

Creating innovative Canadian approaches to anti-racism in early childhood: Transformative practices for addressing and disrupting racism

Nidhi Menon¹, Lyle Hamm², Manju Varma³

Abstract: Canada projects itself as a land of opportunity, embracing inclusivity and multiculturalism in both education and broader societal discourse. However, this ideological framework obscures the realities of race and institutional racism, failing to address persistent inequities experienced by Indigenous, Black, and other racialized communities, including immigrants and refugees. In early childhood education, dominant discourses of diversity and color blindness reinforce the notion that young children are racially innocent and unaffected by race. Yet, reconceptualist early childhood scholars demonstrate that by ages three to four, children develop racial awareness, identification, and attitudes, positioning themselves within racial hierarchies. This recognition underscores the enduring and systemic nature of racism embedded in both formal and informal educational settings. This paper explores innovative anti-racist educational approaches that extend beyond individual and interpersonal racism to challenge structural and systemic inequities within educational institutions. Centering marginalized critical theories, including Indigenous epistemologies, Critical Race Theory, and critical pedagogy, frameworks often overlooked in mainstream early childhood education, we highlight transformative pedagogies and practices that disrupt racism and advance equity in diverse educational contexts.

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Introduction

Canada has long been regarded as a global exemplar of multiculturalism, priding itself on policies that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion within its educational institutions and broader societal structures. The nation's deeply embedded values of multiculturalism suggest a harmonious coexistence of racial and ethnic groups, with diverse cultural identities celebrated as integral components of Canadian society. However, beneath this ideological framework lies a frequently overlooked reality: the persistence of implicit and explicit racialization, racial discrimination, and systemic racism (Battiste, 2013; James, 2001). While multiculturalism has played a crucial role in advancing diversity, it has not sufficiently addressed the enduring legacies of racism that continue to marginalize Indigenous peoples, Black communities, immigrants, and refugees (Battiste, 2013; James, 2001; Ottmann, 2009). Rather than dismantling systemic inequities and structural barriers, multicultural policies have largely failed to mitigate the challenges racialized newcomers face across social, economic, and educational domains.

As a conceptual paper, this work draws on the perspectives of a research team composed of scholars and educators, both people of colour and White allies, based in New Brunswick and engaged in anti-racism research with immigrant and refugee populations. Acknowledging our positionality entails an ethical responsibility to recognize how our social locations, privileges, and institutional affiliations shape the ways we interpret the experiences of marginalized groups. This commitment grounds our inquiry in reflexivity, humility, and a pursuit of justice. We critically examine racism within early childhood education in Canada,

¹ University of New Brunswick, Faculty of Education, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada, e-mail: nidhi.menon@unb.ca, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-6491-4565>

² University of New Brunswick, Faculty of Education, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada, e-mail: lhamm@unb.ca, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1400-2771>

³ Engaging Matters Diversity Consultants Inc., New Brunswick, Canada, e-mail: engage2engage@gmail.com, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9243-7725>

focusing on the Atlantic province of New Brunswick—a region facing ongoing demographic and economic challenges that expose the limitations of multicultural models. Characterized by one of the smallest and oldest populations in the country, New Brunswick has long grappled with population decline driven by low birth rates and interprovincial migration losses. However, recent data from Statistics Canada shows that the province's population grew by 2.7% from July 2023 to June 2024, marking its fastest growth since the 1970s, driven largely by an influx of nearly 15,000 immigrants (Statistics Canada, 2025). Despite this encouraging trend, labor shortages remain critical, particularly in sectors such as healthcare, education, and construction, affecting the province's economic stability. Responding to these pressures, the federal and provincial governments jointly increased New Brunswick's Provincial Nominee Program quota to 4,250 permanent resident nominations for 2025, nearly tripling allocations earlier in the year, alongside commitments to relocate 400 asylum claimants over two years supported by significant federal settlement funding (Government of New Brunswick, 2025; Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2025;). While immigration has helped to reverse population decline temporarily and spur modest economic recovery, the province continues to navigate complex challenges related to immigrant retention and workforce integration that directly affect equity and inclusion in social systems, including early childhood education.

However, attracting immigrants is only one aspect of a sustainable solution. Retention, particularly of racialized newcomers, presents a formidable challenge (Hamm et al., 2021). The success of immigration strategies in New Brunswick depends on newcomers' ability to develop a sense of belonging within their communities. Research suggests that when immigrants encounter exclusion or discrimination, whether at an institutional or interpersonal level, they are more likely to relocate to larger urban centers that offer greater economic opportunities and more inclusive social environments (Hamm et al., 2021; Maston, 2018). Systemic racism and social exclusion undermine efforts to create welcoming communities, necessitating a critical reassessment of how multiculturalism is operationalized and an urgent shift toward anti-racist frameworks that foster genuine inclusion (Varma, 2022). A significant potential shift occurred in 2021 when New Brunswick commissioned a report on Systemic Racism. Varma's (2022) work culminated in a report that outlined the breadth and scope of systemic racism in New Brunswick. This report includes recommendations in numerous sectors of society, including education. We use the word 'potential' for although the recommendations were named in two speeches from the Throne by two different governments, work on these recommendations have yet to materialize (Varma, 2022).

The shortcomings of multiculturalism are particularly evident in the education sector, where structural and systemic racism remain deeply entrenched (Hamm et al., 2021; Varma, 2022). This paper situates early childhood education as a critical site where racialized and Indigenous children may experience both overt and subtle forms of discrimination that shape their educational trajectories (Battiste, 2013; Menon, 2024; Pérez, 2020; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). In this field, multicultural approaches often dominate pedagogy and practice, emphasizing cultural recognition without addressing systemic inequities. As a result, these approaches fail to challenge the institutionalized racism embedded in policies and practices (Escayg et al., 2017; Escayg, 2019). Racialized newcomer children and families encounter obstacles such as Eurocentric curricula, a lack of representation among educators, and discriminatory attitudes from peers and teachers (Menon, 2024, 2021; Pérez, 2020; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). These barriers not only hinder academic success but also impede broader processes of social integration, reinforcing cycles of marginalization and economic disparity.

Given New Brunswick's increasing reliance on immigration for demographic and economic stability, it is imperative to reevaluate how early childhood education settings address these systemic challenges. The province's efforts to attract newcomer and racialized children and families will remain inadequate unless meaningful steps are taken to ensure that social and institutional structures are genuinely inclusive. Economic opportunities alone are insufficient; newcomers, especially young children and families, must feel valued, respected, and empowered within the communities they settle. A promising approach to fostering such inclusion is the adoption of radical anti-racist frameworks within early childhood education (Escayg et al., 2017; Escayg, 2019). Unlike multiculturalism, which often remains celebratory and superficial

(Hamm et al., 2018; James, 2001), anti-racist pedagogies directly confront power structures and systemic inequalities that perpetuate racial injustice (Escayg et al., 2017). This paper argues that anti-racist pedagogies in early childhood education disrupt racism by challenging dominant multicultural ideologies and Eurocentric curricula deeply embedded within early childhood pedagogy and practice. These approaches advocate for the representation of racialized perspectives and promote pedagogies and practices that affirm the lived experiences of diverse communities. By embedding anti-racist principles into early childhood education, educators and policymakers can create equitable learning environments where all students, particularly racialized newcomers, experience a genuine sense of belonging (Souto-Manning, 2021). We propose a radical reimagining of anti-racist pedagogy, drawing from Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), Indigenous scholarship (Battiste, 2013), and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1993; Kincheloe, 2005), perspectives that remain marginalized within mainstream early childhood education.

This conceptual paper asserts the necessity of integrating anti-racist approaches within early childhood education to address both individual biases and systemic inequities. It explores innovative strategies to challenge the structural racism embedded within Canadian early childhood education systems and proposes a framework for fostering inclusivity and equity. By doing so, we aim to support the long-term success of racialized newcomers in New Brunswick, ensuring they can fully contribute to and benefit from the province's economic and social opportunities. This paper is conceptually grounded in the interconnections among Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), Indigenous scholarship (Battiste, 2013), and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1993; Kincheloe, 2005). These frameworks collectively inform the analysis and are integrated throughout the discussion rather than treated as a discrete component. The paper is organized into four main sections. It begins by examining cognitive imperialism and racialized knowledge hierarchies in early childhood education, drawing on decolonizing perspectives, particularly the work of Marie Battiste. It then turns to a critique of multiculturalism as a failing framework to promote diversity in early childhood education, followed by a section that debunks the myth of color blindness, informed by insights from Critical Race Theory and critical pedagogy. The final section offers a framework for anti-racist pedagogy in early childhood education. Through this organization, the paper positions theory and critique in conversation, emphasizing both the systemic nature of racism and the transformative possibilities of anti-racist educational practice in the early years.

Cognitive Imperialism and Racialized Knowledge Hierarchies in Early Childhood Education

One of the ways racism is deeply ingrained within early childhood education is through the privileging of Global North, white, male, Eurocentric theories of childhood, which are deemed scientific and rational (Burman, 2016; Menon, 2024; Pérez & Saavedra, 2017). Early childhood education programs across Canada predominantly center the work of theorists such as Piaget and Erikson, positioning child development as a fundamental framework for understanding and educating young children (Richardson & Langford, 2022). The pervasiveness of child development theory assumes that early childhood experiences shape a child's future across distinct domains, physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and moral, within predetermined ages and stages. This perspective constructs rigid conceptions of childhood and constrains possibilities for pedagogical approaches, research, and policy initiatives in early childhood education (Burman, 2016; Cannella, 1997; O'Loughlin, 2018; Richardson & Langford, 2022; Viruru, 2007).

Mi'kmaq scholar Marie Battiste (2013) critically examines the inherently biased nature of education, arguing that it is neither neutral nor equitable but rather a construct shaped by dominant social and cultural forces. As an Indigenous scholar drawing from the historical and ongoing experiences of racism faced by Indigenous peoples in Canada, Battiste (2013) asserts that education has historically served the interests of the privileged rather than those of Indigenous, newcomer, or racialized peoples. Rooted in a patriarchal, Eurocentric framework, the Canadian education system has been complicit in various forms of oppression, marginalizing women, children, Indigenous communities, and other racialized groups. As a reflection of the broader social order, education in North America functions within intersecting hierarchies of race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and gender, perpetuating systemic inequities (Battiste, 2013). However, sustained resistance and critical scholarship over the past century, informed by cultural studies, decolonial, queer,

postcolonial, and post-structural critiques, as well as anti-oppressive education, have exposed these entrenched injustices. This growing body of research underscores the exclusionary nature of dominant educational paradigms, revealing how these racist ideologies inflict profound intellectual and human harm on racialized populations who are Othered and denied access to meaningful and inclusive learning opportunities (Battiste, 2013; Pérez, 2017, 2020).

Positioning early childhood education and care as a contested site of enculturation and social reproduction within the Canadian context, we align with Battiste's (2013) critique that dominant knowledge in early childhood education functions as a tool of political power. While all people possess knowledge, its legitimization and dissemination have been historically controlled by elite groups within this field (Burman, 2016; Cannella, 1997; O'Loughlin, 2018; Richardson & Langford, 2022; Viruru, 2007). These groups, comprising researchers, educators, politicians, interest groups, political parties, and corporate entities, exercise authority over the production and distribution of knowledge to serve specific economic and cultural agendas. Early childhood education, as a product of this power dynamic, operates within an economy where rewards are distributed according to the priorities of those in control. This process, which Battiste (2013) terms "cognitive imperialism" (p. 159), reinforces the privileging of certain forms of knowledge while marginalizing or dismissing others. Consequently, knowledge that does not align with dominant power structures remains excluded or is only recognized when it serves prevailing societal interests, thereby perpetuating systemic inequities in knowledge production and access (Battiste, 2013; Menon, 2024, 2021).

Cognitive imperialism (Battiste, 2013, p. 159), wielded as a mechanism of control, is embedded within racist, neoliberal, Eurocentric, and patriarchal systems, reinforcing a monocultural knowledge framework that privileges dominant perspectives while marginalizing others (Pérez, 2020; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). Rooted in colonial ideologies, cognitive imperialism in early childhood education shapes curricula, pedagogy, and educational discourse through the dominance of Western thought, language, and values (Battiste, 1986, 2013). This hegemony is particularly evident in early childhood education, where English and French are institutionalized as the dominant instructional languages, curricular frameworks rely on ages-and-stages models, and research and pedagogies perpetuate colonial power structures (Butler et al., 2020; Pérez, 2017, 2020). Consequently, cultural minorities, including Indigenous, Black, and multiply marginalized populations in Canada, are often led to internalize the false belief that their intersectional experiences of oppression—across race, class, and other identity categories—stem from inherent cultural or racial deficiencies rather than from systemic power imbalances and structural inequalities within a capitalist society (Pérez, 2020; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). Through this process, cognitive imperialism sustains educational inequities, limiting the agency and potential of marginalized communities.

Alarmingly, the dominance of this ideology remains as prevalent today as it has been for decades, making racism appear ordinary and unremarkable (Warmington, 2024). A particular mechanism within early childhood education is the widespread adherence to multiculturalism, which serve to obscure and normalize everyday acts of racism. By failing to acknowledge systemic inequities, multiculturalism reinforces the status quo, allowing racism to persist under the guise of neutrality and equality.

Multiculturalism As a Failing Framework to Promote Diversity in Early Childhood Education

The dominance of developmentalism within early childhood education in Canada constrains meaningful engagement with discussions of race and racism. This limitation is further reinforced by discourses of sameness and difference within a multicultural framework. Canada is frequently regarded as a multicultural society that embraces diversity and values inclusion, particularly in contrast to the United States. A central initiative by the Canadian federal government to construct and project this identity was the establishment of the Canadian Multiculturalism Policy in 1971. This policy provided a framework for recognizing and supporting the cultural diversity of the Canadian population. Over time, it has significantly influenced early childhood education (ECE) programs, policies, and curricula addressing issues of race, ethnicity, color, and religion (Escayg et al., 2017; MacNevin & Berman, 2017). In 1988, the

policy was formalized in the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, which affirmed that the Canadian constitution recognizes the importance of "preserving and enhancing the multicultural heritage of Canadians." It further established that the diversity of Canadians—defined by race, national or ethnic origin, color, and religion—constitutes a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society (Multiculturalism Policy of Canada, 1988).

Multiculturalism is deeply embedded in the Canadian national imagination and is often described as a 'social fact' (Ng, 1995). It is commonly viewed as a unifying force that transcends cultural differences to promote equality among all citizens (Moodley, 1983). The metaphor of the mosaic encapsulates this ideal of unity in diversity, portraying a nation in which individuals, regardless of their differences, come together to form a cohesive whole. This narrative underscores values of respect, equality, and opportunity for all. The government's multicultural policy emphasizes cultural democracy within a bilingual framework that privileges English and French over other languages. One of its primary objectives was to promote equality, rather than equity, by ensuring that all ethnic groups were valued equally. The intent was not to establish an official culture but to guarantee that all citizens, regardless of origin, color, or religion, would have the same cultural freedoms and opportunities.

However, the multicultural framework assumes cultural neutrality through the ideal of cultural democracy, suggesting that the norms, values, principles, laws, and policies governing the nation are unbiased. In theory, this neutrality enables all citizens to participate equally in society without their cultural background serving as a barrier. Yet, a critical examination of this framework reveals an incomplete and problematic narrative—one that continues to dominate public discourse and exert influence over early childhood education (Escayg et al., 2017; MacNevin & Berman, 2017). As Delgado and Stefancic (2012) argue, the ideology of colorblindness (the belief that ignoring race promotes equality) masks the permanence of racism by presenting racial inequities as anomalies rather than systemic features of social and educational structures. Similarly, Freire's (1993) critique of 'banking education' illuminates how multiculturalism deposits simplified notions of diversity without inviting critical consciousness or transformation. Within this framework, multiculturalism becomes a pedagogical practice of containment, acknowledging difference only insofar as it does not disrupt existing hierarchies.

A closer analysis of multiculturalism exposes its inherent injustices. By advancing a paradigm of neutrality and colorblindness, multiculturalism has reinforced the dominance and normalization of Anglo-Celtic Canadians as the normative ethno-racial group. This has led to the construction of English and French speakers as the "real" Canadians (James, 1995; Walcott, 1996), while cultural groups outside this framework are relegated to the status of "Other," perceived as embodying foreign values and practices rooted in ancestral homelands. Within this framework, culture is frequently equated with difference and associated with racialized, non-White bodies. Individuals who do not conform to the stereotypical image of a Canadian are often perceived as outsiders, marked by their linguistic and cultural distinctiveness. Scholars argue that the dominant perception of Canadian identity, rooted in Anglo-Celtic whiteness, reinforces exclusionary boundaries, with the exception of French Canadians, who are understood within a bilingual framework (James, 1995; Roman & Stanley, 1997; Walcott, 1996).

By presenting diversity primarily through the lens of difference, multiculturalism constructs a superficial narrative of respect and inclusion while obscuring the power dynamics that determine societal belonging and exclusion. As Delgado and Stefancic (2012) remind us, such narratives function to preserve racial hierarchies under the guise of equality. Critical scholars contend that this conceptualization neglects the historical and ongoing impacts of race, gender, sexuality, class, language, immigration status, (dis)ability, and other intersecting social factors. Furthermore, it disregards the systemic hierarchies that structure relations between ethnic groups (Razack, 1997; Srivastava, 1997). In the context of education, some scholars argue that multiculturalism has increased awareness of culturally specific practices and responded to the needs of diverse students (Banks, 2004; Mansfield & Kehoe, 1994; Samuda & Kong, 1986). However, critical perspectives maintain that its superficial approach to difference ultimately sustains the status quo (Hamm et al., 2016; Merchant, 1999). Rather than disrupting dominant power structures,

multicultural education has preserved the language and culture of the majority while failing to address the structural inequalities embedded in Canadian society.

The impact of multiculturalism on education has been insufficient in addressing the challenges faced by Black, Indigenous, and multiply marginalized students. The persistent streaming of these students into lower-level educational tracks, coupled with high dropout rates, often results in alienation (Clandfield et al., 2014; Maharaj & Zareey, 2022; McGillicuddy & Devine, 2018; Parsons & Hallam, 2014). Far from dismantling educational inequities, multicultural education has reinforced them by perpetuating misleading narratives of neutrality, equality, and opportunity. While it purports to promote respect and inclusivity, in practice, it has sustained the exclusion of marginalized groups and upheld structures that limit genuine inclusion in Canadian society. The following section will examine how this framework is deeply embedded within early childhood education, shaping dominant pedagogical practices and reinforcing systemic racism in early learning contexts. As Delgado and Stefancic (2012) remind us, the permanence of racism underscores that racial inequities are deeply ingrained in social and institutional structures rather than anomalies to be corrected. It is through this lens that we turn to the myth of color blindness in early childhood education—a discourse that, while claiming universality, reproduces the very hierarchies it seeks to deny.

Debunking The Myth of Color Blindness in Early Childhood Education

Developmentalism and a multicultural framework are deeply intertwined within early childhood education settings. Drawing from critical race theory (CRT), particularly Delgado and Stefancic's (2012) assertion that racism is ordinary, not aberrational, we argue that developmental and multicultural discourses normalize inequities through their claims of neutrality and universality. The role of developmental theory, its associated practices, and multiculturalism in sustaining racism in everyday educational practice is evident in MacNevin and Berman's (2017) study. Their analysis of the City of Toronto's Early Learning and Care Assessment for Quality Improvement document—a set of guidelines required to secure municipal childcare funding—revealed an implicit assumption that "an appropriately 'diverse' and inclusive early learning environment can be achieved solely through the addition of culturally, racially, and ethnically diverse (i.e., non-White) play materials to a neutral, culture-free space" (p. 830). The inclusion of dolls with varying skin tones, ethnic foods, international flags, and multilingual displays reflects a superficial and touristic approach to diversity that aligns with CRT's critique of Whiteness as property and normalization of White experience as the universal standard (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; DiAngelo, 2018). Scholars have questioned the effectiveness of "multicultural" materials when they are not accompanied by explicit discussions about race and racism (MacNevin & Berman, 2017; Park, 2011). Freire's (1993) notion of critical pedagogy further illuminates how this uncritical inclusion of 'diverse' artifacts functions as a form of banking education through depositing superficial representations of diversity rather than engaging children and educators in critical reflection about oppression and liberation. The absence of race, ethnicity, and culture in pedagogical guidelines, curriculum planning, and social interactions within early childhood education settings may appear ordinary but is, in fact, deeply concerning. While diverse artifacts may be present in physical environments, meaningful conversations about race and racism remain largely absent.

This disconnect raises critical questions about how multicultural materials influence children's play. Play is often framed within early childhood education as a natural and neutral activity that fosters positive social and cognitive development (MacNevin & Berman, 2017; Park, 2011). Grieshaber and McArdle (2010) challenge the assumption that dramatic play with peers naturally promotes communication and negotiation skills, as this belief implicitly assumes that these skills universally benefit all children. MacNevin and Berman (2017) argue that this assumption also underpins the use of multicultural artifacts in early childhood settings and policy. The entrenched belief that exposure to multicultural materials will automatically foster an appreciation for racial diversity sustains the notion that children are inherently neutral and innocent, thereby reinforcing the dominant construction of childhood as an innately colorblind, positive, and apolitical stage of life. From a CRT perspective, this 'innocence' operates as a form of interest

convergence (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), serving White comfort and preserving dominant social hierarchies by refusing to name racial power. Extensive research has consistently refuted the notion that young children are devoid of racial awareness (Aboud, 1988; Aboud & Doyle, 1995; Park, 2011; MacNevin & Berman, 2017). While prevailing assumptions often depict early childhood as a period of racial innocence, empirical studies conducted over several decades have demonstrated that children begin to recognize and categorize racial differences at an early age. Foundational research, such as the seminal study by Clark and Clark (1947), established that children as young as three to four years old develop racial self-identification. Subsequent investigations (e.g., Aboud, 1988; Aboud & Doyle, 1995; Park, 2011) have further substantiated that children actively engage with racial categorizations, employing both collective labels and physical characteristics to delineate group membership.

Beyond self-identification, children also develop racial attitudes that are shaped by their social environments and racial group status. Scholars have employed a diverse range of methodological approaches to examine these attitudes, including doll studies (Clark & Clark, 1947), standardized racial attitude assessments (Williams et al., 1975; Doyle & Aboud, 1995), and observational analyses of peer interactions (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Experimental studies utilizing visual stimuli, such as photographs and dolls, have demonstrated that children associate specific attributes with particular racial groups, providing valuable insight into the cognitive and social dimensions of early racial awareness. Empirical findings reveal distinct patterns in the racial attitudes of young children. Research consistently indicates that White children exhibit a strong preference for and display positive biases toward members of their own race (Aboud, 2003; Doyle & Aboud, 1995; Gibson et al., 2015; Jordan & Hernandez-Reif, 2009; Pahlke et al., 2012). Studies focusing on Black children indicate that younger children (under the age of seven) often exhibit a pro-White bias (Aboud, 1988). Research involving Hispanic children is more limited but suggests a tendency for them to favor the dominant White group (Dunham et al., 2007; Stokes-Guinan, 2011). Collectively, these studies underscore a pervasive pattern in which young children across racial backgrounds attribute positive value to Whiteness. Such findings exemplify what Delgado and Stefancic (2012) describe as the permanence of racism and its persistence across social and developmental contexts, reproduced even in spaces assumed to be innocent or neutral.

These findings challenge the perspective that racial attitudes in childhood are merely a byproduct of cognitive development. Instead, they highlight the profound influence of sociocultural forces in shaping children's racial perceptions. Scholars have increasingly turned to anti-racism and critical race theory (Escayg et al., 2017) to elucidate the ways in which children internalize racial meanings through exposure to cultural narratives, media representations, and social interactions. Rather than passively absorbing racial constructs, children actively engage with and interpret racial discourses, thereby shaping their own understandings of race (Tatum, 1997). Here, Freire's (1993) pedagogy of critical consciousness is particularly relevant: it compels educators to move beyond passive observation toward active engagement in unveiling oppression and fostering praxis through reflection and action, against racial inequity.

Observational studies have demonstrated that children are aware of race and engage with racialized power dynamics during play episodes. Play is often considered natural, developmental, neutral, and a universally positive experience for all children (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010; MacNevin & Berman, 2017). However, Grieshaber and McArdle (2010) assert that "much play in early childhood settings reproduces the status quo. That is, it reproduces what exists in terms of relations of power about 'race'; gender; social, economic, and cultural capital; ethnicity; heteronormativity, and proficiency with English" (p. 75). This everyday reproduction of hierarchy in play aligns with CRT's emphasis on the ordinariness of racism and how it is embedded in routine practices and interactions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Play often acts as a site of contestation and exclusion, particularly for racialized children and those from minority ethnic and cultural backgrounds. When the cultural experiences of Black, Indigenous, and children of color are not reflected in the environment, they may struggle to navigate unfamiliar cultural norms, further exacerbating their marginalization. A tokenistic inclusion of multicultural materials, such as ethnic food or clothing, does little to disrupt these entrenched inequities. In MacNevin and Berman's (2017) study, participant observation over just seven sessions revealed that children demonstrated a clear awareness of racial

categories and exhibited a preference for White play materials, replicating the racial and power dynamics of broader society.

The myth of colorblindness among young children also persists within the worldviews of early childhood educators, many of whom believe that young children are racially innocent (MacNevin & Berman, 2017). In MacNevin and Berman's (2017) study, although educators were aware of young children's racial preferences, they refused to abandon the belief in childhood racial innocence and insisted that children were too young to understand or embody racial bias. Few educators acknowledged the occurrence of race-related incidents in early childhood settings or recognized how young children used multicultural play materials to express their racial attitudes and preferences. This refusal mirrors what Delgado and Stefancic (2012) describe as 'color-blind racism'—a denial of inequity under the guise of equality.

Ultimately, a framework of developmentalism and multiculturalism in early childhood education obstructs the possibility of engaging in critical discussions about race and racism. The reluctance to acknowledge how young children construct racial meaning and engage in racialized power dynamics reinforces colorblind ideologies and preserves the status quo. Freire's (1993) call for *conscientização*, a deepened awareness of social realities, invites educators to reject color-blind neutrality and embrace transformative, dialogical pedagogy. Without intentional, anti-racist pedagogical interventions, early childhood education settings risk reproducing racial inequities, leaving both educators and children ill-equipped to challenge systemic racism in early childhood education. Addressing these deeply embedded structures requires a fundamental shift toward anti-racist pedagogies that actively confront and dismantle cognitive imperialism, paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable early childhood education system.

Pedagogy As Political: A Case for Anti-Racist Pedagogies in Canadian Early Childhood Education

Education cannot be just technique because education has a characteristic, another quality that, I call *politicity*. The *politicity* of education is the quality that education has of being political. And one principle related to this quality is education never was and never will be neutral (Freire et al., 2014 p. 25).

CRT posits that racism should not be understood solely as individual prejudice but as a structural phenomenon embedded within institutions and systems. Consequently, fostering a genuine awareness of racism necessitates an emphasis on individual, systemic, institutional, and societal responsibilities in driving transformative change toward social justice and equity. Delgado and Stefancic (2012) remind us that racism is ordinary, woven into the very fabric of social life, and thus requires constant, intentional disruption through education and praxis. While awareness of one's social location and positionality is crucial, such reflections must be situated within broader power structures and racial dynamics to effect meaningful change. This section therefore provides a framework for developing anti-racist pedagogies in early childhood education, guiding educators to critically engage with and challenge the systemic forces that sustain inequities in their practice.

Engaging in Ongoing Critical Reflection

Anti-racist pedagogy is not a static framework that can be universally applied but an evolving, iterative process that begins with individual reflection and extends to all aspects of teaching, learning, and community engagement. The intersections of identity among early childhood educators—including race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, language, and religion—shape the ways in which learning and teaching occur in early childhood settings. For researchers and educators seeking to understand themselves, children, families, and communities, ongoing reflection on positionality and color-blind attitudes is imperative to fostering awareness of perspectives that might otherwise be overlooked (Lund & Carr, 2010; Kishimoto, 2018). This deep introspection encompasses both individual self-awareness and relational understandings within broader systems (Milner, 2007). Following Freire's (1993) pedagogy of critical consciousness, reflection must be coupled with action (what he calls *praxis*) to transform oppressive conditions rather than merely name them. Reflection must be cyclical and iterative, forming the foundation

of anti-racist pedagogy. Self-reflection should acknowledge that intersecting identities are dynamic and continually shaped by experience. Individuals hold both privileged and oppressed identities (Collins, 2000, 2008), and these evolving intersections, along with socialization, including internalized racial superiority or inferiority, profoundly influence teaching, research, and relationships with children, families, and communities. Understanding this fluidity is integral to anti-racism work. Such introspection requires vulnerability and humility, recognizing that educators, researchers, and pre-service teachers are all 'becoming'.

For White early childhood educators, reflexivity is essential in analyzing power, privilege, and oppression within themselves before applying such analyses to others. A common pitfall is the tendency to frame racism in an oppressor/oppressed binary, which may lead educators to position themselves either as victims or ascribing all systemic injustices solely to an external oppressor (Kishimoto, 2018). However, White educators must recognize that they, too, are racialized in ways that shape their interactions with children, families, and knowledge production. Delgado and Stefancic (2012) argue that color-blind ideologies allow White educators to avoid engaging with their own racial identity, thereby reinforcing the permanence of racism within education. Confronting whiteness, privilege, and the power embedded in racial identity is crucial (Oluo, 2018; Powers, 2002). A nuanced awareness of racial identity enables White educators to engage in substantive discussions about power, privilege, and oppression with colleagues, children, and families. It is also imperative to avoid tokenizing the success of people of color, adopting a savior mentality, distancing oneself from other White individuals, or seeking validation from Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) colleagues to be perceived as a 'good white person' (Kishimoto, 2018). Deep, intentional, and sustained self-reflection is necessary to ensure that well-intended efforts do not inadvertently reinforce racism or dominant discourses.

Educators who identify as BIPOC must also critically examine their practices, as identifying as BIPOC does not inherently equate to engaging in anti-racist pedagogy. Addressing internalized racism is essential, as it can reinforce an oppressor/oppressed binary that limits self-perception to victimhood and disregards participation in oppressive structures (Kishimoto, 2018). This perspective may hinder meaningful engagement with colleagues, children, and families who struggle with white privilege or with BIPOC individuals who deny the impact of racism. Additionally, internalized insecurity, often shaped by systemic biases, may lead BIPOC educators to adopt authoritarian approaches to establish legitimacy, potentially creating environments where children and families feel unable to question or challenge ideas (Kishimoto, 2018).

Implementing Anti-Racist Pedagogy by Decolonizing Knowledge

Anti-racist pedagogy necessitates a fundamental challenge to Eurocentric, white-centered knowledge by decentering its dominance and integrating diverse epistemologies from Black, Indigenous, and other racialized communities, as well as perspectives from disability and queer studies (Battiste, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Freire, 1993; Menon, 2024, 2021; Pérez, 2017, 2020). It is essential to answer Battiste's (2013) calls to decolonizing education, urging educators to dismantle cognitive imperialism which privileges Western thought systems that delegitimize Indigenous and other non-Western knowledges. This integration must extend across pedagogy and practice, including early childhood education settings and pre-service teacher education, influencing syllabi, learning materials, activities, and curriculum design. Educators must critically reflect on the biases of developmentalism, recognizing how dominant worldviews have shaped the field (Menon, 2025). Faculty teaching pre-service educators should analyze power structures within their disciplines, exploring the historical and racial contexts in which certain theories, methodologies, and paradigms have gained legitimacy.

Knowledge and education are inherently political (Battiste, 2013; Freire, 1993; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). It is imperative to examine the conditions under which specific theories and methodologies have been legitimized (Collins, 2000, 2008; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Key questions to consider include: What role have foundational epistemologies played in reinforcing dominant ideologies? Who holds the power to shape early childhood education, access its knowledge, and benefit from dominant frameworks?

Conversely, which epistemologies have been excluded, and what barriers have prevented their inclusion? Such inquiry not only echoes Freire's (1993) call for critical pedagogy which urges educators and learners to co-investigate the world to transform it but also aligns with Delgado and Stefancic's (2012) insistence on counter-storytelling to challenge dominant narratives. By interrogating these critical questions, both early childhood educators and post-secondary instructors can recognize the centrality of race and racism in shaping knowledge production in Canadian contexts.

Anti-racist pedagogy also involves shifting power dynamics within the learning environment (Kishimoto, 2018). Early childhood educators must engage in self-reflexivity to challenge traditional hierarchies and foster the participation of children and families in curriculum development, observation, documentation, and learning processes. Encouraging children, families, and communities to engage in critical inquiry is essential. In Freirean (1993) terms, this means transforming classrooms into dialogical spaces where educators and learners co-create knowledge rather than reproduce dominant ideologies. These efforts must also consider how the identities of early childhood educators, children, and families shape classroom interactions. Creating an environment conducive to difficult conversations often involves nurturing safe and brave spaces (Cooper, 2022). However, for marginalized early childhood educators, children, and families, the learning environment may not always be a space of safety (Kishimoto & Mwangi, 2009). The term 'safe space' is sometimes misinterpreted as a 'comfortable space,' allowing individuals to avoid confronting White privilege and complicity in oppression (DiAngelo, 2018). Following Delgado and Stefancic's (2012) framing of racism's permanence, such avoidance perpetuates inequity by maintaining comfort over justice. Effective anti-racist pedagogy requires educators to move beyond comfort zones, fostering critical self-examination and engaging with vulnerability. Early childhood educators play a crucial role in facilitating discussions that validate diverse emotional responses while guiding children toward deeper critical analysis (Kishimoto, 2018). Sharing personal reflections on race and identity can also demonstrate that both educators and children are engaged in a mutual learning process.

Fostering Anti-Racist Pedagogy Through Community Building

Anti-racist pedagogy in this article is envisioned as more than pedagogical reform; it is a lifelong commitment to community and institutional transformation. Implementing anti-racist pedagogical principles in early childhood settings requires cultivating critical analytical skills, fostering self-awareness, and developing a nuanced understanding of power dynamics. It necessitates intentional engagement with power, the integration of collaborative and democratic decision-making processes, and the creation of a genuine sense of community. Ultimately, this approach promotes a culture committed to equity, inclusion, and collective empowerment.

An anti-racist pedagogical approach transcends everyday classroom dynamics and should be intentionally embedded in the early childhood educator's broader work within the community (Kishimoto, 2018). Early childhood educators can apply the principles of anti-racist pedagogy to establish meaningful relationships with community members, elders, and organizations to foster collaborative efforts aimed at cultivating a more inclusive and equitable learning environment. Such relationships embody Freire's (1993) praxis by linking reflection and action to transform social realities, and Battiste's (2013) vision of ethical relationality rooted in respect, reciprocity, and responsibility. This approach is not about imposing anti-racist values onto others but about embodying these principles in practice, thereby encouraging others to engage in collaborative anti-racist work in everyday relations. A critical element of anti-racist work involves early childhood educators addressing the systemic barriers facing BIPOC and newcomer children and families. Early childhood educators must cultivate a critical understanding of the structural challenges that impede access and success for these populations, both within institutions and in the broader social and economic contexts.

Avoid Tokenistic Tendencies

Another critical area of focus is ensuring that BIPOC early childhood educators are not tokenized by expecting them to serve as spokespersons for entire racial or ethnic communities, which may impose an

undue burden on them and restrict their ability to critique institutional structures. Moreover, tokenization can create divisions within these communities as those in tokenized roles may be positioned as gatekeepers rather than advocates for systemic change (Kishimoto, 2018). Collaboration plays a central role in anti-racist organizing, fostering a sense of community, mutual support, and open dialogue rather than reinforcing competition, territoriality, or power hierarchies (Kishimoto, 2018). Anti-racist organizing emphasizes collective growth and ethical engagement over individual status or self-preservation. It is marked by transparency, inclusivity, and democratic decision-making, in contrast to exclusionary, opaque, or manipulative institutional practices. Achieving this requires early childhood educators to actively engage in self-reflection about their positions of privilege—whether in terms of whiteness or internalized racial hierarchies—while maintaining humility and a willingness to learn from others (Kishimoto, 2018; Oluo, 2018).

Conclusion

Working toward racial justice requires not just critique but also the active construction of alternatives. This work is never complete, and there may be no definitive endpoint. The collaborative process of defining and striving toward an anti-racist future is as significant as understanding the challenges posed by racism itself. Early childhood educators (ECEs), alongside children and families, must actively engage in imagining a future that is just, anti-racist, and equitable for everyone.

In line with Delgado and Stefancic's (2012) insistence that racism is permanent, yet contestable, anti-racist pedagogy becomes a tool of continuous resistance and reimagination. Through Freirean praxis and Battiste's (2013) call to decolonize knowledge, educators can construct anti-racist frameworks that foreground relationality, equity, and critical inquiry. Anti-racist pedagogy in early childhood education is critical for fostering a sense of belonging among newcomer, Black, and Indigenous families in New Brunswick, who continue to face racism in their everyday lives. If we are intentional about retaining racialized newcomers, we must empower these children and families by not only critically deconstructing racism but also envisioning and articulating what an anti-racist society would look like. This involves recognizing the agency and resilience of racialized communities while actively working to dismantle systemic barriers that inhibit their full participation.

Dismantling racism in early childhood education requires more than individual efforts; it necessitates a collective commitment to creating a shared vision for an equitable society. This vision must extend beyond classroom practices to include institutional transformation, community engagement, and policy advocacy. By embedding anti-racist principles into every aspect of early childhood education, educators enact what Freire (1993) called the 'practice of freedom'—a pedagogy rooted in love, justice, and humanization. In doing so, we move toward a future where equity, inclusion, and justice are not just aspirations but lived realities.

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