Talking culture? Egalitarianism, color-blindness and racism in Australian elementary schools

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HIGHLIGHTS

- We focus on egalitarianism as an ethnic-racial socialization message.
- We examine egalitarian messages in relation to types of color-blind approaches.
- We discuss implications of different egalitarian approaches for teacher practice.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines egalitarianism as an ethnic-racial socialization message used by teachers with 8—12 year old children in four socio-demographically diverse elementary schools in Melbourne, Australia. The three main types of egalitarian messages identified are i) procedural-justice color-blindness, ii) distributive-justice color-blindness and iii) colormuteness, and each is explored in relation to how teachers talk to children about racial, ethnic and cultural diversity, and racism. We conclude that teacher confidence and capability, and to a lesser degree, school context, influenced the types of egalitarian messages used about diversity and the extent to which teachers had explicit and critical discussions about racism.

1. Introduction

Schools are powerful sites of socialization through which children learn about cultural diversity and understand their own cultural identity and sense of belonging in a multicultural society. These processes are known in the literature as 'ethnic-racial socialization'. Teachers and school communities are key transmitters of information about racial, ethnic, cultural and religious diversity (Thomas & Kearney, 2008) and greatly influence students' beliefs and attitudes regarding race and difference (Aboud & Fenwick, 1999; Paluck & Green, 2009; Smith, Atkins, & Connell, 2003). Elementary school children in particular are highly receptive to teacher influences as they develop their own perspectives and, in diverse school environments, adapt to regular interaction with children from different backgrounds (Killen, Rutland, & Ruck, 2011).

Despite the socializing influence of schools, within ethnic-racial socialization research, reviews indicate that most studies to date have focused on parents as the primary socializing agent (Hughes, Rodriguez, & Smith, 2006). There is less research considering teachers as socializing agents or how messages from different socializing agents (e.g. parents and teachers) interact to influence children's attitudes and behaviors toward racial, ethnic and cultural diversity. Additionally, egalitarianism as an ethnic-racial socialization message has also been under-researched

compared to other messages such as preparation for bias and promotion of mistrust (Hughes et al., 2006). Comparatively, there has been significant educational research conducted on how racism and cultural diversity are discussed in schools with consistent findings that demonstrate a strong tendency for teachers to take "color-blind" approaches where racial and cultural differences are considered not to be present or are disregarded (Kempf, 2012; Pollock, 2004). However, little is known about how these color-blind approaches interact with ethnic-racial socialization messages, such as egalitarianism, within a school context.

1.1. Research aims and questions

The study reported here addresses these gaps in the literature by considering nuances of egalitarianism as both a complex theoretical concept and as an ethnic-racial socialization message used with children in elementary school contexts. The research questions framing the overall study included: (1) What explicit and implicit ethnic-racial socialization messages do parents and teachers use to teach children about racial, ethnic and cultural diversity, and racism?; and (2) How do children understand racial, ethnic and cultural diversity, and the messages they receive? Here, we focus only on messages used by teachers pertaining to egalitarianism and color-blindness.

2. Theoretical approaches and key concepts

In this section, we provide a brief overview of ethnic-racial socialization and, in particular, egalitarian messages that adults use with children. We then consider egalitarianism as it has been defined in a broader context, primarily as (1) a belief that humans hold equal value; and (2) an approach toward a social condition of equality (Arneson, 2013). Expanding on the second definition of egalitarianism, we introduce two dominant approaches toward equity – procedural-justice egalitarianism and distributive-justice egalitarianism. We consider these approaches in terms of how they are used to discuss racial, ethnic and cultural diversity and the extent to which they address racism. Racism refers to a social phenomenon that perpetuates avoidable and unfair inequalities in society (Walton, Priest, & Paradies, 2013a).

Often, egalitarianism is associated only with the first definition, a condition of equality. As a result, egalitarianism is sometimes considered to be conceptually identical to color-blindness in which equality is also assumed (i.e., everyone is equal) along with an added normative dimension that we should therefore be 'blind' to ethnic or racial (i.e., 'color') differences. However, egalitarianism cannot simply be equated to color-blindness. We argue that a more nuanced approach to egalitarianism, as an ethnic-racial socialization message, is necessary. To illustrate this, we explore three approaches to color-blindness (Knowles, Lowery, Hogan, & Chow, 2009; Pollock, 2004) as they relate to types of egalitarian messages: colormuteness; procedural-justice color-blindness; and distributive-justice color-blindness. These messages are discussed in relation to the egalitarian messages teachers used with children to talk about racial, ethnic and cultural diversity, and racism. In the sections below, we outline key debates and our understanding of ethnic-racial socialization, egalitarianism, and color-blindness.

2.1. Ethnic-racial socialization

Ethnic-racial socialization encompasses the implicit (e.g. non-verbal) and explicit (e.g. verbal) processes by which messages about the meaning and significance of race, ethnicity and culture; ethnic-racial and cultural group membership; and inter/intra-group interactions are transmitted to children by parents, extended family, peers and community members (Hughes et al., 2006; Lesane-Brown, 2006; Neblett, White, & Ford, 2008). Hughes et al. (2006) identified four main types of ethnic-racial socialization messages used with children: preparation for bias, promotion of mistrust, cultural socialization and egalitarianism. With a limited focus on egalitarianism in any population to date, most ethnic-racial socialization literature focuses on minority groups, predominantly African American populations (Hughes et al., 2006). Less is known about ethnic-racial socialization messages within majority families.

2.2. Egalitarianism

Egalitarianism, in its broadest sense, refers to (1) a belief that humans have equal value and as such are inherently equal, and (2) an approach toward socially equitable conditions, such as income, wealth, resources and capabilities (Arenson, 2013). The second definition is of greater interest here and has provoked debate in terms of the kind of equality being advocated, its value and aims, who it is for and on what conditions (see Arenson, 2013; Sen, 1979; Temkin, 1993). This article focuses on two key approaches to achieving equity, namely procedural- vs. distributive-justice (see Deutsch, 1975; Elford, 2012). A procedural-justice approach asserts that people must always be treated equally to achieve equity whereas a distributive-justice approach asserts that sometimes people must be treated unequally to achieve equity. In other words, a procedural-justice approach focuses on equal processes (e.g. meritocracy) while a distributive-justice approach focuses on equal outcomes (e.g. affirmative action policies) (Knowles et al., 2009). As we argue below, egalitarianism is often associated with a procedural-justice approach – treating everyone the same – an approach that is equivalent or close to color-blindness. However, as we explore in this article, egalitarianism as it is understood and used in ethnic-racial socialization messages can take a distributive-justice approach where difference is recognized and accounted for.

2.3. Color-blindness

In contrast with a distributive-justice approach to equity, color-blindness as an approach to issues of ethnic-racial diversity centers on the premise "that racial group membership and race-based differences should not be taken into account when decisions are made, impressions are formed and behaviors are enacted" (Apfelbaum, Norton, & Sommers, 2012, p. 205). That is, everybody should be "judged as individual human beings – without regard to race or ethnicity" (Ryan, Gee, & Laflamme, 2006, p. 618). Some argue that such an approach is adopted when one fears being considered racist and is uncertain whether discussing racial/ethnic differences is appropriate (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008). Color-blindness as a means of preventing racism assumes that if individuals or institutions do not take race into account, they cannot be racially biased (Apfelbaum et al., 2012).

Color-blindness is linked to the idea of a post-racial society in which race does not matter and racism is a thing of the past (Appiah & Gutmann, 1996; Cho, 2009; Ono, 2010). This approach is critiqued for failing to recognize social inequality and thus supporting the 'status quo' of dominant social structures (Apfelbaum, Pauker, Sommers, & Ambady, 2010). It is also critiqued on the basis that, despite any claims to color-blindness, people do see racial differences when perceiving others, beginning in the first 12 months of life (Apfelbaum et al., 2012). Yet, a number of studies indicate that many individuals avoid acknowledging these observed differences within social interactions in an effort to appear unbiased, and that