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Research Article

Pluralist proximity: Speculation for an antiracist pedagogy in Swedish and Norwegian early childhood education

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Abstract: This article builds on findings that racism significantly affects the well-being of minoritised students in early childhood education in Sweden and Norway. We understand the lack of a specific antiracist early childhood education in a colourblind society as impacting the development of young children and the future of the Earth when racial disparity amplifies the instabilities caused by predatory capitalism and the climate crisis. We challenge the assumption that education in the arts is inherently beneficial and speculate on a future where critical awareness of differences and colonial understanding are integral in early childhood education. Our aim with this article is to enhance the abilities of early childhood education students and teachers, as well as early childhood teachers, to develop visual racial literacy. We unpack the Solmaz collective's emerging concept of *pluralist proximity*: a state of collective professional development that can scaffold a practice of emancipatory antiracism needed in early childhood education contexts. It is a speculative, emerging pathway for students and teachers to develop antiracist pedagogy for early childhood education in Sweden and Norway. The notion of pluralist proximity investigates how zones of racial discomfort can be acknowledged and harnessed to develop antiracist teaching practices. The authors of the article use performative research, which is entangled with postcolonial thought. By identifying how stereotypes are subtly perpetuated through colonised lenses, the image thus becomes a theoretical and methodological tool for critically thinking about our entanglements in racialisation processes. It aligns with the concept of *visual racial literacy*.

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Introduction

This article focuses on the role of visual arts in an antiracist pedagogy in Early Childhood Education (ECE) and examines the racialising power of visual information (Hall, 1997). The Solmaz Collective write collectively, informing this article from different intersectional and racialised positions. The collective comprises a collaboration with Gry O. Ulrichsen, Zahra Bayati, and Helen Eriksen, artists, researchers, and educators. We have different educational and geographical backgrounds and different positions in a colonially constructed racial hierarchy. Gry O. Ulrichsen is a racially unmarked White person, born, raised, and living in Norway. Helen Eriksen is also unmarked and racialised White, with Norwegian and British parents, raised in the UK, now residing in Norway. Zahra Bayati belonged to the dominant majority in Iran before she fled to Sweden due to political oppression. In a Swedish or Norwegian context, she is racially marked as non-White. We are also mothers whose children are racialised as non-White.

We began our journey in 2018, and since then, we have explored our research and artistic practice together. We have found that our markedly different backgrounds raise interesting questions when we touch upon the racialising boundaries that influence and entangle us all. We continually investigate how we are differently silenced or compelled to conform to structural racism through institutionalised and

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internalised epistemological structures. We do so by acknowledging our different racialised positions and the effect of our emotions when racialising boundaries are questioned through the agency of the image.

The aesthetic experience and the arts are central to Early Childhood (EC) work. They should be central to antiracist work, aiming to dispel racialising visual stereotypes and tropes in EC spaces and ECE. We all, that is Zahra, Gry and Helen, experience emotional attachment to individual image production as central to sustaining a White supremacist imagery and thought. In this article, we will address rarely explored visual arts pathways for the expression of racialising or stereotyping content beyond the apparent stereotypes. Furthermore, we will demonstrate how, despite good intentions, visual representations, both pre-existing and those we create individually or collectively, can reinforce and replicate stereotypes. This can reveal and help us understand how racialisation operates and is experienced from various positions within a racialised hierarchy. We hope that our emerging concept of *pluralist proximity* (PP) can enable future early childhood teachers to foster what Acuff and Kraehe (2022) describe as visual racial literacy.

Discussing racism and its occurrence has profound implications for the distribution of power and real-life expectations in ECE, for its lecturers, students, and children involved. In Sweden and Norway, it appears that few ECE professors are racialised as non-White and have backgrounds from non-Western countries (Baugerud & Ahmed, 2025; Beiler et al., 2025). Introducing this topic in the context of Sweden and Norway is challenging because ECE is often seen as representing spaces characterised by innocence and thus discussions about race, racialisation, and stereotypes are ignored, avoided or deemed irrelevant (Bayati, 2014; Kristoffersson et al., 2021; Pearson, 2015). Furthermore, we conclude that there is a lack of representation through materiality and visuality, from picture books to toys, from the colours of paper children use for self-portraits to how specific colours are defined as skin colour (Clark & Clark, 1947; Edutopia, 2021; Kareem, 2020; Minotenk, 2021; Mpike, 2019; Schwarz & Lindquist, 2018). Art-pedagogical resources in Swedish and Norwegian ECEs are positioned within dominant White normativity (see also Mångkulturellt Centrum, n.d.).

As time evolves, our common concern for social sustainability, universal equity, and the need for a society that encourages all its citizens to reach their full potential seems to be slipping out of reach. Scandinavia often sits at a table decked for peace and understanding, yet for us living here, there is an ever more persistent noise from the far right. Although this work is challenging, we are encouraged by Haraway's "Staying with the Trouble" (2016) that urges us to lean into difficult, uncomfortable situations rather than trying to stabilise realities. She maintains that present day urgencies cannot be resolved by overoptimism in technology, to secure the future, nor by despair over impending destruction.

The terms race, racialisation, and Whiteness used in this article analyse and address intersectional power imbalances in our societies. According to postcolonial and critical race theories, these terms can help us understand race as a social construct and racialisation as a process that has significance in all parts of our lives (Bayati, 2014; Leonardo, 2009; Loomba, 2015; Said, 1978). The legacy of colonial times is still active (Quijano, 2000), categorising groups in a hierarchy based on physical traits. In Scandinavia, new social class divisions are forming according to skin colour, which points to ongoing structural racism. Today in Sweden and Norway, BIPOC children experience significantly higher rates of poverty compared to others (Barnombudsmannen, 2021; Bufdir, 2024; Rädda Barnen, 2021).

To understand how visual racial literacy already supports racialising processes, we need to consider the concept of the cultural archive. Edward Said argued that European society has a cultural archive that otherises non-Whites and normalises racialising hierarchies and stereotypes (1994). This phenomenon is vague, and its agency is cumulatively dissipated throughout European society in texts, images and artistry. It produces and promotes colonial norms and values in cultural activities, including the visual arts and crafts (Said, 1978; Wekker, 2016).

To develop visual racial literacy, we must unravel the mechanisms of the cultural archive to decode, challenge, and eventually transform our image-making. Thus, PP is a theoretical and methodological tool to unlearn how the cultural archive and coloniality produce racialising White supremacist meaning. Our starting point is that racialising division is anchored in an art education that prioritises individual,

expressive, and emotive image production. Images are neither neutral nor real, but they can reinforce an idea, such as a stereotype. Furthermore, image making is a valuable activity that can encourage the development of a new social imaginary (Taylor, 2003), that is, to transform how children and adults experience and imagine their own social situations and expectations beyond the normative, socially reinforcing stereotyping imagination. What happens when we begin to negotiate the space for image making and explore individual expression through collective action?

The Solmaz Collective examines entanglements with discourses on art, aesthetic practice, coloniality, and antiracism in education (Bayati et al., 2025). We argue that the daily manifestation of coloniality through recurring racism can be addressed if we have the tools to challenge the structural racism surrounding us. We aim to initiate a dialogue that transcends constructed racial boundaries, making it easier for ECE teachers and students, as well as EC teachers, to reflect on their own positions in racialisation processes. In the article, these positions within the EC field will be referred to as EC teachers. PP is a theoretical and methodological tool that can help articulate what happens in situations where ideas about race are brought to life by our own actions.

Our methods include collective image creation to foster knowledge development. In this article, we examine why we strive to, and struggle with, developing pluralist and equitable communities in the field of EC, as well as the significance of visual art in this endeavour. The research questions we pose in this article are:

- How do images affect us in collective and pluralist knowledge production?
- How can we make visible and disrupt stereotypes in our cultural archive?

Antiracist work places the usual demands on early EC teachers: professional insight, humility, responsiveness, love, and care for others. However, it also requires additional qualities, those of tenacity and courage, to persevere and challenge deeply rooted racism at both individual and structural levels. For this reason, we encourage readers to prioritise self-care in their daily antiracist practice. The White reader lives within a global structure of racism; as such, they should treat moments of awakening as opportunities for reflection, even when they are painful. Such moments of reflection are not a break with antiracism but a pause in the work.

We need to learn to interpret and decode images beyond racialising boundaries to recognise actions as either complicit or racist. Achieving this requires unlearning ingrained silences and shame. For Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC), and EC teachers, breaking the silence around racism is painful and may even be retraumatizing. For White EC teachers, it involves examining moments when their words or actions have been perceived as stereotyping, humiliating, or racist. We encourage White teachers to reflect on their own positions, engage honestly with others, and openly acknowledge these experiences. Furthermore, it is essential to learn to recognise and apologise for a complicit position (Daniel, 2023).

We structure this article by examining how visual art can help transform the field of EC into equitable, democratic communities. Next, we consider ways to become aware of and disrupt the processes that recreate dominant knowledge canons and cultural archives. Drawing on decolonial frameworks and collective methodologies, we illustrate how visual artefacts reveal both the reproduction of colonial narratives (Figures 2 & 3) and the potential for images to challenge and overturn them (Figures 4 & 5). Finally, we address the educator's responsibility—what it means for early childhood teachers to adopt antiracist practices.

What is Pluralist Proximity?

PP describes a critical process that emerges when people from different racialised positionalities, and thus varied forms of knowledge, deliberately come together to examine how racial boundaries are created and maintained. A crucial point is that White supremacy continues when these dynamics are left unquestioned, when meaningful dialogue and ethical image making are possible. It can disrupt entrenched, racialising positions, where those typically excluded, such as Zahra, are present in positions of

power and negotiation usually dominated by White perspectives. Through this collective artistic process, it is possible to achieve new understandings and disruptions of racialised visual narratives. This approach highlights that images, whether sourced or made, can reinforce racist ideas. Yet, images also have the power to show how racialisation operates and how individuals experience it differently depending on their place within racial hierarchies.

PP operates in environments shaped by racism, which means it emerges everywhere through language and lived experiences during social interactions. In PP, we examine emotions that arise in negotiations about racial boundaries, as people define themselves and others in relation to these boundaries and the power structures involved. PP encourages a deeper, embodied understanding of how racial boundaries are formed, raising essential questions about the emotional responses people experience during discussions with individuals from different backgrounds. Our previous research has examined the effects of colonial forms of thinking on our perception of identity and knowledge (Eriksen et al., 2020). Building on this, PP can help reveal how White supremacy remains central in racialising processes as coloniality shapes our sense of self and identity. Understanding how racialisation happens may offer a way to challenge and dismantle these enduring structures.

PP can stir strong emotions and may even retraumatise those who have experienced racism. Failing to address racism as it arises only allows silence to reinforce racialising positions and deepen divisions. However, there is a risk of distressing BIPOC individuals. This painful reality is confronted by remaining present and engaging in these moments. We do not leave it alone: we worry it as it worries us. PP can also trigger strong emotions in the White majority who have never experienced the negative consequences of racism against themselves. It will also evoke memories of past events in the racialised White student or teacher and cast them into phenomena such as guilt, shame, aggression, denial, and defence (DiAngelo, 2011; Wekker, 2016). These moments can serve as opportunities for antiracist work. On the other hand, the impact of racism is insufferable, causing significant anxiety and impacting all aspects of life, from daily routines to education and career paths. Racism creates structural barriers, making certain privileges unattainable for racialised people.

Our approach works to make racism visible, challenge dominant ways of seeing, and create space for new narratives. Through PP, we can empower ourselves to examine how historical representations of race persist in images created today. Rather than repeating racial hierarchies without addressing the deeper problem of racism, we can take responsibility for them.

The Role of Art in Equitable Democratic Children's Communities

This article highlights the connection between politics, values, and the aesthetic practices of EC teachers. Democratic institutions are under threat at a moment when Trumpism appears unescapable and European democracies are electing far-right parties. To counteract the erosion of democratic values, it is essential to cultivate agency and explicitly confront racism within educational practice. We can draw lessons from EC history and be inspired by the pioneers of Reggio Emilia, who founded an innovative pedagogy explicitly aimed at preventing a resurgence of fascism in the aftermath of World War II (Carlsen, 2021). Furthermore, pedagogical models such as Reggio Emilia encourage teachers to favour participatory, process-oriented, and collaborative methods (Taguchi, 2010). This focus is supported by Swedish and Norwegian EC curricula, which aim for children to develop aesthetic awareness and creative expression, explore a variety of materials and cultural forms, and engage collaboratively in artistic processes (the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017; the Swedish Ministry of Education and Research, 2018/2025). Yet, art education has a colonial power structure embedded in the discipline (Acuff & Kraehe, 2022; Josef, 2019). Sadly, our previous research found that the didactic art practices of both art and EC teachers are strongly influenced by a lack of criticality and implicit bias (Bayati, 2014; Eriksen, 2023; Ulrichsen, 2024). Thus, pedagogical and didactic decisions taken by EC teachers are closely interwoven with and influenced by dominant colonial narratives (Murris, 2016), where creative joy and the expressive needs of the child dominate discourses about art in EC. In this article, the power and agency of images are examined within relational and material-discursive practices in art education, particularly in response to

societal and eco-critical challenges. To develop such practices, EC teachers need to critically assess existing knowledge, move between different knowledge fields, and create new theoretical perspectives through their own creative work. Likewise, it is essential to translate theory into practical action.

From Inclusion to Pluralism

The first social institution children meet outside the home is an EC space. It plays a crucial role in helping a child grasp values, develop their identity, and understand their environment and community (Johansson, 2011). In ECE, the concepts of diversity and inclusion are an echoing theme, from lunchrooms to policy documents, from lesson plans to systems for quality assessments. In our previous research, we have observed discrepancies between good intentions for inclusion and actual practices in our educational institutions (Ulrichsen et al., 2021). It is a paradox that, despite educational inclusion strategies in Sweden and Norway, statistics show that socio-economic differences follow racialised lines (Hübinette & Lundström, 2022; Statistiska centralbyrån, 2023). We argue that these good intentions, as expressed in well-informed and articulate policy documents, are not adequately translated into transformative action (Bayati, et al., 2025) Bayati, 2014; Hübinette & Lundström, 2022).

Education can be both empowering and constraining: while it has the potential to enrich lives, it can also serve political agendas by perpetuating dominant knowledge systems and discourses (Foucault, 2006; Illich, 1971; Howarth, 2007). In Sweden and Norway, neoliberal reforms have reshaped schooling and are now gauging learning by its contribution to economic growth. Even EC spaces, a colonial knowledge system, underpins the allocation of societal power and resources (Frick Alexandersson, 2021). Not every child receives the foundations for self-sufficiency and solidarity when EC spaces either enable or restrict children's ability to envision themselves as active, future citizens. Therefore, dedicated EC spaces become essential and decisive arenas for shaping the future of society. Kraehe & Herman (2020) forward that the skills needed for educators to teach effectively and responsively in contexts of racial inequality are seldom incorporated or formalised in art teacher education programmes. Yet, parents and educators alike view these antiracist competencies as essential for all teachers. They further point to the lack of professional standards or assessments in art education generally in relation to discourses and practices of racism and antiracism. Because educators must constantly advocate for preserving a discipline at risk of commodification, instrumentalisation, or integration into other subject areas, they often develop conservational practices. Consequently, issues of racial equity are frequently omitted from EC arts programmes, leaving the field without a critical framework for examining the societal roles of art.

Curricula for 21st Century Skills

The world looks different from the way it did a decade ago. The new millennium brought a wide range of technological, educational, and social developments that have transformed the visual landscape. Children in EC settings are constantly exposed to images that shape their developing understanding of the world. Are art teachers adapting to the 21st century? Do they possess the necessary skills for a new world? (Acuff & Kraehe, 2022). As ECE teachers, we must reflect on developing greater opportunities for students to understand how implicit bias, stereotyping, and racialisation are communicated directly through images and visual forms of expression. In both the Swedish and Norwegian ECE curricula, a goal for children's knowledge development is to encounter a variety of artistic and cultural forms of expression and explore and participate in art and cultural experiences with others. Another goal is for children to experience joy and pride in their own cultural belonging (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018/2025). These goals raise the following questions:

How can an unmarked White EC teacher—whose higher education has only covered superficial, uncritical celebrations of happy diversity (Ahmed, 2012) effectively pursue these goals?

How can an unmarked White EC teacher, trained in an environment where discussions of diversity drive narratives that perpetuate racism, come to understand the experiences and identity of a racialised child?

ECE curricula have to be grounded in broader social realities rather than isolated from societal trends

and shifts. At a macro level, societal factors such as racial and socio-economic divisions influence child poverty, particularly affecting BIPOC children. At a micro level, teachers make value-laden decisions through their previous aesthetic experiences, their consideration of content and methods, which is combined with their personal projection of what art is. There is no singular neutral decision, rather an entanglement of value laden factors that influence how we teach art.

Today's children grow up immersed in a highly visual environment, including television, social media, and digital platforms, which creates a rapidly expanding visual archive. They carry this into their personal repertoires. If EC teachers remain unaware of these dynamics and respond passively, they risk perpetuating stereotypes and colonial imagery, whether through picture books, classroom posters, or toys and games (Eriksen, 2022). As children advance through school, visual media often yield to written language, making it even more urgent that educators consciously address how visual culture influences children's knowledge production. To prevent this, educators must actively examine, reveal, and challenge the prevailing racialised visual narratives embedded in the materiality surrounding children.

Our departure point is that racism exists in all parts of Norwegian society (Bufdir, 2024; Knudsen, 2022; Jirde-Ali, 2023; Sibeko, 2019), in Swedish and Norwegian fields of EC (Bjørnaas, 2025), in schools (Arneback & Jämte, 2017; Bufdir, 2024; Ramirez et al., 2024), in the art field (Josef, 2019; Nunes, 2019; Presto et al., 2019) and in higher education (Bayati, 2014; Baugerud & Ahmed, 2025; Hovde, 2021; Ramirez, 2021).

The Significance of Art for Social Sustainability

When we explore and question racism in education, in our capacity as peers, lecturers and colleagues, we often hear the same arguments from educators repeated across the educational sector, including the field of EC (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Repeating arguments

Unlearning through Discomfort

White colleagues often ask Gry and Helen, "What does *this* have to do with *you*?" White students ask, "How can *I* talk about this without speaking on behalf of others?" These questions could originate from the fear of inflicting pain on someone and the fear of taking space that should be given to the minoritised. This resistance can come from a position characterised by White innocence (Wekker, 2016). A position where one disclaims responsibility for racism and places it on other individuals, institutions, fields, and history. These positions work to silence the White antiracist agency. We repeat to amplify bell hooks (1994) question: why should this only concern groups or individuals who experience systematic discrimination? We further ask:

Does Zahra have to take responsibility for the racism that she experiences because she is marked racialised?

When one does not participate in the work for racial equality, does it mean that one is not actively

racialising?

In the Swedish and Norwegian contexts, our previous research highlights the need to focus on discomfort in discourses and educational practices regarding racialised discrimination within our fields (Bayati, 2014; Ulrichsen et al., 2021). Sweden and Norway's pervasive self-confidence stems from national narratives of Nordic exceptionalism (Eriksen et al., 2020), which instil in citizens from a young age the idea that their countries lead the world in equality, antiracism, feminism, and human rights (Danbolt, 2016; Schierup & Ålund, 2011).

Our Cultural Archive and the Power of Canon

Acuff and Kraehe (2022) argue that there is a pressing need to understand how race is visually constructed and mediated. The capacity to discern racial distinctions is predicated upon an initial acquisition of the visual, symbolic, and aesthetic conventions that underpin racist ideologies. Consequently, if individuals can be conditioned to interpret the world through a racialised lens, they can equally be socialised to deconstruct that perspective and cultivate alternative modes of visual analysis. Within this framework, the art classroom emerges as a particularly conducive environment for fostering such competencies that Acuff and Kraehe (2022) conceive of as a visual racial literacy.

From this perspective, the central role of the cultural archive is essential in our understanding of how European art, and its historical canon, supports White supremacy. The cultural archive operates through the production and promotion of colonial norms and values in artistic expressions, including visual art. A colonial cultural archive is active and dissipated throughout European society (Said, 1978; Wekker, 2016) through texts, images and artistry. These field specific works from literature, sculpture, painting, and anthropology are often considered part of a foundational canon of knowledge that cannot be dismissed or challenged.

In the art field, the Eurocentric visual canon is centred and influences knowledge production by pushing other knowledges to the periphery (Pollock, 1999). This is reiterated and passed down through generations in various fields. The artist Fadlabi points to this when he says

> I think that art history is a lie; this lie generated terminology like primitivism, for example. The White man used terms like genius when he saw the jewels that those 'primitive' people could make, you know, like he is the hero (laughing), like Picasso and Mondiglioni. They were unable to see African artists as equals. They just couldn't (Joof, 2018, our translation).

Cultural values and norms influence policy documents in the arts disciplines, which means that challenging the established canon raises questions about the role of art in society. From an intersectional viewpoint (Crenshaw, 1989), power is not owned but instead negotiated when identity markers, such as race, class, and gender, intersect in complex, context-dependent situations. Thus, read through intersectionality, it is unsurprising that arguments once used to marginalise women in art by rejecting the modern canon and centring women's experiences (Lippard, 1973; Pollock, 1988) reappear in debates about racism in art and art education. When viewed from an intersectional perspective, the resistance and polarisation seen in the discussion of racism in the field of art education become understandable and addressable. Recognising these recurring counterarguments can help us prepare for the inevitable resistance we face when dealing with exclusion and racism in this field. We recognise that gender exclusions can be successfully legally challenged. In this article, we aim to continually challenge the intersecting practices of racialisation and coloniality in knowledge production and visual expression.

Overt Stereotyping

The collage below (Figure 2) is composed of images from Hergé's comic series "*S/S Manitoba Doesn't Answer"* (1952/19). The protagonists of the narrative, Johan and Lotta, are captured by a cannibalistic tribe. They escape to a beach where an armoured car emerges from the ocean. The tribe, who have never seen such a vehicle before, fall to their knees and worship it as a sacred object. This stereotypical image of "natives" worshipping Western technology is a recurring feature in popular culture. It clearly indicates that the "savages" are foolish and ignorant and that Western ideas (technology) are superior.

Figure 2
*Found images showing overt stereotyping in children's literature (Mångkulturellt Centrum, n.d.)**

* Bottom - left to right: Comic published in Allers Family Journal, 1894; still images from the films *Jungle Jitters*, from 1938, and *Trader Mickey*, from 1932 (Mångkulturellt Centrum, n.d.).

It would be premature to assume that stereotypes have vanished simply because overtly racist images are uncommon in mainstream culture, primarily due to recent efforts to address the explicit racist imagery. Far from disappearing, stereotypes persist all around us (Bayati, 2014; Hall, 1997). One example is the *baby-bonus* advertising campaign in Norway (Figure 3). The term itself, implying a discount, was printed over the image of a BIPOC child dressed in hip-hop fashion, which is still unjustly associated with the Black gangster culture of the 1980s. A video portrayed the BIPOC child as highly sexualised, resulting in a storm of complaints about the sexualisation of small children, which saw its removal from the internet (Wittrup Djup, 2019). However, these images were also circulated on supermarket posters and continue to appear on social media, which demonstrates that racialised stereotypes remain deeply embedded in our everyday visual environment.

Figure 3
Example of a contemporary form of racialising and stereotyping the BIPOC body

The Agency of Image Making

When the Solmaz collective collaborates on collages, our individual relationships to the cultural archive are activated through existing images. This collective activity provides an opportunity for participants to respond to each other's use of images, and as such is a performative research method (Østern et al., 2023). Our process of collaging and assembling enacts and generates new knowledge through embodied knowledge, sensory presence and dialogue. These acts are an ongoing relational inquiry where meaning emerges from the interplay and co-creation between participants, materials and context. Thus, it is important not to fix the images onto a background. When they have a flexible position, they can be repositioned through negotiation of meanings made in this process of becoming. This further reflects the conviction that identity is not a fixed and impermeable phenomenon (Hall, 1990). In these collaborative making processes, we have collectively produced several images (Bayati et al., 2022; Eriksen et al., 2020; Ulrichsen et al., 2021).

In the example below, Gry started a collage to express experiences of racism and Nordic exceptionalism within the context of White art-education (Ulrichsen et al., 2021). What began as Gry's individual artistic gesture evolved into a collective creation as all three authors discussed, critiqued, and refined the work together. Through collaboratively negotiating the position of images and visual content, we became aware of how deeply entangled we were in colonial hierarchies and how our own practices inadvertently reproduced stereotypes. The material process of constructing the collage opened a space of discomfort for difficult but honest conversations about our shared, racialising and racialised experiences. These conversations would not have been possible without the tangible provocations encountered through collage making.

Figure 4
Deconstructing the cultural archive (Ulrichsen, 2024, pp. 71-72)

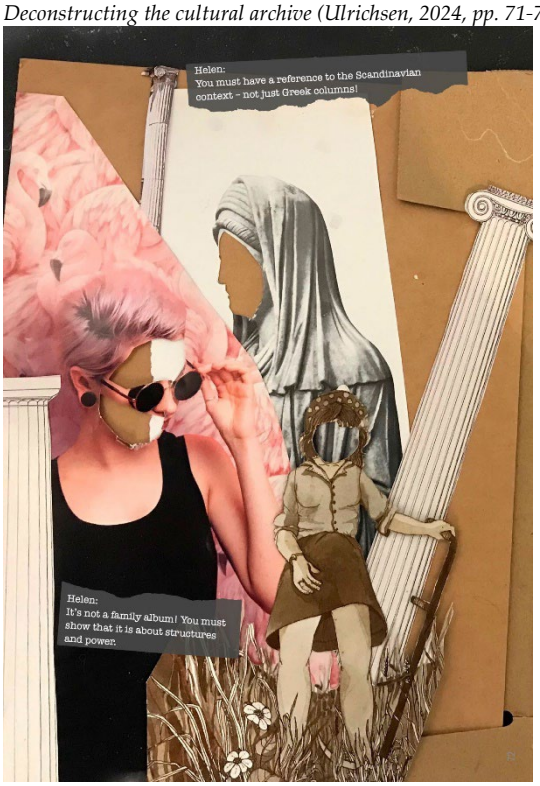

Figure 5
Dear, Do You Want to be Our Critical Friend?(Ulrichsen et al., 2021, p. 26)

Zahra's Response and Collective Reflection

Zahra about Gry's first image:

….. the right side of the image represents the good intentions…… specifically, its focus on White subjectivity. The left

> side of the image illustrates how good intentions render themselves the subject and the Other the object. At the same time as you have made the picture of me as a child visible, you have erased my family and turned them into somewhat ghostly figures. How about moving and placing them on the heads with the White gaze at the top of the pillars, where they are ghosts in the colonial mind, anyway? My family is real and exists! You must show more clearly that the ghostly figures are the White gaze's projection of their own colonial and racist historical narrative. The White gaze is cut off from the child's reality because there are pre-existing colonial stereotypes of those children and their parents and their relationships (Ulrichsen et al., 2021, p. 27).

Through Zahra's presence and our positions of belonging in a community where we are differently racialised, Helen and Gry gained the opportunity to ask questions they didn't know existed when Zahra was absent. Zahra began to understand how her interpretation of images differs from Gry's and Helen's. Gry and Helen started to recognise how Whiteness dominates as an exclusionary category, and how categories lead even well-intentioned individuals like themselves to reproduce stereotypes in their artistic practices.

Thus, we came to understand that White supremacy survives to produce racialising stereotypes when it remains unconfronted. In our meetings, we tried to resist locking ourselves into our initial reactions or thoughts. What we experienced was a shift in our understanding and a partial ability to change positions when confronted. In this way, we began to interpret our reactions as outcomes of the positions we currently are assigned within Swedish and Norwegian colonial racial hierarchies (Eriksen et al., 2020). Through the silent, implicit knowledge in the image and our encounter with it, we gained insight into our differing colonial positions. Articulation with and through image negotiation during collage making destabilised naturalised racialised positions. Gry and Helen attempted to distance themselves from their colonial art education and take responsibility for their image making. The destabilisation, at this stage, could only take place with Zahra in the process. She was integral to opening a traditionally closed White disciplinary conversation about image composition. The images from these collective processes are shown in Figures 4 and 5.

Visual images and materiality made racialisation processes visible and increased awareness of who benefited and gained power in racialisation processes. We learnt to identify who is subjected to discrimination and exclusion through these same processes. The images made it easier for us to engage in a difficult conversation, even though they evoked different types of discomfort in each of us. As we created this awareness and recognised how stereotypes appear and function, we also gained opportunities to expose them and transform them.

The Early Childhood Teacher's Responsibility

Rauna Kuokkanen (2010) and Gayatri C. Spivak (1994) emphasise the importance of examining the researcher and teacher's roles in maintaining racialised hierarchical structures that reproduce and perpetuate inequality. Both researchers point to the academic environment and the university institution as spaces that need to be structurally reformed so that pluralist knowledge can be created. Kuokkanen (2010) maintains that creating pluralist spaces is necessary and can be accomplished through academic homework. The ecocide we are experiencing necessitates change in the university, as it is a structure that supports White supremacy. She argues that if the same knowledge that pushed out indigenous knowledges of the world could solve this problem, it would have already done so. Teachers and researchers need to take responsibility for doing their homework and learning from and including indigenous and other knowledges on their own terms. The Solmaz Collective attempts to respond to Kuokkanen's (2010) thoughts through actions, not least through the development of the collage-making method in PP, which confronts White supremacy as it hides in the process of White artists creating new images.

Today, the discourse on diversity and inclusion is dominated by content and various practices within an overwhelmingly White workforce (Ahmed, 2022). Multicultural EC and the importance of community, inclusion, and Swedishness/Norwegianness are researched and documented mostly from a White positionality. However, as Zahra (Bayati, 2017), Sønsthagen and Massao (2025) point out, most of this research focuses on the shortcomings and differences of minoritised children or parents from a majority perspective. Furthermore, the higher up the education chain we look, the whiter and more homogeneous

it becomes (Ahmed, 2022; Baugerud & Ahmed, 2025). Thus, EC teachers are largely educated by lecturers with White positionality, which leads to ECE lacking articulated knowledge about the experiences of racialised marked individuals.

In decolonial practice, the fundamental principle is that research is conducted *with* and takes aboard, creating constructive dialogue with differing knowledges and cosmologies (Patel, 2015; Smith, 2012). When research is conducted *about* a group, it is impossible to understand how to create equitable pedagogical practices for differently racialised identities. In the EC field, both students and children serve as a mirror to our pluralistic society. Thus, we have an excellent opportunity for EC spaces to create pluralistic and democratic communities.

Suppose we respond to the call to do our homework in ECE by examining our own knowledge base and our role in knowledge production in pedagogical spaces. In that case, we can become more receptive to images, materiality and discussions that concern race and racialisation processes. These processes are uncomfortable, messy, painful, and often invisible to those who are stabilised in a position of Whiteness. It takes agency and sustained commitment to destabilise naturalised attitudes to stereotypes that affect BIPOC children.

Unmarked racialised White subjects can learn how to unlearn racist actions, that is to be antiracist, by deep listening to the perspectives coming from minoritised positions. Minoritised subjects too often carry a burden to articulate their experiences of racism; we ask for the White majority to share this burden. We see PP as an antiracist theoretical and methodological tool to discuss and disrupt pervading systems of racialisation. For PP, we call for openness to acknowledge the pain of all marked racialised subjects and the affective struggles of those in unmarked positions, to grasp how colonial programming shapes embodied responses. However, we acknowledge that White pain is experienced from a position of privilege; White pain can return to a comfort zone by opting out of antiracism.

Concluding Remarks

In this article, we, as educators, teachers and artists in the Swedish and Norwegian academic knowledge system, have explored PP and collective practice through the agency of images. We draw attention to the materiality and visuality in pedagogical practices as academic homework. New questions arise:

- Who are the educators?
- Who educates the educators?
- What will the art canon look like when we have undergone significant restructuring of art in EC in Sweden and Norway?
- How will future educators create pedagogical practices in the art disciplines that reflect the lives of children and the society surrounding them?

We have shown how we can collaborate to challenge the coloniality in inherited images, stories, and stereotypes through acknowledging and questioning our own colonial positions of power to racialise and be racialised.

As ECE teachers, we see the potential of a new social imaginary in children's artistic expressions. Images are not real, but they can help solidify an idea, such as a stereotype. Art is central to the perpetuation of stereotyping and racist ideology and is thus central to antiracist work in the field of ECE. We level critique at ourselves and our institutions, urging ourselves and our colleagues to adopt the practices of PP, so that inclusion is not just a superficial, legally mandated discussion or exercise coloured by good intentions (Ahmed, 2012; Bayati et al., 2022; Eriksen, 2022; Ulrichsen et al., 2021). All educators, regardless of context or discipline, have an essential role to play and an ethical obligation to take racist events seriously in the formative years of children, laying a foundation for life.

It takes time, commitment and vision to build awareness, knowledge, and practice the skills needed for visual racial literacy and thus create a new social imaginary. EC teachers do not need to stop when racial inequalities emerge and cause discomfort. This emotional state can be harnessed to enable social change when the environment is trusting, supportive, and focused on change rather than stability. Both White and BIPOC EC teachers can be expected to decentralise Whiteness by developing competence around how racialisation also occurs visually in ways that affect children's relationship to race.

Figure 6

Examples of non-stereotypical images; you can draw any figure or person in an infinite number of different ways (Mångkulturellt Centrum, n.d.)

For us as educators in ECE to act in the best interest of all children, we need to be aware that the images we surround ourselves with, and the images we express ourselves through, are part of our cultural archive. It is, in this moment, a systematic, pervasive cultural entity and a tool for White supremacy that we can challenge and change. We must confront images that envelop us and the ones we re-create. Artistic work and aesthetic practices can help us move from seeing inclusion only as bringing marginalised individuals into the dominant system, to instead understanding society as diverse and pluralistic. Creating racist expressions uncritically, being confronted and admitting that one performs racist actions can be challenging and shameful. Shame brings about a strong urge to defend oneself - I am not a racist! – I want to hide it away - if I show what I have made, they will think I am a racist! The cultural archive of a world developed through colonial power structures is still agential, racialising and affecting the bodies that it defines through powerful stereotypes. In collective PP processes, we can see and expose stereotypes as they emerge because we experience and can discuss what we experience from different racialised positionalities. However, when discussions about race and racism are normalised within a processual framework of trust, care, and intention, EC teachers are left in positions of power to transform society through antiracist work such as this. We agree with Acuff and Kraehe (2022) that EC teachers have a unique opportunity to encourage children to engage with images and visually mediated environments already existing in our cultural archive. They have the potential to co-create new images that we have yet to imagine, thereby questioning colonising values and perspectives that become increasingly self-evident to us as we ascend the educational ladder (Acuff & Kraehe, 2022).

Furthermore, we connect the agency of images to fantasy, creativity, and the inherent capacity of images to communicate without verbal language, across language barriers, national borders, and generations. Images that make the world understandable and comprehensible to us have the potential to

develop a decolonial social imaginary with and in children, shifting the cultural archive developed during colonialism. For this to be possible, we must recognise the power and agency of images and how we implicitly reproduce stereotypes through images. In one of the examples, we showed how Gry, through collage, attempted to express racism in art education. In meetings and discussions with Zahra, who is racialised as non-White, Gry understood that, as White, she reproduced the same stereotypes despite good intentions. With PP as a theoretical and methodological tool, ECE can create spaces where stereotypes and colonial imagery are neither unconsciously nor uncritically perpetuated.

It is possible to move towards ecological and social sustainability by being aware of and practising an ethical responsibility towards all people, images and materiality in any given situation. As EC teachers, our homework is to work and think in diverse ways to produce new knowledge, rather than continue unsustainable paradigms and mindsets. PP can be a tool to develop visual racial literacy and thus encourage a different social imaginary as it deconstructs White supremacist structures, such as silence, through the creation of art education spaces where the antiracist project is a core understanding. These have to be spaces of trust, support, respect and curiosity where the minoritised individual is not silenced or rendered incoherent. These spaces of antiracist pluralism should encourage deep listening to embodied knowledges, and our own innermost critical voices welcome dialogue. This approach will enable both educators and children to unlearn the stereotypes implicit in the cultural archive, thereby deepening their collective understanding of racialisation and supporting a more equitable educational environment.

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In regard to ethical reviews and consent, all studies have been reviewed by the internal ethics committees at NTNU and University of Agder during Helen Eriksen´s (Eriksen, 2023) and Gry O. Ulrichsen´s (Ulrichsen, 2024) PhD thesis. Both PhD studies which have been internally and externally reviewed in accordance with national ethical standards and laws. All necessary consents and ethical requirements are archived in these publications. Furthermore, this paper is an authoethnographical project in which all the authors agree on the empirical content as ourselves as subjects. This is also outlined in the appendixes of both the PhD projects above. This study did not involve the production of sensitive personal data, experimental interventions, or research with vulnerable populations.

Even though the declaration above being stated, ethical considerations in this article extend beyond procedural concerns to encompass questions of power, representation, and relational accountability. Working as researchers in a collective composed of individuals with differing levels of privilege and precarity required continuous reflection on the politics of participation and the uneven distribution of epistemic authority. This included attention to who is speaking, who remains silent, and how certain experiences or emotions are validated, questioned, or ignored in educational systems, in this context, foregrounds the notion of Pluralist Proximity.

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