In recent years, we have witnessed debates that all children, regardless of their background, should be entitled to equal opportunities in education, and that early educators have a responsibility to encourage this. The message that educators must be critical of their received opinions and reflective of their practice through learning is central to the ethos of the Educational Equity Institute and its proponents, Drs. Jen Neitzel and Ebonyse Mead, based in and across the USA.

- Every child deserves a quality education.
- Drs. Jen Neitzel and Ebonyse Mead are pioneers in the field of addressing equity-related issues in early childhood.
- Neitzel and Mead act as the standing Executive Director and President of the Educational Equity Institute, respectively, based in and across the USA.
- They aim to change mindsets and transform systems that engender deep disparities between Black and White students in early education.

Jen: When I was a Researcher and Technical Assistance Provider at FPG Child Development Institute at UNC-Chapel Hill, I got engaged in racial equity work and became more interested in providing training and other services to educational organizations. So, I started the Educational Equity Institute. Ebonyse was doing similar work; however, we did not know of each other. She and I met when we submitted almost identical proposals on implicit bias to an early-childhood conference in North Carolina. They asked if we would work together, and we both said, ‘yes’. We did not meet in person until the day of the training, and it was like we had known each other forever. It was a natural partnership for Ebonyse to join me as the President of the Educational Equity Institute, and we have been working together since then to build and develop it.

Ebonyse: I worked with an early childhood organization in North Carolina. I was asked to sit in on a workgroup to help North Carolina draft a policy to address preschool suspensions and expulsions. After reviewing the data which illustrates the disproportionate rates of suspension and expulsion for Black boys, I was compelled to action. Being the mother of a Black male child makes you think and pray differently. I know firsthand the fear and joy of raising a Black male child in America. As a mother and an early childhood professional, I have a responsibility and obligation to be a voice for Black children who are often marginalized, excluded, silenced, or labeled because of their racial background and or the zip code they live in.

How did you both become involved in addressing equity-related issues in early childhood?
Jen: In my previous role at FPG Child Development Institute, I was put on a project to examine the disproportionalities in suspensions and expulsions of young Black children. When I saw the data, that Black children were up to four times more likely to be suspended or expelled than their White peers, I had two choices: I could look away because the data did not affect me, my children, and family in any way, or I could be a part of the solution going forward. Obviously, I chose the latter.

Ebonyse: I worked with an early childhood organization in North Carolina. I was asked to sit in on a workgroup to help North Carolina draft a policy to address preschool suspensions and expulsions. After reviewing the data which illustrates the disproportionate rates of suspension and expulsion for Black boys, I was compelled to action. Being the mother of a Black male child makes you think and pray differently. I know firsthand the fear and joy of raising a Black male child in America. As a mother and an early childhood professional, I have a responsibility and obligation to be a voice for Black children who are often marginalized, excluded, silenced, or labeled because of their racial background and or the zip code they live in.

The Institute’s mission is ‘to create paths toward racial healing through authentic...’

The murder of George Floyd in 2020 has sparked US-wide protests and helped the international Black Lives Matter movement gain momentum.

Interactive, creative play is an important aspect of early development.

We continue working towards being a haven for anti-racist work in early childhood.

Thought Leader

Equity in education
Creating a haven for anti-racist work in early childhood

The Handbook will be released on 15th April by Brookes Publishing and can be purchased here.
We've recently received funding for two very different projects, both equally exciting.

For the first project, we are implementing a promising model to address the disparities in suspensions and expulsions of young Black children in early-learning programs. Our approach for this project is designed to bring about deep, transformational change within one community by: 1) building capacity through trainings focused on equity, historical trauma, and systems change; 2) engaging a strategic planning team made up of parents, providers, and county officials to develop a road map for change related to the suspension and expulsion of young Black children; and 3) working within the community to implement the strategic plan. The second project that we are excited about is to encourage family empowerment and relationships that empower Black and White children. For example, with the Educational Equity Institute we envision an all-encompassing resource is designed to give practitioners a deeper understanding of the issues related to racism in early childhood. One chapter is devoted entirely to helping individuals understand and differentiate key terms, such as equity, equality, discrimination, oppression, etc. We also have chapters on racial healing, Whiteness, and historical trauma.

The second part of the book outlines the current issues involving equity in early childhood, such as suspensions/expulsions, data collection, positive identity development, culturally responsive anti-bias practices, and culturally responsive family engagement. The remainder of the book is dedicated to providing organizations with a path forward towards deep, transformational change. Each chapter ends with tips and suggestions for continuing the work, both on an individual and organizational level. Our hope is that early childhood educators who want to address equity and justice in early childhood education will read with open hearts and minds; childhood educators will be challenged, but will lean into the discomfort because that is the context for change.

We are a huge proponent of culturally responsive anti-bias practices and anti-racist pedagogies because they are good for all children, and they help practitioners create learning environments where all children and families can see themselves. They know that when they enter a classroom, they matter simply because they exist. Getting to a point where there is mass implementation of these practices is going to be challenging because of the barriers we discussed previously. We also understand that change will take time – it took us over 400 years to get here! The issues are too deep and complex to solve within a single training. Deep, ongoing work within organizations is critical. There must be a commitment to learning and unlearning all that we have been taught about ourselves and our society, including how Whiteness and anti-Blackness shows up in early childhood. So, the key area of focus right now is engaging in work that pushes people towards their own deep, transformational change. After that, we can begin to change policies and practices without continuing to do harm because we have not done our own work first.

You have recently published The Handbook of Racial Equity in Early Childhood Education. Why should people read it?