

September 28, 2016

Statement from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) regarding new research on implicit bias and early childhood educators from Dr. Walter Gilliam and the Yale Child Study Center

We all have implicit biases, yet we don't often know what to do with them - how to examine, respond to and change them. As a longtime leader in the anti-bias field, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is committed to bringing new research and resources to our 60,000+ members and the field at large that helps shine a light on how we can, collectively and individually, reduce our biases and improve our policies and practices to better serve young children and their families.

That is why we welcome new [research](#) from Dr. Walter Gilliam and a team at the Yale Child Study Center that explores the implicit biases of early childhood educators and the impact those biases may have on their expectations of children's behavior and recommendations related to suspension and expulsion. Key findings of this innovative research study, which applied a sophisticated methodology that included eye-tracking of 132 early childhood staff, include:

- Preschool teachers and staff show signs of significant implicit bias when expecting misbehaviors and when rating their severity, with the race of the teacher playing a big role in the outcome.
- Early education staff regardless of race show a tendency to more closely observe Black children and especially Black boys when challenging behaviors are expected.
- White teachers hold Black children to a lower standard of behavioral expectations and therefore judge significantly challenging behaviors from Black children as if those behaviors were typical. At the same time, Black teachers hold Black students to a higher standard of behavior than do their White counterparts and therefore judge them more harshly than they judge White preschoolers. Black teachers also are more likely to recommend longer amounts of expulsion/suspension in response to behavior problems.
- When teachers are provided background information about the child's stressful home life (economic insecurities, domestic arguments, etc.) they respond differently depending on whether the teacher's race matches that of the child. When the race of the teacher and child matched, extra information regarding family stressors tended to create increased empathy. But when the teacher and child race did not match, extra information about the family led teachers to feel that the behaviors were even worse and insolvable.

We know, from the extensive prior research of Dr. Gilliam and others, that early childhood suspension and expulsion is prevalent and problematic, disproportionately impacting young Black boys, three and four years old, who are systematically being denied access to the critical



supports that high-quality early childhood education can provide. As this issue has risen to new heights of attention from policymakers and practitioners, NAEYC led the development of a [collective statement against suspension and expulsion in the early years](#), signed by over 30 national early childhood organizations. The statement expressed our support behind the research and recommendations of the [joint policy statement](#) written by the US Department of Health and Human Services and the US Department of Education.

As Dr. Gilliam’s newest research shows, any solution to the challenges posed by suspension and expulsion must include a willingness among early childhood educators to hold ourselves accountable for our biases, our expectations and our actions. This accountability must be embraced across race and gender, and must also be supported by clear policies and guidelines; increased access to early childhood mental health consultation and crisis counseling; meaningful professional development; and other policy and practice changes, including increasing supports and compensation for educators across settings and sectors.

As Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor once said, “Personal experiences affect the facts that judges choose to see.” This need for the recognition of bias holds true in early childhood as well, where, as this research helps to show, educators of all races bring to the classroom a mix of emotion and experience that causes them to react to Black boys in particular with protection and punishment, fear and love.

As the largest professional association for the early childhood field, NAEYC both welcomes this research and is proud of early childhood educators’ role in collecting the data. We know that, when fully informed about what this research was addressing, all but one educator choose to remain in the study. The truth is that nearly 90% of American voters say early childhood educators are important members of their communities, on par with firefighters and nurses. Yet it’s not often that early childhood educators have the opportunity to display true courage on a national stage, as firefighters and nurses so often do. Willingly holding up a mirror to examine one’s own biases, however, takes courage; courage that is displayed by few members of any profession. We are proud to stand as an example for other individuals and professions in tackling head-on the issues that prevent us from fulfilling our shared mission and vision to ensure that all children have equitable access to high-quality, developmentally-appropriate early childhood education.

Dr. Walter Gilliam and the team from the Yale Child Study Center will be joining NAEYC, other experts, and thousands of early childhood educators to present this research during a Research Symposium Session at our [Annual Conference](#), being held November 2-5, 2016 in Los Angeles, California. We look forward to grappling with the research and its implications as a professional community, and to additional research and partnerships that continue to address and reduce our individual, collective and systemic biases moving forward.