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Advancing Anti-Racism in Child Policy Advocacy

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Abstract

Although child policy advocates support and protect children's rights, research evidence does not indicate that these professionals and organizations have addressed embedded racial disparity and disproportionality in the child welfare system that renders children vulnerable in the first place. This article argues that adopting anti-racism is essential to child advocates committed to dismantling racist structures at the core of child welfare. Anti-racism enables child policy advocates to scrutinize and dismember the Eurocentric structures, biases, and practices that keep Black and Brown children and families entangled in the child welfare system. We provide background on child welfare and child policy advocacy. Next, we offer intentional anti-racist strategies for child policy advocates to disrupt the child welfare system. We conclude with recommendations for anti-racist practices to eliminate racial disparity and disproportionality in the child welfare system.

Keywords: child policy advocacy, child welfare, anti-racism, whiteness

Anti-racism discourse in the United States has been around since abolitionism (Aptheker, 1975), yet this work is re-emerging and becoming integrated into the national lexicon and praxis. Anti-racism is an active commitment to dismantling institutional racism, particularly anti-Blackness, in relations, systems, and structures (Graham & Schiele, 2010; Ladhani & Sitter, 2020). In the United States, institutional racism consists of systemic racial prejudice operationalized through economic, political, and social structures that extend primacy, power, and longevity to whiteness or those persons deemed racially and/or culturally White (Gillborn, 2005; Ture & Hamilton, 1992; Wilkerson, 2020). Whiteness is a strategy or performance to attain privileges by adhering to white racial identification and interests, while White people represent a socially constructed racial demographic group. White supremacy is essentially a dynamic effort to maintain the status quo or uphold a caste system that sustains domination of whiteness and subordination of blackness. In this paper, we use institutional racism as an interchangeable term for white supremacy and centering whiteness.

A cadre of scholars have highlighted racism in child welfare, but few have examined the utility of child advocates using anti-racist strategies to disrupt the system. Anti-racist child policy advocacy is ongoing, active practices that explicitly target structures and policies creating racial disparities and disproportionality that impacts Black, Brown, Indigenous, and racially/ethnically marginalized youths. Child policy in the United States dates back well before the 1900s, and one of the first public discussions on child policy was at the 1909 White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children (Yarrow, 2009). This conference addressed child maltreatment, conditions in orphanages, and child poverty. Since that time, state, regional, and national organizations have emerged to advocate for policies aimed at improving child well-being. Professionals from several disciplines such as social work, education, public administration, and public health serve as advocates for the welfare of children. Professional child policy advocates are viewed as credible, influential, and informed voices who wield significant influence in legislation. De Vita et al. (2004) found six types of child advocacy groups with different structures and approaches to advocacy. These included public-private partnerships, human service organizations, advocacy organizations, unions and professional organizations, intermediary groups to provide technical support, and action-oriented think tanks. Advocacy organizations are essential players in state policy development, policy and implementation monitoring, and, ultimately, the passage of laws to protect children and their families (Wright & Jaffe, 2013).

Child policy advocacy organizations are not immune from the employment of white supremacist strategies such as colorblindness, which can result in hasty legislative actions detrimental to Black, Brown, and Indigenous youths. Child advocates generally follow the eight public policy tasks described by Jansson (2014). These tasks include deciding what is right and wrong, navigating policy and advocacy systems, agenda-setting, problem-analyzing, developing policy proposals, policy-enacting tasks, policy implementation, and policy assessment. Additionally, advocates employ political strategies, such as negotiation or bargaining, direct lobbying of public officials, coalition-building, education campaigns, and organizing public

events, to impact positive change (Gormley & Cymrot, 2006). Political timelines, philanthropic priorities, or the political environment may cause child policy advocacy strategies to become less progressive or proactive. Advocates may prioritize the salability of their policy proposals during the political negotiation process by deemphasizing race and ethnicity (Ade, 2019). A race-neutral stance may yield some policy wins that enable policy passage, but this strategy perpetuates institutional racism in child policy advocacy and child welfare policy work. Although there is little research on dismantling white supremacy in child policy advocacy, researchers agreed that institutional racism perpetuates poor outcomes for Black youths in the child welfare system (Anyon, 2011; Cooper, 2013; Courtney et al., 1996; Fenton, 2006; Graham & Schiele, 2010). Thus, one area that child advocates should reform is child welfare, where institutional racism contributes to overrepresentation of Black children in out-of-home placements and the carceral system, as well as affects decision-making on referrals and service levels for youths (Hill, 2004). Within the child welfare system how workers perceive and define abuse can have a significant impact on children (Chibnall et al., 2003). In turn, Black and Brown families are often overly monitored and reported for maltreatment, which creates racial disproportionality and disparity in child welfare.

Child policy advocacy organizations represent the most vulnerable communities and, consequently, are assumed to pursue ethical practices to decrease disproportionate and adverse outcomes. Professional advocates and social workers, in particular, have an ethical obligation to do so. For example, social work ethics mandate that practitioners and educators commit to the welfare of Black youths and families, seek knowledge to become more aware of oppression, pursue social change in partnership with marginalized communities, and advocate against injustice (National Association of Black Social Workers, n.d.; National Association of Social Workers, 2021). To date, little is known about how to practice anti-racist child policy advocacy. Therefore, to address this gap in the literature, we present strategies for anti-racist child policy advocacy. We do not claim to offer an exhaustive explanation on white supremacy in child policy advocacy or anti-racist advocacy leadership and practice. However, we seek to contribute to anti-racist discourse and offer a preliminary contribution to anti-racist child advocacy efforts.

First, we provide a historical context for child welfare by tracing its roots to early child advocates deeply invested in culturally assimilating children and families deemed poor, immigrant, or aberrant. This historical information precedes a discussion of contemporary child advocacy and the sociopolitical environment of child welfare policy advocacy.

Next, we recommend three research-informed strategies to promote anti-racism in child policy advocacy. The first strategy addresses the disruption of micro-level barriers to actualize anti-racism and proposes adopting anti-oppressive approaches to counter existing worldviews. The second strategy recognizes the macro-level processes that maintain racial disparities and disproportionality. Of special interest is the tendency for policy advocates to succumb to the false promise of interest convergence for the sake of policy passage. The final strategy proposes expanding the definition of transformative leadership to actualize anti-racist child policy advocacy. We conclude by highlighting the ethical imperative of anti-racism and call for further research on the impact of anti-racist policies and practices.

Background on Child Welfare

The child protection movement of the late 1800s aimed to respond to the poor conditions of children and families living in almshouses and the growing census of children living in abusive orphanages (Gordon, 2011; Takanishi, 1978). The reformers of this movement were often upwardly mobile and religious European Americans. Central to early U.S. child policy advocacy was the belief that poor children needed protection (Takanishi, 1978). Protection most often translated to social control and remolding character. Early childhood advocates sought to protect children by controlling social life through discipline, nurture, and care (Frank, 1933, as cited in Takanishi, 1978). Akin to protection through social control, reformers also pursued conformity. For example, Charles Loring Brace, a social reformer and philanthropist considered a framer of the modern foster care system, believed that he possessed the authority to culturally assimilate or elevate families deemed poor or in need (Gordon, 2011). These advocates supported legislation to assimilate vulnerable children—disabled, poor, juvenile offenders, and immigrants—with middle and upper-class Eurocentric values and culture (Takanishi, 1978) by creating institutions, agencies, and professions to reflect their whiteness. These efforts purported to improve child welfare and living conditions, including health and mortality, housing, and education.

Present-day child advocates continue to promote child welfare, but the field has become more diversified. Child policy advocacy efforts broadly include addressing the contributing factors of poverty, poor health and education outcomes, childcare issues, and disparities in juvenile justice, to name a few. Many child advocacy organizations develop and implement policy agendas designed to make a significant, long-lasting impact on children and their families. Child policy advocates may use scientific data and analyses and lived experiences or personal narratives to make cases for policy change. However, child policy advocacy occurs in a white-dominant political environment with urgent and expedited timelines and predetermined policy priorities (Okun & Jones, 2019). Consequently, policy efforts tend to move too fast without sufficient input from the population affected, which contributes to inadequate, ineffective, and incremental change. Current attitudes and beliefs of those in power, who are often White legislators invested in quick political wins, overwhelmingly determine the fate of policy in the child welfare system. However, child advocates also play a substantial role as policies are shaped by their asks and demands (Murray & Gesiriech, 2004). Given this context, anti-racist consciousness, structures, and practices are prerequisites for child policy advocates to dismantle the child welfare system.

Strategies for Promoting Intentional Anti-racism among Child Advocates

True of any concept or framework, anti-racism has varied interpretations and definitions that have shifted over time. Social work scholars have defined anti-racism as a progressive, critical approach that exposes, confronts, and interrupts through deliberate actions institutional racism in practices, structures, and relationships (Graham & Schiele, 2010; Ladhani & Sitter, 2020). We define anti-racism as antithetical to white supremacy. Anti-racism is a dynamic and ongoing effort to divest from the status quo and upend a caste system that maintains domination of whiteness and subordination of blackness. Anti-racist leadership recognizes that white supremacist policy interventions disproportionately contribute to adverse outcomes for Black, Brown, Indigenous, and racially/ethnically marginalized youths and families. For example,

Lewis and Diamond described a slew of factors that buffer progress toward anti-racism, including racial stereotypes, harsher discipline of Black students, and school policies that favor White students (2016, as cited in Irby et al., 2019).

Some of the literature on the intersection of anti-racism and leadership emerges from primary education (Aveling, 2007; Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Khalifa et al., 2016; Welton et al., 2019). Anti-racist leadership in educational settings explores models and frameworks designed to reduce racial disparities and inequities in school settings. However, the anti-racist strategies provided herein seek to upend the current system. To date, there is scant available research that examines anti-racist child policy advocacy. There are limited, if any, literature reviews or research studies that explore white supremacy in child policy advocacy. Thus, on the matter of anti-racism and child policy advocacy, we generated three research-informed strategies to initiate brief commentary on this matter.

Strategy 1: Disrupting Strategic White Ignorance

The first anti-racist strategy requires advocates to be responsible and accountable for acknowledging, educating, and dismantling white ignorance (Mills, 2007) ergo the status quo of whiteness. Leaders who center an anti-racist approach continue to face challenges and nullification from stakeholders vested in perpetuating racial privilege. White privilege enables a passivity toward pervasive and systemic racial oppression. Adherence to whiteness grants privileged access to traverse the world without being inconvenienced by racism (Case, 2012; Welton et al., 2019). White ignorance is passivity and indifference, or knowing designed to produce ‘not knowing,’ to white privilege and white supremacy (Mueller, 2017). Similar to privilege is white complicity, where not knowing is normalized, intention absolves one of responsibility, and white supremacist actions are narrowly viewed as exceptional events that occur solely in the context of white nationalism (Applebaum, 2010). These norms of ignorance and complicity are not specific to White people but to the mission of white hegemony.

Adopting and integrating different worldviews and theories (e.g., African-centered perspectives, Indigenous knowledge, and Critical Race Theory) can motivate self-analysis and examination of false claims like racism or anti-Blackness does not exist. One way to integrate critical theories is through education, trainings, and workshops. Culturally responsive information is important but insufficient in addressing the broad racial inequities concretized in systems and policies (Khalifa et al., 2016). Diversity trainings were also found to have a small-sized to medium-sized effect (Kalinowski et al., 2012), may contribute to defensiveness, and rarely materialize into behavioral change for those in power such as White men (Chang et al, 2019). Another approach is to infuse policy with critical theories and non-Eurocentric worldviews to disrupt white ignorance. Much of U.S. policy is shaped by the dominant caste, European/White Americans, who determine the social, cultural, political, and economic values of the society. Primary values that underlie Eurocentricity are materialism and individualism that maintain an emphasis on domination and inequality (Schiele, 1996). Progressive policy perspectives such as African-centered social welfare supplant Eurocentric values with collectivity, collective welfare,

and individual and government responsibility (Schiele, 1997). White ignorance and privilege are unsustainable using an African-centered worldview.

Strategy 2: Policy Aimed at Harmed Communities

As child policy advocacy moves toward centering anti-racism, leadership must not paradoxically reinforce racial inequity. Researchers have recognized that it is challenging to promote anti-racism due to limited awareness among leaders on what institutional racism is and how it is perpetuated in environments (Aveling, 2007; Knaus, 2014; Young & Laible, 2000). Even when leaders develop some competency in anti-racism and practice anti-racist interventions, white supremacy still produces accumulated advantages for White people, and as a result, neutralizes efforts to reduce racial inequities. An insidious barrier to anti-racist leadership is interest convergence (Bell, 1980; Bornstein, 2018) or similar actions to couch interventions in neoliberal reforms that mitigate substantive benefit to Black and Indigenous youths and families. Interest convergence is a common tool used by leadership designed to combine White, Black, and multicultural interests to reconcile competing demands (Bell, 1980). While interest convergence may seem neutral or even sensible, it typically results in few gains for the most vulnerable groups. An example of interest convergence in child welfare is when policies are created for all children or racial minority children. These policies often do not focus exclusively on those children who are primarily impacted by the issue or harm. Colorblind and racial-neutral policies that employ interest convergence harm Black youth who are disproportionately impacted in the child welfare system. Wilkerson (2020) further explained this phenomenon as a shape-shift or workaround where the race-based caste system protects its beneficiaries, and the racial hierarchy remains intact. African Americans as the lowest-ranked racial caste have limited power, if any, relative to people of color. Anti-racism is a failure if it does not achieve equitable outcomes and instead promotes equality for minorities to Black people's detriment.

Contrary to interest convergence is centering anti-racist child welfare policy. For example, child policy explicitly aimed at reducing out-of-home placements in foster care or juvenile detention for African American youths. Policy exclusively focused on African American youths, who experience disparity and secondary trauma from institutional racism, can serve as a rising tide to lift all boats. Policy aimed at this harmed community may benefit all children as improved policy and increased knowledge, skills, and practice are generalized across the system. Blackwell (2017) evidenced this targeted universal effect when describing the impact of curb-cuts. Although curb-cuts were designed to increase the safe mobility of individuals using wheelchairs, these improvements benefit a much larger swath of society. The author illustrated multiple public policies (e.g., bike lanes, public transit accessibility, and seat belts) that were designed with a specific sub-population in mind but produced broad benefits for the general population.

Anti-racist leaders can be effective child policy advocates by identifying and defining institutional racism, challenging and upending existing power structures that maintain the status quo of whiteness, and understanding the systemic and structural necessities to advance anti-

racism. However, a prerequisite for intentional anti-racist leadership and organizational change is non-performativity. Ahmed (2006) explained that non-performativity is about using direct language versus coded language and fulfilling institutional commitments with actions (e.g., financial investment in policy and structural changes).

Institutional change centers anti-racism and ceases performativity when policy commitments are made specific to communities directly harmed. These commitments require truth-telling and public acknowledgments of harms, victims, and beneficiaries; removing barriers to increase public participation or people-centered policy advocacy; cessation of colorblindness and race-neutral policies and political negotiations; financial investments or disinvestment to address and eliminate systemic and institutional oppressions; fostering transparency through the policymaking process; and ongoing funding for anti-racism (Metivier, 2020; Miller, 2017). Anti-racist child policy advocacy recognizes reparations as a method to repair historical injustices. Reparations are material and non-material restitution for harms committed by an individual, group, or system (McElderry & Jones, 2021). Reparations may include direct compensation, apologies, and social programs or policies. Institutional reparations can replace colorblind policy and offers a specific disruption strategy that administrators and practitioners may undertake. Researchers, advocates, and practitioners are proposing both incremental and transformational change efforts. For example, Dixon (2008) recommended the African-American Child Welfare Act, which recognizes the ongoing struggle to battle racism and discrimination in U.S. child welfare policy. Transformational efforts like the upEND movement focus on training, convening, policy models, and research for abolition of the current child welfare system due to its practices of family policing (Dettlaff et al., 2021).

Strategy 3: Practice Anti-racist Child Policy Advocacy

After disrupting White ignorance and centering policy aimed at communities directly harmed by institutional racism, organizations and leaders can begin to actively practice anti-racist child policy advocacy. Child policy advocates who exercise transformative leadership can problematize the culture—ways of thinking and doing—from the status quo of white supremacy to create anti-racist critical consciousness and cultural responsiveness that center justice and equity (Hewitt et al., 2014). Anti-racism often requires mechanisms outside of established institutional parameters to create meaningful change. The tools and processes needed to dismantle white supremacy may not currently exist within child policy advocacy institutions. Therefore, practitioners, leaders, and organizations must envision and create new systems.

Unlike transformational leadership, which focuses on reform or improving an existing system for social change, transformative leadership seeks to critique and upend the status quo using the value of justice and a strategy of conscientizacao or critical awareness in pursuit of equitable social change (Freire, 2005; Hewitt et al., 2014). Anti-racist child policy advocacy calls

for responsive transformative leadership. Anti-racist transformative leaders critique existing oppressive systems, advance equity instead of equality or race neutrality, and deconstruct and reconstruct systems to repair harms by making reparation (Hewitt et al., 2014; McElderry & Jones, 2021). There is currently limited research, if any, on anti-racist transformative leadership. However, using recommendations from Watson and Rivera-McCutchen (2016), anti-racist transformative leadership includes, but is not limited to:

- Use of critical theories and reflective practices, both personal and organizational, to dismantle white supremacist norms, beliefs, organizational culture, and power structures.
- Acknowledge and eliminate whiteness (not White/European-descended people).
- Center change efforts around equity, justice, reparations, and anti-white supremacist activism.
- Emphasize transparency and collective participation from all stakeholders.

Ingredients for effective anti-racist transformative leadership also include self-reflection, grounding in critical theories, a prophetic and pragmatic vision, and explicit inclusion of race language (Gooden & Dantley, 2012). As child advocates embark on this form of leadership and perspective, cognitive dissonance and emotional discomfort may occur as long-standing beliefs and practices are unearthed. Anti-racist transformative leadership requires being open, honest, rehabilitative, reflective, humble, and committed to continually dismantling white supremacy.

Conclusion

While some advocates may see colorblindness, political negotiations, or interest convergence as strategic, to anti-racist advocates this perpetuates white supremacy and contributes to adverse outcomes for Black, Brown, and racially/ethnically marginalized youths and families. Effectively transforming child policy advocacy to address the harms of white supremacy will require (1) a explication and consensus on what anti-racism means; (2) the development of analytical skills to recognize practice dynamics, such as interest convergence, that recreate the hegemony of whiteness; and (3) defining and practicing transformative anti-racist leadership. This notion that since White people cannot handle the ‘racism’ conversation, then we just will not have the conversation is no longer an option. It is unacceptable to avoid anti-racism due to fear of open conflict, fear about policy failures, or fear of pushing too hard for proposals to explicitly address institutional racism or anti-Blackness. Social work ethics demand that social workers accept responsibility to protect the Black community against unethical and hypocritical practice, challenge social injustices, and pursue social change in the interest of vulnerable populations (National Association of Black Social Workers, n.d.; National Association of Social Workers, 2021). Social work education programs should infuse anti-racist strategies in advocacy practices and teach students about how the current welfare system sustains institutional racism. In addition to systemic change, individuals must take personal responsibility for anti-racism and reflexivity that leads to practice change and the elimination of harm against those populations we aim to help. Child policy advocates must lead the efforts to dismantle and rebuild equitable and anti-racist child welfare spaces. Future research should explore whether anti-racist policies and practices eliminate institutional racism in child welfare, which directly targets and disempowers Black, Brown, Indigenous, and racially/ethnically marginalized youths and families. Therefore, child policy advocates need ongoing evaluation of anti-racist processes and outcomes. There are

existing tools to assess racial equity and anti-racist self-assessments. However, future researchers should create mechanisms to analyze, monitor, and evaluate the effectiveness of anti-racist child advocacy practices.

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