

New report finds substantial racial, linguistic segregation among preschoolers

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Paying closer attention to preschool diversity could help to lay the foundation for students from all backgrounds to play and learn together across racial and economic lines, yet a new study released Oct. 13 reveals that many children in school-based preschool programs do not have the opportunity for such cross-racial learning experiences.

Expanding access to quality [early childhood education](#) has drawn bipartisan support among the public. Further, the Obama administration and members of Congress continue to emphasize the importance of school diversity for children and their communities, according to Erica Frankenberg, associate professor of education and demography at Penn State. Yet while both topics have received renewed interest, the two are rarely considered together, even though early childhood is one of the most important developmental windows regarding understanding difference and preventing the formation of prejudice.

Frankenberg shared findings about the extent to which preschool students are placed in racially diverse educational settings in a research report titled "[Segregation at an Early Age](#)," released through Penn State's Center for Education and Civil Rights (CECR) in conjunction with the National Coalition on School Diversity. The report drew on the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) from 2013-14, analyzing 27,957 public schools that enrolled 1.43 million preschool students. The report includes information about the extent of segregation nationally along with an appendix containing state-level analysis.

Preschool enrollment has considerable racial diversity: more than 40 percent of children are white while 30 percent are Latino and nearly 20 percent are black. Yet, the report found that many preschool students do not experience this diversity. More than one-fifth of white students attend preschool programs that are almost entirely white. The typical black or Hispanic preschool student, meanwhile, attends a school where more than half of the students are from his or her same race. Students who are English learners are also less likely to attend preschools with native English speakers.

"We cannot protect our children from race," said Andrew Grant-Thomas, co-director at EmbraceRace in Amherst, Massachusetts, and author of the foreword on Frankenberg's paper. "As parents, teachers and other caring adults in the lives of children, our challenge is to nurture children who have the language, discernment and inclusive sensibilities they will need to envision and create the institutions of authentic racial inclusion and belonging that remain among our most pressing works in progress."

The study pointed out that many white children in school-based preschools are missing out on intergroup exposure that could be an important foundation to enhance their social development by helping to reduce stereotyping. Policies must be designed in a multiracial society to support educational settings that welcome students from many racial/ethnic groups on an equitable, inclusive basis to provide all children with the opportunity to learn from one another, the study concluded.

"Professor Frankenberg's report, the first I have seen to document the stark lack of diversity in our preschools, suggests that in too many communities we continue to fail our children—all our children," Grant-Thomas said. "As long as we fail to create the integrative conditions that support [children](#) to see each other as fully human across lines of race and

class, the cost of our failure will continue to be etched in newspaper headlines, segregated social networks and polarized politics."

The report suggests that policy should be intentionally designed to help support preschools drawing a more diverse enrollment, including educating parents about the importance of diverse settings, providing transportation, attending to the design of programs so that they will attract families from all backgrounds, and supporting professional development for teachers and staff centered on creating inclusive, diverse classrooms.

"We hope for the findings from this inaugural report released by the CECR to generate needed attention to integration policy efforts at the early stages of the educational pipeline, which we believe is critical for promoting greater racial equity and meeting the democratic goals of our society," said Liliana M. Garces, associate professor and co-director of the Center for Education and Civil Rights at Penn State.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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