to interventions that blame families of Color as failing to support their children's development (and themselves requiring intervention) while ignoring systemic educational and sociopolitical inequities (e.g., Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009). Similarly, the previously discussed behavioral intervention systematic review by Steed and Kranski (2020) found that multiple identity markers (e.g., race, gender, dis/ability, indicators of socioeconomic status) were rarely reported for individual participants, which limits the field's understanding of how to address intersectional inequities related to behavioral expectations and exclusion. Thus, discourses and practices intended to support children's development that only attend to dis/ability cannot necessarily support equity for multiply marginalized young children with dis/abilities.

Research can advance intersectional justice by examining multiple dimensions of identity and converging oppressions. For example, examinations of curricular materials and texts have found disproportionately low representation of children of Color (Crisp et al., 2016) and those with dis/abilities (Favazza et al., 2017). While such research is useful for identifying gaps in classroom material provision, future research could use a DisCrit lens to examine representation of children with multiple marginalized identities (e.g., children of Color with dis/abilities; multilingual children with dis/abilities). Intersectional analysis can facilitate a more complex, nuanced understanding of the unique learning experiences of multiply marginalized young children (component 1 of justice-driven inclusive education) and how early educational settings can value multitudes of diverse identities and backgrounds (component 2).

Tenet 3: Though race and dis/ability are social constructions, they manifest in material consequences for those for whom these constructions place them at the margins. Racialized developmental expectations and labeling that disproportionately position children of Color as "at risk" or having a dis/ability can contribute to them being sorted into restrictive learning experiences (Adair et al., 2017; Ferri & Bacon, 2011; Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010). For example, when educators ascribe to deficit perspectives of marginalized children considered to be "at risk" (e.g., children

experiencing poverty, multilingual children) or disabled, they often adopt practices narrowly focused on addressing perceived deficits rather than richer learning opportunities afforded to wealthier, en/abled, white children (Adair et al., 2017; Martínez-Álvarez, 2019). Although not recommended by many in the field, such research indicates these practices continue to happen. In addition, once labeled as disabled, Black and Latinx children are disproportionately placed in segregated settings compared to white children with dis/abilities, regardless of family income (Grindal et al., 2019). Segregated placements often limit children to curriculum focused on their perceived deficits which may lead to their future exclusion as the gap between them and “normal” expands (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014; Ferri & Bacon, 2011). Thus, constructions of race and ability make children of Color more likely to be labeled as “at risk” or disabled while constructions of dis/ability are used to justify their exclusion from learning spaces and opportunities. Such deficit labeling and sorting results in early educational experiences that may effectively be disabling.

Given these and other intersectional consequences of racism and ableism, DisCrit can facilitate justice-driven inclusive education research that helps examine how constructions of race and dis/ability dually affect the lived experiences of multiply marginalized children and how such inequities can be addressed. For example, researchers can use DisCrit to examine participation during classroom activities, looking for patterns that may indicate inequitable distribution of learning opportunities for multiply marginalized children (e.g., who receives content vs. management talk, whether book questions facilitate expression of diverse perspectives). Such an examination can help researchers recommend specific ways to eschew marginalizing patterns so that educational practices rectify inequitable distribution of learning experiences (component 1 of justice-driven inclusive education research) and reflect the valuing of diverse ways of being and learning (component 2).

Tenet 4: The voices of marginalized populations should be honored and privileged as experts of their own experiences and as knowledge generators. Early childhood research has largely been driven by the perspectives of (white, female) teachers and researchers (Yoon & Templeton, 2019). As a result, the voices and experiences of multiply marginalized children and their families have often not been taken up to help determine educational norms and supports. For example, in their systematic review of phonological awareness interventions for Latinx children, Soto and colleagues (2019) found that only two out of 17 identified studies included some measure of child or family satisfaction and most were only conducted in English (as opposed to Spanish or multiple languages), which limits external validity. Similarly, several systematic reviews examining the use of social validity measures in intervention research for children with

dis/abilities have found that such measures are typically administered after the intervention and participants are rarely given the opportunity to choose intervention goals or procedures (Ledford et al., 2016; Snodgrass et al., 2018). While these literature reviews remind the field of established social validity guidelines, it is critical that any justice-driven inclusive education research using a DisCrit lens incorporates the perspectives of multiply marginalized families and communities throughout the planning processes for both educational supports and research methods.

When children’s perspectives have been included in ECE/ECSE research, studies tend to focus on the perspectives of (primarily white) en/abled children. For example, ample peer acceptance research examines the attitudes and behaviors of en/abled children toward children with dis/abilities (e.g., Hong et al., 2020; Yu et al., 2015). While such research typically collects sociometric or observational data from both en/abled children and children with dis/abilities, research questions and discussion often center around en/abled children’s play behaviors toward children with dis/abilities and how children with dis/abilities compare to en/abled children in peer ratings. Such research draws attention to the need for teachers to facilitate positive social interactions between children with dis/abilities and en/abled children. However, it does not necessarily reflect the social preferences and agency of multiply marginalized children with dis/abilities.

Excluding or minimizing the voices of multiply marginalized children and families reinforces what Waitoller and Annamma (2017, p. 36) called the “individual-assimilationist” focus of some inclusive education research. That is, valuing the perspectives of white en/abled teachers and children most in research reinforces race and ability hierarchies, justifying the perspective that children who do not assimilate to normative social and behavioral standards may need to be labeled, intervened on, or excluded until they are closer to normative standards. Moreover, when research compares children and families from marginalized groups to institutionalized norms without incorporating their experiences and characteristics in their own terms, it reinforces deficit perceptions and ineffective, potentially unnecessary, intervention (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009). DisCrit privileges the voices and perspectives of marginalized communities (component 3 of justice-driven inclusive education research) which allows the complexities of their experiences to remain intact and directly challenges racial and ability hierarchies. Drawing on this tenet, justice-driven inclusive education research that aims to support positive social interactions, for example, may learn from children with dis/abilities about the peers they enjoy playing with and observe those interactions to identify recommended practices and contextual features that facilitate a sense of belonging for children with dis/abilities and the social interactions they value. Incorporating innovative methods, such

as storytelling and photos, can help researchers amplify children's perspectives and highlight diverse patterns of learning and participation (Koivula et al., 2020).

Tenet 5: We should attend to the legal and historical aspects of race and dis/ability and how they have been used separately and jointly to deny rights. Historically and contemporarily, Black and Latinx children have reduced access to high-quality early educational programs (based on field-accepted norms) compared to their white peers (Valentino, 2018). Such educational inequities reflect decades of legal segregation, systemic financial divestment from communities of Color, and exclusion of communities of Color from civic processes (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Moreover, racialized, class-based notions of “readiness” and ability based on psychometric and achievement testing have been upheld in educational policy, which can contribute to the positioning of children of Color as being “at risk,” dis/abled, and requiring remediation from an early age (Baker, 2002; Dyson, 2015; Ferri & Bacon, 2011). This is evidenced by accountability-based educational reform policies, such as *Race to the Top*. Such policies aim to promote high-quality education and address the “achievement gap.” However, the policies often inadvertently reproduce inequities by promoting academic and behavioral standardization and reinforcing deficit assumptions about marginalized groups that justify exclusionary practices (Jahng, 2011). Meanwhile, such policies position families of Color as not being able, or willing, to support their children's development (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Kaomea, 2005). This contributes to families' exclusion from educational decision-making and undermines their ability to advocate for their children in the face of racism and ableism (e.g., Gillborn et al., 2016).

Research has contributed to the codification of children of Color and those who are multiply marginalized (e.g., children of Color experiencing poverty) being positioned as “at risk” based on their racial identity and/or socioeconomic status alone (Ladson-Billings, 2014). For example, when race or socioeconomic status are used as independent child-level variables in quantitative analyses without contextualizing their meaning, conclusions may be drawn that erroneously dismiss the contributions of ableism and racism to assessment, narrow definitions of typical development, and the structures and processes of schooling (Collins et al., 2016). The singular use of race, home language, and/or socioeconomic status to label children as “at risk” is evidenced in some research examining the effects of comprehensive or multi-tiered intervention models and language interventions (e.g., McLeod et al., 2017; Pentimonti et al., 2017). While such research provides useful information about potential ways to provide and structure supports, by operationalizing “risk” as being static and inherent in the child and/or family (as opposed to social

systems and institutionalized practices), it can perpetuate disproportionate labeling of children of Color as having dis/abilities and their subsequent placement in segregated classrooms (Grindal et al., 2019; Wright & Ford, 2016). The latter is allowed by the legal ambiguities imbued in IDEA's mandate that children be placed in the least restrictive environment (LRE) to the “maximum extent appropriate” (Grindal et al., 2019). Justice-driven inclusive education research necessarily considers how systems contribute to findings and the practical implications for institutional changes. For instance, some scholars have presented evidence that warrants caution in equating “risk” with lower socioeconomic status and have advocated for more strength-based approaches (Albritton et al., 2017).

Importantly, inclusion is still legally defined based on percentage of time in the general education classroom (Grindal et al., 2019). Yet, such a legal conceptualization of inclusive education obscures the fact that children of Color with dis/abilities may be included into general education classrooms with exclusionary practices and structures (Brown et al., 2010; Watson, 2018). The classrooms children with dis/abilities are included into can be disabling when they are expected to perform in certain ways based on deficit assumptions and are “managed” accordingly with practices that restrict access to certain spaces (e.g., being pulled out of the classroom), activities (e.g., being limited to skills-based interventions addressing perceived deficits; reduced access to bilingual and biliterate opportunities and supports), and social opportunities (e.g., teachers refraining from challenging notions of dis/ability and race that led to social isolation for some children) (Adair et al., 2017; Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010; Martínez-Álvarez, 2019). Consequently, race and dis/ability intersect such that the legal definition of inclusion intended to promote justice for children with dis/abilities can obscure the unique experiences of children of Color with dis/abilities and may therefore undermine efforts for justice for multiply marginalized children.

As DisCrit attends to such historical and legal aspects of how race and dis/ability informs research and practice, it provides an analytic lens that locates deficiency in systems rather than individuals, which helps contextualize findings and points to new avenues for improving ECE/ECSE for multiply marginalized young children. Drawing on this tenet, research could be conducted that examines the effects of policies, such as policies intended to increase access to early education or that assert certain standards of quality, on multiply marginalized children's educational experiences. By refraining from locating “risk” in the child, justice-driven inclusive education research may explicate the impact of policies on the learning opportunities of multiply marginalized young children (component 1 of justice-driven inclusive education research) and center their experiences in work that has policy implications (component 3).

Tenet 6: Whiteness and ability are property that have been denied to people of Color and people labeled with dis/abilities; gains in rights have largely been due to interest convergence with white, middle-class citizens. Property reflects both physical objects and anything that is ascribed value. Accordingly, whiteness and ability are given property status because they are socially valued as something to attain and benefit from (Harris, 1993). In the classroom, whiteness (ways of being predominately valued, enacted, and expected by white communities) and ability can be seen as property because they are signifiers of those who have and continue to benefit the most from the educational system, and those who possess the power to distribute resources and include or exclude (Annamma, 2015). Importantly, both whiteness and ability (including notions of “smartness” and “goodness”) are not inherent qualities in an individual but rather can be ascribed to an individual based on their adherence to dominant characteristics and behaviors, as well as through access to enabling opportunities, privileges, and cultural capital (Broderick & Leonardo, 2016; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011). This is not to say that all educators explicitly label young children as “good” or “bad”—in fact, many educators explicitly resist using that kind of language. Instead, tenet six points to the ways that educators’ well-intentioned use of institutionalized practices can, in effect, (re)establish racial-ability hierarchies by placing positive (i.e., “good”) and negative (i.e., “bad”) values on children’s abilities and behaviors, and by extension, their identities.

Whiteness and ability are disproportionately valued in the early childhood classroom in a number of ways. For example, it is well-documented that classroom literature and other materials have a long way to go in representing the multifaceted experiences that children of Color and children with dis/abilities bring to classrooms (e.g., Cooperative Children’s Book Center, School of Education, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2020; Crisp et al., 2016; Favazza et al., 2017). Moreover, when early childhood books and classroom materials do represent children with dis/abilities and/or children of Color, they may resort to tropes about overcoming disability and everyone being the same, or reduce communities of Color to historical figures and experiences (Crisp et al., 2016; Lalvani & Bacon, 2019). While materials that do not explicitly address race and ability differences appear to encourage positive messages (e.g., “believe in yourself,” “we’re all equal”), rendering race and dis/ability invisible can actually reinforce notions of normalcy that marginalize children with dis/abilities (Lalvani & Bacon, 2019), and reinforce whiteness as the norm (Berman et al., 2017).

Educators protect and uphold this differential valuing of whiteness and ability when they use practices that regulate or limit participation to privilege notions of “typical” learning and “academic readiness” (e.g., focusing on evaluating and correcting academic responses rather than discussing

substantive race-related content; Beneke & Cheatham, 2019; Beneke & Cheatham, 2020). Because of such classroom materials and practices, children of Color with dis/abilities are not only excluded from valuable learning opportunities (regardless of physical placement), but the deficit ways they are positioned and treated (e.g., being denied access to more enabling opportunities) reduce the likelihood they will be able to reach the norms associated with whiteness and ability and will be continually denied access to the benefits of both (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011).

Research can reinforce the valuing and inaccessibility of whiteness and ability when “readiness” and normalization (through standardized intervention and behavior management) remain the ultimate educational outcomes in early childhood settings. Justice-driven inclusive education research requires moving toward an examination of processes that reflect equitable learning opportunities and the values of multiply marginalized children and families. Justice-driven inclusive education research that takes up a DisCrit framework can more acutely identify the impacts of race- and ability-evasive materials, practices, and institutional processes as well as determine how to engage in race- and ability-inclusive practices to support multiply marginalized young children’s access to learning opportunities and belonging (component 1 of justice-driven inclusive education research).

Importantly, inclusive education and culturally responsive or antibias practices that benefit children of Color and those with dis/abilities have often come about and been upheld because they benefit white, en/abled, middle-class citizens, reflecting interest convergence. For example, to obtain buy-in from stakeholders in general education settings, advocates for inclusion often emphasize how inclusion benefits en/abled children, and should be implemented because it does not negatively impact en/abled children’s development (Gottfried, 2014; Szumski et al., 2017). While true, such arguments lose emphasis on the need for intersectional justice for young children experiencing marginalization. DisCrit helps deconstruct exclusionary structures and practices and envision inclusive processes without catering to the interests and norms of white, en/abled citizens, thereby potentially facilitating more extensive justice that truly addresses the unique abilities, values, and support needs of multiply marginalized young children and families (components 2 and 3 of justice-driven inclusive education research).

Tenet 7: Activism is required for equity and social justice and all forms of resistance should be recognized. Multiply marginalized children’s acts of resistance and meaning-making have often been construed as challenging behavior and deficits that warrant intervention and exclusion (Collins, 2011; Migliarini & Annamma, 2020). Accordingly, inclusive education research has often examined and recommended

practices that are intended to extinguish “challenging behavior” and assimilate children of Color and those with dis/abilities into dominant ability norms (Broderick & Leonardo, 2016; Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014). As Migliarini and Annamma (2020) articulated, this is problematic because, when “appropriate” behavior is narrowly defined according to white, middle-class norms and any other behavior is construed as “challenging” or indicative of the need for intervention, it leaves children of Color with dis/abilities subject to exclusionary discipline. Such a pattern may be further compounded by the minimal consideration of race in behavior intervention research (Steed & Kranski, 2020).

As noted by this DisCrit tenet, children of Color with dis/abilities and their families intentionally act in the face of marginalization, and such actions should be respected as necessary communication to support justice efforts rather than simply targets for intervention. For example, Collins (2011) described how a Black child with perceived challenging behaviors engaged in literacy moves to confront deficit positioning and capitalize on self-identified strengths. Acknowledging such behaviors as intentional forms of participation, rather than disruptions, encourages innovative practice and counters deficit assumptions that hinder inclusive education. Similarly, families of Color often resist deficit positioning of their children by engaging in behaviors that are not traditionally recognized as parent involvement, such as refusing disability labeling and enacting culturally meaningful parenting (Kaomea, 2005; Lalvani, 2014; Waters, 2016). Understanding such acts as necessary family advocacy and engagement creates new avenues for family–professional partnerships supporting young children.

DisCrit recognizes acts of advocacy and resistance as necessary micro-level responses to macro-level oppression, which helps reimagine classroom spaces, practices, and partnership opportunities (Annamma et al., 2020; Migliarini & Annamma, 2020). Research that adopts a DisCrit lens to amplify the many ways multiply marginalized young children and their families resist dominant notions of normalcy can learn from the children and families about ways to redistribute resources, opportunities, and supports to align with their priorities and values (components 1 and 2 of justice-driven inclusive education research).

Final Thoughts: Enacting Justice-Driven Inclusive Education Research in Early Childhood Using DisCrit

In early educational contexts, normalizing institutional practices (e.g., Eurocentric curriculum and pedagogy, enforcement of narrow behavior expectations, restrictive learning opportunities focused on remediating perceived

deficits) contribute to the construction of children with dis/abilities as pathological (Ferri & Bacon, 2011), the construction of children of Color and those experiencing poverty as inferior or “at risk” (Adair et al., 2017; Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009), and the construction of multiply marginalized children as problematic (Artiles, 2011; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). These perceptions are used to justify exclusion from educational opportunities (Baglieri et al., 2011; Broderick & Leonardo, 2016; Hatt, 2012; Martínez-Álvarez, 2019). Research efforts to counter such exclusion and advance inclusive education must contribute to the dismantling of racism and ableism that reinforce notions of normalcy and uphold deficit-based practices. To that end, research should take up an explicitly justice-driven stance that embodies a continuous process of critical reflection and transformative action (Waitoller & Annamma, 2017). DisCrit is a potential theoretical lever that can contribute to this work in ECE/ECSE because it helps reimagine research questions and purposes that do not rely on deficit assumptions, serves as an analytic tool that exposes and counters biased systems and processes, and amplifies the voices of multiply marginalized communities to identify and create justice-driven practices and processes. Thus, adopting a DisCrit lens is one way justice-driven inclusive early childhood researchers can reflexively transform unjust early childhood systems and center the humanity of the children and families they serve.

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Notes

1. In this article, we use “disability” and “disabled” to denote ascriptions of impairment based on historically and culturally defined expectations, tasks, and categorizations (Annamma et al., 2013; Schalk, 2018). We use “dis/ability” or “dis/abled” to reflect the simultaneous state of ability and disability and interrupt the dominant notion that disability is static or a singular state (Annamma et al., 2013). Simultaneously, we use “en/abled” to highlight the ways educational discourses and practices actively construct children as “smart” or “good” in proximity to dominant notions of ability, leading to the provision of opportunities that reinforce said perspectives (Annamma et al., 2020).
2. Instead of privileging the history of racial domination “white” and “whiteness” represent with a capital letter, we follow

Gotanda (1991) by intentionally leaving these terms in lowercase. Following Kohli (2019), we capitalize children/families of Color in collectively referring to racially minoritized children and families in the United States, including people who identify as Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Pacific Islander, Asian, Biracial, and Multiracial. This discursive choice is not meant to minimize or erase the unique struggles of specific communities but to signify patterns of racial subjugation as well as resistance. We use Latinx in line with other literature to be more inclusive of multiple gender identities (e.g., Rolón-Dow & Davidson, 2020).

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