INTRODUCTION

- Children develop intergroup racial biases from a young age (Aboud, 1988), which can lead to ongoing discrimination and stereotyping amongst racial groups (Doyle et al., 1988).
- Increased intergroup contact and particularly, cross-race friendships, can improve intergroup attitudes (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005). However, it is likely that cross-race friendships are particularly beneficial in reducing in-group bias for White children (Margis, Kilen, Sinn, & Mc Clint, 2005), as they are less likely to have cross-race friends and more likely to have higher in-group bias (Aboud, Mendelson, & Purdy, 2003).
- Learning environments can impact the development of cross-race friendships and consequently reduce in-group bias in young children, through exposure to diverse peers and classroom materials addressing topics of bias and discrimination (e.g., Anderson, 2015; Derman Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Mc Clint & Kilen, 2010); however, little is known about how children’s earliest schooling experiences shape these outcomes.
- Examining the associations between early school environments, cross-race friendships, and intergroup bias is important as children form biases based on their emerging categorizations of people (e.g., based on skin color, sex, clothing, language) during these years (Aboud, 1988).

HYPOTHESES

- Ethnic richness in the preschool classroom will increase the likelihood that children have a cross-race friend in first grade, which in turn will reduce in-group bias in third grade.
- The relation between cross-race friendship and in-group bias will be stronger for white children compared to non-white children.

DATA AND SAMPLE

- Data come from the first three phases of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development. Data were collected from 10 sites across the United States. Our sample consisted of 670 students (49.6% male) on whom preschool observation data was collected. Of the sample, 80.3% participants were White, 10% were Black/African American, 5.1% were Hispanic, and 4.6% were other races or ethnicities. On average, mothers had 14.73 years of education (SD = 2.44). At third grade, the average income to needs ratio was 4.93 (SD = 4.07).

METHOD

- Measures
  - Ethnic Richness (Preschool). Trained observers rated preschool classrooms on seven items that captured the diversity of materials and people (e.g., teachers and classmates) in the classroom.
  - Cross-Race Friendship (First-grade). Mothers reported on their own children’s race/ethnicity at birth, and the race/ethnicity of their children’s close friend at first-grade. We created a dichotomous variable to capture whether the child’s race/ethnicity matched the friend’s race/ethnicity. (1=cross-race).
  - In-Group Bias (Third-grade). Children were shown pictures of four children (Black, Asian, White, Hispanic) and were asked to identify with whom they would like to play in order from most to least. In-group bias was coded as “Yes” if the selection pattern favored the study child’s own race, or “No” if the selection pattern favored other races. The scores were averaged over four trials.
  - Control variables.
    - Controls on cross-race friendship:
      - Child sex (0-girl)
      - Mother’s racial/ethnic minority status (0-non-minority)
      - First-grade income-to-needs
      - First-grade classroom diversity index (Simpson, 1949)
    - Controls on in-group bias:
      - Child sex (0-girl)
      - First-grade in-group bias
      - Third-grade income to needs

Analysis

- Missing data were imputed using the MI procedure in Mplus.
- SEM with WLSMV estimation was used to estimate the mediated pathway between ethnic richness, cross-race friendship, and in-group bias.
- We tested the significance of both the direct and indirect effects of interest for White and non-White students.

RESULTS

- As expected, learning in an ethnically rich preschool classroom increased the likelihood of having a cross-race friend in first grade, which in turn related to reduced in-group bias in third grade. Contrary to hypotheses, no main paths of interest differed for White or non-White students.
- It is important to note that the direct relation between ethnic richness and in-group bias was significantly positive, indicating that without building positive relationships with diverse peers, exposure to diverse people and materials in preschool may lead to increased bias. This highlights the importance of improving interactions amongst diverse children, instead of solely increasing exposure.
- This study has meaningful implications for practice and policy. Results speak to the importance of increasing diversity in early schooling settings, in conjunction with building learning environments that intentionally facilitate cross-race friendships in these classrooms. This may be accomplished by training teachers to promote interaction amongst diverse students.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

- As expected, learning in an ethnically rich preschool classroom increased the likelihood of having a cross-race friend in first grade, which in turn related to reduced in-group bias in third grade. Contrary to hypotheses, no main paths of interest differed for White and non-White students.
- It is important to note that the direct relation between ethnic richness and in-group bias was significantly positive, indicating that without building positive relationships with diverse peers, exposure to diverse people and materials in preschool may lead to increased bias. This highlights the importance of improving interactions amongst diverse children, instead of solely increasing exposure.
- This study has meaningful implications for practice and policy. Results speak to the importance of increasing diversity in early schooling settings, in conjunction with building learning environments that intentionally facilitate cross-race friendships in these classrooms. This may be accomplished by training teachers to promote interaction amongst diverse students.

LIMITATIONS

- The measure of ethnic richness only captures the presence or absence of ethnically and racially diverse people and materials in the room. No attention was given to classroom practices or processes regarding diversity or bias. There was no indication of how students or teachers related to diverse others or utilized the available materials. Research has demonstrated the importance of process variables in impacting children’s experiences in their classrooms and future outcomes (Tseng & Seidman, 2007; NICHD, 2016). These are the same processes necessary for building cross-race friendships. Future research should examine the impact of multicultural or anti-bias classroom practices, that will better capture how issues of racial and ethnic diversity are actually addressed in the classroom.
- The majority of the NICHD sample is White, which limited our ability to examine results for multiple ethnic/racial subgroups. Future studies should consider differences among a variety of ethnic and racial groups (e.g., black, Latino, Asian, Native American), instead of combining heterogeneous racial/ethnic minorities.