

Reimagining anti-racist pedagogy in early childhood education: Foregrounding critical theories and frameworks that challenge racism

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Abstract: Recent global events, shaped by conservative ideologies, neoliberalism, and capitalism, have exacerbated racism toward displaced individuals, particularly migrants and refugees of color. In Canadian early childhood education, these racist ideologies manifest through theories rooted in white, patriarchal, colonial knowledge systems that frame refugee children through a deficit lens. Such frameworks position early childhood education as a mechanism for assimilation, prioritizing workforce preparation in merit-driven economies over recognizing refugee children's lived experiences, cultural strengths, and intersectional identities. In response to the global rise in racism, this paper examines transformative anti-racist approaches in early childhood education that challenge dominant discourses and systemic inequities. Through a case study of a Syrian refugee child and her mother, the paper reimagines anti-racist pedagogy by drawing on critical poststructural theories from the margins, including Black Feminist Thought, the sociology of childhood, and critical pedagogy. By centering Black feminist storytelling methodologies, this study highlights the necessity of valuing marginalized knowledge and participatory, creative practices in early childhood education. It argues for an intentional shift toward anti-racist educational frameworks that dismantle deficit-based narratives and affirm the agency and contributions of refugee children and their families.

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Introduction

We are living in turbulent times marked by rising global authoritarianism, the resurgence of far-right ideologies, and escalating racial violence. Neoliberal policies continue to entrench systemic inequities, disproportionately impacting racialized communities, particularly displaced individuals and migrants seeking refuge. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as of April 2024, over 120 million people, approximately 1.5% of the world's population, were displaced worldwide, including 43.4 million refugees and people in need of international protection, and 68.3 million internally displaced individuals (UNHCR, 2024). Borders are tightening, deportations are increasing, and families, including young children, are being forcibly removed from the places they sought as refuge.

Educational institutions are not immune to these global shifts; rather, they function as sites where racist ideologies are embedded, reproduced, and contested (Brady, 2022; Butler et al., 2020). The increasing influence of neoliberal, capitalist, conservative policies on education, coupled with the weaponization of nationalist rhetoric, has direct consequences on how young minoritized racialized children (especially refugee children), families and educators are perceived and treated (Butler et al., 2020; Menon, 2024). Within early childhood education, dominant discourses frame refugee children through a deficit lens, reinforcing assimilationist agendas while erasing their lived experiences, cultural knowledge, and intersectional identities (Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). These conditions make early childhood education a crucial site of contestation and transformation, demanding urgent attention and intervention. A critical, anti-racist approach to early childhood education is necessary to challenge the ways in which racialized children are positioned within education systems and to disrupt the systemic racism that

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continues to shape their schooling experiences (Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018; Pérez, 2017, 2020).

One of the ways racist ideologies manifest in early childhood education in Canadian contexts is through the dominance of theories rooted in White, patriarchal, and colonial knowledge systems. The racism experiences of refugee and minoritized children, families, educators and the community are situated within a system that disregards those who are imagined outside of the trope of White, heteronormative, non-disabled, middle-class imaginaries of teaching, learning and childhoods (Brady, 2022; Davies et al, 2022). These foundational frameworks position young refugee children through a deficit lens, reinforcing assimilationist agendas that seek to mold them into compliant subjects of a capitalist, merit-driven economy (Menon, 2021). By centering normative, Eurocentric developmental models, mainstream early childhood education disregards refugee children's complex lived experiences, cultural knowledge, and intersectional identities, thereby maintaining their marginalization and upholding the status quo.

In response to the troubling rise of racism and exclusionary politics worldwide, this paper explores how transformative anti-racist theories and methodologies in early childhood education can disrupt and challenge these harmful stereotypes and narratives. I enter this conversation as a racialized immigrant woman, early childhood educator, social justice scholar and researcher grounding my experiences as an educator in pre-service early childhood education, in reconceptualist scholarship and community activism. I present a counter narrative (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) of a young Syrian refugee child and mother to present possibilities for holistically centering critical theories particularly Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000, 2008; Pérez, 2017), sociology of childhood (James & Prout, 1990; James & James, 2004), and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1993), to provide opportunities to disrupt knowledge and theories that sustain racism in early childhood education.

To carve out space for anti-racist educational beliefs and practices this paper prioritizes critical dialogue and engagement in early childhood education by employing Black feminist storytelling methodologies (Baker-Bell, 2017). By intentionally centering anti-racist, oppressed and participatory pedagogies, I actively challenge the injustices perpetuated by educational practices that pathologize young refugees. I underscore the alarming persistence of the 'ordinariness' of racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Gillborn, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1998) in Canadian early childhood education and highlight the urgency of engaging in radical discussions to disrupt the 'permanence of racism' (Bell, 1992; Warmington, 2024), which has long been entrenched in educational institutions. To counter racism towards racialized and minoritized children and families, I argue for a grassroots approach (Freire, 1993) in educational settings to honor and elevate their voices and lived experiences. As Freire (1993) reminds us, such perspectives cultivate hope in times when society marginalizes and excludes refugees. A truly democratic, anti-racist education demands radical systemic change and requires both hope and a commitment to dismantling the racial injustices embedded in our educational systems. This paper, therefore, offers a vision for reimagining early childhood education as a site of resistance, possibility, and transformative justice. This article is organized into four main sections: a review of literature; the theoretical framework; the counter narratives of a refugee child and mother; and visions for a transformative, anti-racist pedagogy in early childhood education.

Developmentalism as Racial Violence: How Biased Epistemologies Maintain Systemic Racism

Early childhood education is deeply entangled with the ideologies rooted in positivist and natural science epistemologies, which conceptualize children as biologically determined subjects whose growth can be categorized, and assessed within rigid, linear ages and stages (Burman, 2016; Cannella, 2000; Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Pérez, 2017; Pérez & Saavedra, 2017). Developmentalism, framed as an objective science, has been globalized as an unquestioned paradigm that dictates how children should grow, learn, and behave. Yet, this discourse is not neutral. It is a product of Eurocentric knowledge systems that position White, Western, middle-class, able-bodied, children as the normative standard against which all others are measured. By legitimizing this model as universal, developmentalism masks the ways in which it upholds racial hierarchies, marginalizes children of color, and renders non-Western ways of knowing and being as inferior or pathological.

This framework positions children as measurable objects through predictable stages of cognitive,

emotional, and social development reducing them to a set of predetermined behaviors, reinforcing a rigid system where those who do not conform, particularly racialized and displaced children, are perceived as lacking or behind. This framework constructs childhood as a singular, universal experience, erasing the sociopolitical, historical, and cultural contexts that shape children's lives. Such an approach effectively renders racialized children as 'deviant' or 'lagging' when they do not conform to White, Eurocentric norms of development (Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018).

Developmentalist thinking is deeply embedded in early childhood education pedagogy, shaping curriculum, teaching methods, and assessment practices. It situates adults as authoritative experts who possess the knowledge to define and manage childhood, reinforcing a paternalistic and racialized system of control in which children, especially refugee and racialized children, are viewed as innocent, incomplete, needy, and in perpetual need of intervention (Burman, 2016; Cannella, 2000). This epistemological violence positions racialized children within deficit frameworks, where they are continuously scrutinized for their perceived delays, linguistic differences, or cultural 'deficiencies', rather than recognized as complex, agentic beings with rich lived experiences. The insistence on 'normal' childhood development disregards the historical and political realities shaping refugee children's lives, including forced migration, war, colonial displacement, and systemic racism. Developmentalism works as a mechanism of racial governance, sorting children into categories of 'normal' and 'abnormal', 'gifted' and 'slow', 'competent' and 'in need of support' (Burman, 2016; Walkerdine, 1984). These classifications are not benign; they determine which children are granted access to resources, opportunities, and belonging, and which children are marked for intervention, remediation, or exclusion. For refugee and minority children, these labels often serve as a justification for social hierarchies, pushing them further to the margins of society.

The naturalization of developmentalism makes its racial violence appear ordinary, matter-of-fact, and even benevolent (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Gillborn, 2006). The language of 'helping' or 'supporting' refugee and racialized children often disguises coercive assimilationist agendas that seek to mold them into White, Western ideals of childhood (Menon, 2021). This is particularly alarming in the current global context, where refugee children and families are facing heightened racial violence, forced deportations, and the tightening of borders, all while wars, climate crises, and economic instability continue to displace millions worldwide. The UNHCR (2024) estimates that globally, children account for 30 per cent of the world's population, while they represent 40 per cent of all forcibly displaced people. The discourse of universalized childhood erases the political realities of displacement, racial violence, and global inequities, reinforcing White, Western dominance while rendering the struggles of racialized children invisible. Within this context, early childhood education is not an apolitical space—it is a site where racist ideologies are both reproduced and contested.

Early Childhood Education as a Site of Racial Control and Social Regulation

Early childhood education in North America has long been framed as a means of intervention rather than a space of liberation. Despite significant resistance from scholars, the field continues to operate within discourses of achievement that uphold racial hierarchies, capitalism, and colonial logics (Nxumalo, 2020). Our education system is designed to measure effectiveness, efficiency and measure learner outcomes which will shape the children into the workers to shore up our economic growth. In this theorization, children are imagined as embodied with the potential for nation building with educators playing the role of technicians who prepare children to acquire the skills, values and dispositions to become the efficient adults ready to enter the workforce and further the productivity of the nation (Moss, 2019). Central to this theorization are constructs such as school readiness, developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), and the so-called word gap, all of which function as mechanisms of exclusion that disproportionately impact children and families of color.

A historical examination of early childhood education reveals that early childhood programs were designed primarily to uplift children and families from poverty, a social and economic reality of multiple families of color (Nxumalo, 2020). These programs centered on deficit-oriented ideologies that framed marginalized communities as inherently lacking, with the responsibility for their children's perceived

underachievement placed squarely on their families. These early interventions established a precedent that persists today, where early childhood education remains a space where children of color are positioned as needing remediation rather than recognition, validation, and empowerment.

School readiness, a dominant framework in ECE, exemplifies how the field continues to discipline rather than support marginalized children. This concept operates within a neoliberal logic that envisions the ideal child as one who conforms to White, middle-class developmental trajectories, ultimately preparing them to become productive workers and responsible citizens (Nxumalo, 2020). The pressure to achieve school readiness falls on children and families, effectively erasing the structural and systemic barriers that shape their educational experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2006). By framing success as an individual responsibility, early childhood education programs sanitize systemic inequities, reinforcing the false narrative that marginalized children simply need to work harder to succeed. This ideological stance upholds neoliberalism, capitalism and White supremacy by positioning Whiteness as the standard while portraying families of color as failing to adequately prepare their children for academic success (Pérez, 2020). Closely linked to school readiness is the widespread use of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) as a guiding principle in early childhood education. While often promoted as a neutral, research-based approach, DAP operates as a tool of exclusion, reinforcing the notion that children who do not conform to these norms are deficient (Pérez, 2020; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). Souto-Manning and Rabadi-Raol (2018) argue that DAP is rooted in “colonial monocultural, monolingual norms” (p. 205), effectively erasing the diverse cultural and linguistic realities of marginalized children and communities.

The construct of the word gap further exemplifies the insidious ways in which early childhood education perpetuates racial hierarchies by positioning English as the superior language and frames children of color as linguistically impoverished, rather than recognizing the richness of multilingualism and diverse linguistic traditions (Barrero Jaramillo, 2018). This framing serves to justify interventionist policies that seek to assimilate children of color into White, monolingual norms, rather than valuing their existing linguistic and cultural assets (Adair et al., 2017). Underlying these dominant narratives is a broader colonial logic that positions early childhood education as a site of surveillance and regulation rather than a space of freedom and possibility. The language of “achievement gaps,” “at-risk children,” and “intervention” sustains a racialized hierarchy in which Whiteness remains the unattainable ideal (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Tuck, 2009). Research that focuses on the deficits of children of color, often conducted under the guise of educational equity, perpetuates what Tuck (2009) terms “damage-centered” research, in which marginalized communities are framed solely through their struggles and deficiencies rather than their knowledge and strengths. Even as critical scholars disrupt these frameworks, the dominant discourse of intervention persists, reinforcing the racial, capitalist, and colonial underpinnings of the field (Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016).

If we are to dismantle the violence of deficit centered frameworks, we must reject its claims to universality and recognize its role in sustaining systemic racism. An anti-racist, decolonial approach to early childhood education must move beyond the rigid frameworks of developmental psychology to honor the lived experiences, knowledges, and resistances of refugee and racialized children.

An Anti-Racist Framework to Interrogate and Disrupt the Racism Inherent in Early Childhood Education

A radical shift in early childhood education requires moving beyond merely critiquing deficit models to actively building alternative pedagogies that affirm and celebrate the diverse ways children learn and engage with the world. Anti-racist theorizations challenge the normalization of Whiteness as the standard in early childhood education and create space for alternative epistemologies that honor the knowledge, agency, and lived realities of racialized children and families.

Drawing from my research with Syrian refugee children and families living in Toronto, Canada, I present a theoretical framework that foregrounds social justice and equity by centering the voices and lived experiences of marginalized children and families. In response to the ongoing war in Syria that started in 2011, more than 14 million Syrians have been displaced (UNHCR, 2025). According to Immigration,

Refugee and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) the government has welcomed approximately 45,000 Syrian refugees a majority of whom are families with young children (Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2024). In fact, 85% of government-sponsored refugees are families with children aged 0-14 (Statistics Canada, 2019). Around 55% of Syrian refugees are resettling in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) (Statistics Canada, 2019). Ali and Jibrán (2020) highlight that, despite the significant presence of young children among Syrian refugees, their narratives and lived experiences remain largely overlooked in research on this population. To address this gap in research and to explore the lived experiences of young Syrian refugee children and families, I designed a feminist ethnography.

I draw from Black Feminist Thought and the new sociology of childhood, to create a theoretical framework to interrogate and disrupt the racism inherent in early childhood education. The new sociology of childhood challenges the positioning of children as passive subjects, instead recognizing them as active social agents who both shape and are shaped by their social worlds. Scholars such as James and Prout (1990), James and James (2004), James et al., (1998), and Spyrou (2018) have critically examined how dominant discourses construct children in ways that reinforce power imbalances. This framework resists the developmentalist narrative that infantilizes racialized children, particularly refugee children, by denying them voice, agency, and the capacity for meaning making in their own lives. The sociology of childhood thus offers an ontological shift that moves research from being conducted on or about children to being done with them, positioning them as epistemic authorities of their own experiences. This epistemological shift is crucial in dismantling the racist foundations of early childhood education, where the dominant developmental framework continues to render Black, Indigenous, and racialized children as deficient, abnormal, or in need of intervention.

Black feminist epistemology offers a vital and transformative lens for rethinking early childhood education, particularly when examined in conjunction with the sociology of childhood. Together, these frameworks provide a critical analytic for understanding how racism is structurally embedded in both the practices and research paradigms of early childhood education. Patricia Hill Collins (2000, 2008), the foundational theorist of Black Feminist Thought, insists on the centrality of lived experience as a legitimate and necessary site of knowledge production—particularly for those historically marginalized by dominant discourses. Black feminist scholars (Collins, 2000, 2008; Pérez, 2017) expose how early childhood education often erases or marginalizes Black, Indigenous, and racialized perspectives, reinforcing a deficit logic that devalues the epistemologies of these communities. In contrast, Black Feminist Thought reframes the lived experiences of racialized children not as problems to be solved, but as generative grounds for knowledge, theorization, and resistance.

Both Black feminist theory and the sociology of childhood challenge universalist, static, and Eurocentric constructions of childhood by foregrounding relationality, embodiment, and agency. Black feminist epistemology, in particular, interrogates how racialized bodies are read, regulated, and disciplined within early childhood education (Collins, 2000; Pérez, 2017). This critique extends to the ideological underpinnings of developmentalism, which has historically positioned racialized children as deficient, vulnerable, and in need of White, Western intervention. Rather than upholding the supposed scientific neutrality of developmental psychology, Black Feminist Thought reorients research and pedagogy toward ethics, care, responsibility, and radical love. These commitments position early childhood education as not only a site of learning but also a space of political and ethical engagement.

By centering anti-racist, feminist, and postmodern theories, this article underscores the transformative potential of early childhood education as a space of resistance against institutionalized racism and colonial logics. The work of Black feminist scholars and childhood sociologists makes clear that challenging developmentalism is not merely a theoretical endeavor—it is a necessary political intervention aimed at justice for all children (Brady, 2022; Pérez, 2017). In order to confront and dismantle the racism that undergirds early childhood education, it is imperative to reject its interventionist and individualizing foundations. Instead, we must reimagine early childhood spaces as sites of collective liberation, grounded in the cultural knowledge, languages, and lived experiences of marginalized communities (Freire, 1993).

Disrupting Racism Through Anti-Racist Methodologies in Early Childhood Research

To challenge the dominance of positivist methodologies that measure, assess, and quantify young children, particularly refugee children, this paper advances an anti-racist, arts-based methodological framework rooted in social justice. Historically, research with marginalized populations has reinforced deficit-based constructions, positioning them as objects of study rather than co-creators of knowledge. This project resists the exploitative nature of traditional scientific research methodologies by centering political and relational ethics (Clark-Kazak, 2017; Smith, 2012), engaging in transformative, participatory approaches that recognize the agency and lived realities of young refugee children.

At the heart of this methodology is Black feminist storytelling, which provides a critical lens to interrogate power and knowledge hierarchies while amplifying marginalized voices. Black feminist storytelling, as a key methodological tool, disrupts dominant knowledge systems by foregrounding narratives that challenge hegemonic discourses of deficiency and vulnerability (Baker-Bell, 2017; Collins, 1998; Pérez, 2017). It imagines research as a site of dialogue, exploration, and resistance to systemic racism embedded in early childhood education. By troubling the neutrality of conventional research methodologies, this approach refuses the dehumanization of young refugee children and instead cultivates ethical, creative, and politically engaged knowledge production. Black feminist storytelling is both a form of knowledge production and a political act that reclaims voice, agency, and self-definition (Baker-Bell, 2017). By positioning refugee children as narrators of their own experiences, this method moves beyond a singular, deficit-based representation, creating space for multiplicity and complexity in how refugee childhoods are understood. It highlights the relational and intersectional nature of identity, acknowledging how race, class, language, and migration status shape the everyday experiences of displaced children. As Collins (1998) notes, storytelling allows marginalized individuals to reclaim their humanity, empowering them to assign new meaning to their experiences and resist dominant racialized constructions of childhood.

Anti-racist methodologies make space for possible disruptions of traditional, deficit-oriented approaches that have long dominated early childhood research pedagogy and practice with refugee children. It resists the scientific gaze that seeks to categorize, discipline, and assimilate refugee children into dominant cultural frameworks. Instead, it embraces storytelling, creativity, and relationality as tools for unsettling racist structures in early childhood education. But how do we challenge deficit narratives in everyday schooling experiences of refugee children and in doing so, how might we offer a transformative vision for anti-racist qualitative inquiry—one that acknowledges the complexity, resilience, and agency of young refugee children to challenge the systems that seek to marginalize them?

Centering Refugee Children's Lived Experiences in Schooling to Challenge Deficit Narratives

Schools are primary care institutions and significant social spaces that offer stability and support as refugee children and their families navigate the complexities of resettlement in a new country (Guo et al., 2019). As sites of connection, schools provide refugee children and their families with opportunities to build new social networks, shaping their interwoven experiences of agency, identity, and belonging. However, the schooling of refugee children is situated within broader historical and socio-political contexts, shaped by public and media discourse (Triandafyllidou, 2017) and by the ways in which social systems position refugees within dominant ideological frameworks (Mayblin & Turner, 2021). For example, Canada recently announced a 20% reduction in overall immigration levels for 2025, a policy shift that includes cuts to refugee admissions (IRCC, 2025). This decision, framed as a response to the country's ongoing housing crisis, reflects the increasing political backlash against newcomers, who are often scapegoated for systemic social issues (Osman, 2024). Within this shifting political climate, schools serve as microcosms where refugee children and families encounter, negotiate, and challenge dominant narratives about belonging and exclusion. As sites of both integration and contestation, schools reflect broader social tensions, shaping and reshaping ideas of normalcy, inclusion, and development.

A fundamental aspect of resettlement in Canada involves enrolling refugee children in local schools, a process facilitated by both school institutions and settlement agencies (Guo et al., 2019; Menon, 2024; Yohani et al., 2019). Empirical research affirms the critical role of schools in fostering safe spaces,

establishing routines, and serving as key institutions that connect refugee families to the wider social world. Much of the existing literature focuses on academic achievement (Antony-Newman & Niyozov, 2023; Gagné et al., 2021), integration into the school system (Guo et al., 2019; Yohani et al., 2019), and the barriers refugee children face in schooling and academic success (Ayoub & Zhou, 2021; Emerson et al., 2022; Gagné et al., 2021). However, despite the extensive body of research in these areas, critical gaps remain. First, relatively few studies center refugee children's own perspectives on their schooling experiences. Second, the majority of research disproportionately focuses on refugee youth, leaving the experiences of younger refugee children (ages eight and under) largely underexplored.

A closer examination of the scholarship on refugee children's schooling in Canada reveals a strong reliance on developmental psychology, child development, and trauma-centered frameworks. Many studies focus on mental health, trauma, and psychological disorders (Guo et al., 2019), the cognitive and academic impact of trauma (Kaplan et al., 2016), social-emotional development (Emerson et al., 2022), psycho-emotional needs (Yu, 2012), and academic achievement (Antony-Newman & Niyozov, 2023; Gagné et al., 2021). This emphasis on trauma and developmental challenges constructs refugee children within a deficit- and damage-centered discourse, framing their educational experiences through narratives of loss (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015). As a result, a singular and limiting story of refugee children's schooling emerges—one that foregrounds vulnerability while overlooking their agency and lived knowledge (Adichie, 2009).

This article critically interrogates the dominance of damage-centered narratives by foregrounding two key aspects of refugee children's schooling experiences. First, it calls for greater inclusion of refugee children, particularly young refugee children, in research about their own educational experiences. Second, it argues for the importance of attending to everyday interactions and small moments that children themselves deem meaningful. In advancing a social justice-oriented approach to refugee education research, this paper draws on Farmer's (2017) work, which emphasizes the significance of attending to "emerging phenomena in everyday life" and questioning taken-for-granted assumptions (p. 49). Farmer (2017) also highlights the need for a nuanced approach to schooling that recognizes the "multiple and often conflicting pressures" children navigate (p. 50). This paper advocates for positioning refugee children as "living theorists," whose everyday experiences and narratives provide valuable epistemic insights that are often overlooked.

A social justice, anti-racist framework grounded in Black Feminist Thought and childhood studies is particularly valuable in bringing the knowledge of refugee children and families from the margins to the center. Such an approach challenges the dominant epistemologies that frame refugee children through deficit-based narratives and instead foregrounds their agency, knowledge, and experiences of schooling within resettlement contexts. In the following section this paper seeks to illuminate the complex, multifaceted realities of refugee children's schooling, by presenting a case study of a refugee child and her mother, emphasizing their role as active participants in shaping their own lived experiences and shifting the focus from damage to desire centered framework.

The Original Study

The narrative presented in this article emerges from a larger qualitative study examining the resettlement experiences of 16 Syrian refugee children and their families across multiple cities in Ontario, Canada. Eight families participated in the study, each including at least one parent or guardian. All families engaged in three research encounters, during which data were collected through field notes, audio recordings, interview transcripts, children's drawings, and photographs. Guided by a relational methodology, the research emphasized co-constructed meaning-making between children, parents, and the researcher to explore the lived dimensions of resettlement. Data were analyzed using descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2013) to identify patterns and themes across narratives, followed by categorization and analytic reflection, which informed the development of the study.

This work is rooted in Black Feminist Thought, which challenges conventional assumptions about

what counts as valid data by foregrounding lived experience and attending to the everyday as sites of meaning-making. In this framework, seemingly ordinary interactions are understood as both pedagogical and political. By centering a single, richly detailed interaction, the article seeks to demonstrate, as scholars such as Collins (1998) and Farmer (2017) have argued, that the personal and speculative are not only legitimate forms of knowledge but are crucial for unsettling dominant developmentalist and positivist paradigms in early childhood education. This article invites the readers to pause and reflect with a personal narrative of a refugee child and mother to understand how they navigated identity, belonging, and learning. Rather than aiming for generalizability, the paper invites readers to consider the epistemological and political value of attending to the micro-worlds of marginalized children to disrupt entrenched hierarchies of power and knowledge in early childhood education.

A Refugee Child and Mother's Narratives of Schooling

Miriam (7 years old) and her family were displaced from Syria during the war. They moved along with their extended family to Egypt, where they waited for four years before they were granted refugee status in Canada. During our research encounters, Miriam participated alongside her mother Maira, hence their narratives are presented together. Both Miriam and Maira (pseudonyms) chose to speak in English, although they would go back and forth among themselves in Arabic and then translate their conversation for me in English. Both were enthusiastic participants and in fact, both were in school. While Miriam was attending public school, Maira was attending English language learning classes with the goal and hope of being an Arabic language interpreter and she was also preparing to pass her citizenship exam. Having stopped schooling at age 14 in Syria, Maira was determined to ensure her children can go to school.

During our research encounter, Miriam and Maira were sitting side by side on the sofa and Miriam was reflecting on her schooling experiences in Canada. Miriam said her favourite memories of schooling were from kindergarten when she could play for long periods of time. She loved playing with her friends inside and in the outdoor playground. As she was describing her schooling, she turned to Maira and started talking in Arabic. Maira responded to her and nodded her head and then both explained about an encounter with Miriam's kindergarten educator, a White woman. During pick up time, the educator told Maira that Miriam was not doing well in school. She was not participating, needed more practice in English, she was failing in reading and writing (in English) and that she needed to learn more and be better. Maira was surprised and taken aback, because she knew Miriam knew her letters, was beginning to read and could write her letters in English. Back home, when Maria had a conversation with Miriam, she learned that the educator had told Miriam that she was not smart and that she was not good. This has caused Miriam to withdraw, disengage and distance herself from the educator and daily learning experiences. Miriam explained that the educator would shout at her and she was afraid of her educator.

Discussion

The 'Ordinariness' of Racism in Early Childhood Education

This article highlights the persistent 'ordinariness' of racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Gillborn, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1998) in Canadian early childhood education. It challenges the permanence of racism (Bell, 1992; Warmington, 2024) within everyday schooling contexts by examining the lived experiences of Miriam and Maira. Their experiences serve as an urgent call for educators, educational systems, policymakers, and society at large to critically engage with the micro-level, everyday interactions that often go unnoticed or are dismissed as insignificant (Collins, 2000, 2008). The seemingly mundane encounter between Miriam, her kindergarten teacher, and her mother, Maira, reveals how racism permeates routine interactions. Through the analytical lens of Black Feminist Thought and the sociology of childhood, these interactions are reframed to expose the racialized dynamics embedded in everyday educational practices. These critical theoretical frameworks position early childhood education as a contested political space enmeshed within a "Western-centric, capitalist, and patriarchal world-system" (Butler et al., 2020, p. 42).

Far from being neutral or color-blind, early childhood education through a developmental lens, reflects and reinforces dominant societal structures. Miriam's kindergarten teacher, a White woman,

perceived Miriam as failing to meet 'normative' and 'universal' developmental standards, particularly in English language acquisition. This deficit-based framing positioned Miriam as lacking – lacking in language proficiency, engagement, and the competencies deemed essential within the Western literacy paradigm. Such framing not only marked Miriam as a failure but also reinforced cycles of exclusion and marginalization. Through the lens of dominant developmentalist ideologies, Miriam, a child refugee from Syria, is constructed as failing even before she enters the educational system. By casting her as a deviation from the expected norm, the educator assumes the role of an authority tasked with correcting her perceived inadequacies. This dynamic reinforces an uneven distribution of power, where Miriam is placed under ongoing surveillance and subjected to relentless assessment. Methods used to track and address her supposed shortcomings not only sustain these imbalances but also affirm standardized developmental benchmarks as fixed and inherently valid measures of progress.

This ordinary classroom interaction reveals how early childhood education operates as a site of power, reinforcing social hierarchies rooted in Whiteness, racism, linguistic superiority, and class privilege (Butler et al., 2020; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). This reality contradicts the common perception of early childhood education as a space of neutrality, innocence, freedom, play, and joy. While often romanticized as apolitical, early childhood education is deeply intertwined with societal structures that perpetuate inequities (Pérez, 2020). Within the broader context of neoliberal capitalism, young children are positioned as future consumers and workers, subject to social hierarchies delineated by class, race, ability, and gender (Butler et al., 2020). As a racialized child, Miriam is inscribed with the expectation of 'becoming', shaped into an adult who conforms to capitalist demands. The educator, in turn, assumes the role of a technician tasked with preparing children for economic participation (Moss, 2019). Yet, beyond the economic imperative, the interaction between Miriam, Maira, and the educator reveals the intersectional layers of systemic racism and exclusion that shape everyday schooling experiences.

A critical analysis of the educator's assumptions and behaviors exposes the hegemonic forces that sustain coloniality, White privilege, neoliberal capitalism, and patriarchy. In a society where Whiteness is constructed as the normative standard (Butler et al., 2020, p. 43) and literacy is narrowly defined through a monolingual and monocultural lens (Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018), Canadian early childhood education remains entrenched in biases that privilege the 'normal' child, one modeled after the White colonizer and imbued with neoliberal capitalist values. The White educator and the broader educational system function as extensions of colonial logics, positioning Miriam and Maira, as refugees, Arabic speakers, and newcomers, as outsiders who fail to meet normative standards. Their humanity is conditionally recognized through the lens of education and assimilation into dominant constructs of normalcy. However, this system is not designed for their success. Instead, it systematically marginalizes them, reinforcing their position as the Other. Miriam and Maira's identities and experiences remain entangled within a system that upholds power relations and reaffirms the hegemony of Whiteness. This systemic exclusion is further perpetuated by dominant discourses of deficiency, particularly in how refugee childhoods are framed through narratives of pain and damage.

The Persistence of Damage Discourse: Refugee Childhoods and the Logic of Pain

The systemic positioning of racialized and refugee children within early childhood education reflects broader ideological frameworks that define their worth and potential through narratives of lack and suffering. This framing is deeply embedded in the damage discourse that dominates refugee childhoods, shaping policies, practices, and research in ways that reinforce racial hierarchies (Souto-Manning, 2022).

No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer the speaking subject and you are now at the center of my talk (hooks, 1990, p. 343).

hooks' words bring attention to the pervasive research that focuses on the deficits, trauma, and perceived inadequacies of refugee children. This dominant damage discourse, framing refugee children through narratives of pain and suffering, is repackaged and disseminated under the guise of protection

and support. Categorized and assessed within rigid, linear models of development, refugee children are positioned as measurable objects, expected to progress through predetermined cognitive, emotional, and social stages. This reductionist approach reinforces a system where refugee children are perceived as lacking and perpetually behind. The preoccupation with the so-called deficiencies of refugee children places the burden of responsibility on the children and their families. Their perceived underachievement is framed as a personal or familial failure, rather than as the result of systemic inequities. Refugee children are constructed as having language barriers, a 'word gap,' a 'language gap,' and multiple obstacles to education and social integration. The pressure to achieve school readiness is placed squarely on them and their families, effectively erasing the structural and systemic barriers that shape their educational experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2006). By framing success as an individual responsibility, early childhood education programs sanitize and obscure systemic inequities, reinforcing the false narrative that marginalized children simply need to work harder to succeed. This ideological stance upholds neoliberalism, capitalism, and White supremacy by positioning Whiteness as the standard while portraying families of color as failing to adequately prepare their children for academic success (Pérez, 2020).

Tuck and Yang (2014) explains that a logic of pain holds our collective gaze on suffering, ensuring that we remain "always adhering to a teleological trajectory of pain, brokenness, repair, or irreparability from unbroken, to broken, and then to unbroken again" (p. 231). These logics ensure that the body or community remains secondary in the process of humanization. The ultimate goal, as framed within these logics, is to place marginalized individuals on an (un)achievable path to humanization, one that, through hard work, appears attainable but is ultimately an illusion. This carefully constructed smokescreen maintains racial superiority and hegemonic hierarchies, where success is elusive, and only those who continuously struggle against the relentless forces of oppression may achieve it. Meanwhile, others are "waylaid by their victimry and subalternity" (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 231), further reinforcing the systemic barriers that render success nearly impossible.

This deficit-based discourse further infantilizes refugee children and their families, reinforcing the notion that they lack the maturity and intellectual capacity to succeed in a modern, White-centric society. Placed within the adult/child binary, refugee children and families are framed as passive and in need of guidance, while educators and the broader educational system are positioned as authoritative experts who define and manage childhood. This dynamic reinforces a paternalistic and racialized system of control, wherein Whiteness remains the implicit norm. What is particularly alarming is the ordinariness of this racist discourse—it has become an entrenched and seemingly natural component of our educational systems and wider society. The language of "helping" or "supporting" refugee and racialized children often disguises coercive assimilationist agendas that seek to mold them into White, Western ideals of childhood. Within this context, early childhood education is not an apolitical space; rather, it is a site where racist ideologies are both reproduced and maintained.

Visions for a Transformative, Anti-Racist Pedagogy in Early Childhood Education

Early childhood education functions as a contested site of cultural transmission and social reproduction within Western nation-states. Yet, it simultaneously holds transformative potential, as a space where resistance, reimagining, and justice-oriented practices can flourish. While the inherently political nature of early childhood education has long been acknowledged, this paper contends that anti-racist pedagogy must be approached as an ongoing, cyclical, and reflexive process. It demands the continual interrogation and dismantling of oppressive, racist, and colonial structures that persist within educational discourse, curriculum, and practice. To move beyond surface-level critiques of deficit models, this paper advances a set of actionable recommendations to guide educators, policymakers, early learning institutions, and teacher education programs in enacting transformative, anti-racist pedagogy. These recommendations call for structural and systemic changes and daily pedagogical practices that center equity, relational accountability, and the epistemic authority of marginalized children and communities.

Confronting and Rejecting Biased Epistemologies

To center anti-racist pedagogies in early childhood education, it is imperative to critically confront and reject dominant epistemologies, such as developmentalism, that continue to construct racialized and refugee children as deficient, deviant, or in need of remediation (Menon, 2021, 2024; Pérez, 2017, 2020). For educators, policymakers, and teacher education programs committed to anti-racist practices, it is essential to interrogate these deficit-based narratives, which often appear neutral or natural but profoundly shape the educational trajectories of refugee and other marginalized children (hooks, 1990; Menon, 2021; Tuck, 2009). An anti-racist reorientation necessitates moving beyond these limiting constructs to center the lived experiences, voices, and knowledges of refugee children and their families. Critical frameworks such as Black Feminist Thought and the sociology of childhood offer generative tools for this shift and illuminate how racist and colonial logics are embedded in everyday educational practices and institutional policies (Menon, 2024). These approaches foreground relationality, embodiment, and agency, disrupting historical constructions of racialized children as passive recipients of care and intervention.

This epistemological (re)framing positions refugee children like Miriam as knowledgeable social actors—active participants in shaping their educational environments rather than subjects to be shaped (James & Prout, 1990; Pérez, 2017, 2020; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018; Spyrou, 2018). Recognizing refugee children as ‘living theorists’ foregrounds their everyday practices and meaning making as valuable contributions to knowledge production. Their experiences not only reveal the workings of systemic racism in educational spaces but also offer counter-narratives that challenge the dominant logics of developmentalism. Valuing knowledges that emerge from lived experiences of migration, displacement, and resettlement enacts an ontological shift—one that affirms marginalized children and families as legitimate and authoritative knowledge producers (Collins, 2000; Pérez, 2017). Pedagogies rooted in Black Feminist Thought advocate for classroom spaces that are relational, creative, and open to alternative modes of participation. Within these pedagogies, silence, refusal, and resistance are not seen as deficits, but as meaningful forms of engagement and critique.

Anti-racist pedagogical practice must also disrupt the hierarchical binary between knowledge producers and knowledge subjects (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). This involves co-constructing culturally relevant and responsive curricula that reflect children’s social worlds, languages, and epistemologies, rather than imposing Eurocentric standards of development. For example, integrating children’s and families’ narratives through storytelling, multilingual and multimodal texts, and child-led documentation affirms their identities and experiences. These practices not only validate children’s diverse ways of knowing but also promote their agency as co-creators of knowledge. Further, rejecting standardized assessments in favor of pedagogical documentation allows educators to attend to children’s stories, silences, relationships, and refusals as meaningful expressions of learning. Such practices actively resist the reproduction of racial hierarchies and offer alternatives to systems that pathologize difference. Creating classrooms that affirm multiple ways of being and knowing, while critically examining power relations and systemic inequities, is central to anti-racist early childhood education. Finally, centering the experiences of children and families of color resists the epistemic erasure of marginalized voices and is essential for producing knowledge grounded in the lives of those historically excluded from early learning settings to build more just and equitable educational systems.

Adopting Desire Centered Frameworks

This article foregrounds the ethical and political responsibilities of educators, researchers, and policymakers working with refugee children and families by advancing desire-centered frameworks (Clark-Kazak, 2017; Smith, 2012; Tuck, 2009). These frameworks are critical for sustaining anti-racist pedagogies in early childhood education, as they directly counter deficit-oriented narratives that pathologize refugee children through the lens of trauma, lack, and vulnerability. Instead, desire-centered approaches prioritize children’s strengths, cultural legacies, and capacities for joy, resistance, and transformation (Tuck, 2009). Rather than framing refugee communities as damaged or broken, desire-centered early childhood education recognizes their resilience, knowledge, and enduring cultural practices

as foundational to reimagining inclusive pedagogies. This social justice-oriented orientation affirms the agency of refugee children and families and enables educators to create learning environments that sustain dignity, foster belonging, and challenge the systemic racism embedded in dominant educational discourses.

Embracing desire-centered frameworks for educators and policymakers committed to anti-racism, requires reconfiguring the structural conditions that shape early learning environments. This involves moving beyond Eurocentric, deficit-based curricular and assessment models that marginalize the linguistic, cultural, and epistemic resources of refugee children. National and provincial early learning policies and curricular frameworks must include anti-racist, trauma-informed, multilingual approaches that recognize the varied strengths of newcomer children and families. In practice, this means redesigning pre-service teacher education programs, as well as in-service professional development opportunities, to prioritize anti-racist and decolonial approaches to prepare educators to navigate the complexities of working in diverse, pluralistic, and often inequitable contexts. Replacing standardized assessments with participatory, narrative-based documentation methods that honor children's varied and unequal lived experiences and reject racialized developmental benchmarks. Tools such as pedagogical narration, digital storytelling, and community-based documentation can be used to make visible the political, emotional, and social dimensions of children's learning. These methods center children's and families' brilliance and reveal the diverse ways they engage with the world around them. Additionally, schools and early childhood programs must develop participatory programming that values intergenerational knowledge, cultural memory, and community collaboration. This includes creating space for families to co-design curriculum and share cultural practices, stories, and languages. Such initiatives not only disrupt deficit-based assumptions but also foster reciprocal relationships rooted in desire, care, respect, and shared learning. Desire-centered pedagogies thus offer a generative pathway for enacting anti-racist education. By affirming the experiences and contributions of refugee children and families, these approaches resist the dehumanizing tendencies of developmentalism and reorient early childhood education toward justice, joy, and collective possibility.

Black Feminist Storytelling as Resistance in Early Childhood Education

Black feminist storytelling serves as both a methodological tool and a political act, offering a vital framework for confronting racism in early childhood education (Baker-Bell, 2017; Collins, 2000, 2008). As a critical methodology, Black feminist storytelling reconceptualizes teaching and research as spaces for dialogue, resistance, and ethical engagement (Baker-Bell, 2017). It rejects the presumed neutrality and objectivity of education, foregrounding knowledge production as inherently political and deeply invested in dismantling systemic racism. By elevating the voices, agency, and self-definition of refugee children, it humanizes their experiences and affirms their right to narrate their own lives in the ways they deem meaningful. Miriam's narrative of silence and withdrawal from conventional classroom participation exemplifies the necessity of this pedagogical shift. Rather than interpreting such behaviors through deficit frameworks or demanding conformity to normative expectations of productivity, educators must view these acts as meaningful forms of resistance. Black feminist storytelling makes space for educators to engage in critical self-reflection to interrogate the ideological underpinnings of their own practices and to examine how whiteness, privilege, and systemic racism shape their assumptions, practices, and relationships with children and families. This deep work allows educators to reimagine pedagogy in ways that honor children's autonomy and refusal.

This mode of storytelling challenges dehumanizing, objectivity-centered research and teaching models by embracing ethical, creative, and relational approaches that resist racist structures within early learning. It calls for the integration of lived experience and narrative into policy consultations to reflect the plural realities of children in Canada. Moreover, it demands structural change—through sustained funding for community-based programs led by racialized educators and grounded in anti-colonial, anti-racist values. Drawing on Freire's (1993) call for grassroots transformation, this methodology insists that true systemic change must center the voices and knowledge of those relegated to the margins. It urges early

childhood educators, institutions, and policymakers to reimagine early childhood education as a collaborative, liberatory, and justice-oriented project. To this end, institutions, educators and policy makers must commit to ongoing, collective learning and critical inquiry aimed at unlearning racism, building solidarity, and co-constructing pedagogies of resistance.

Conclusion

This article situates early childhood education as a critical site where racist ideologies are embedded, perpetuated, and contested. The increasing influence of neoliberal, capitalist, and conservative policies in education, alongside the weaponization of nationalist rhetoric, has profound implications for how minoritized and racialized children, particularly refugee children, as well as their families and educators, are perceived and treated within early childhood education settings. Dominant discourses often frame refugee children through a deficit lens, reinforcing assimilationist agendas while simultaneously erasing their lived experiences, cultural knowledges, and intersectional identities. These conditions underscore the urgency of positioning early childhood education as a space for critical resistance and transformation.

To challenge the systemic racism that continues to shape the schooling experiences of racialized children, an anti-racist approach to early childhood education is essential. Anti-racist pedagogy is not a prescriptive method that can be superficially integrated into teaching practice; rather, it is a deliberate, intentional and strategic activism that requires educators to embed anti-racist principles into both their pedagogical approaches and broader spheres of influence. This process necessitates ongoing critical self-reflection on one's social position, privileges, and complicities, as well as a commitment to confronting internalized racial oppression or superiority. Transforming early childhood education through anti-racist praxis is a continuous and collective endeavor—one that questions dominant deficit frameworks and thinking with theories from the margins to foreground justice and equity in early childhood education. By centering these commitments, early childhood education can move toward becoming a site of collective resistance and transformative possibility. Anti-racist pedagogy, in this vision, is not a fixed destination but a dynamic process grounded in ethical responsibility, community accountability, and an unwavering commitment to social justice.

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