

# Philosophical foundations for anti-racist early education: A Mediterranean perspective

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**Abstract:** This article examines anti-racist early childhood education and care (ECEC) in the Mediterranean, a region marked by diverse histories, cultures, languages, and migration patterns. These dynamics shape access, curriculum, language policy, and belonging from the earliest years. Drawing on Fanon, Freire, hooks, Ladson-Billings, West, and Braudel's *longue durée* perspective, the study introduces a conceptual framework based on four interconnected tenets: critical consciousness, empathy, cultural affirmation, and participatory community learning. Greece, Italy, Malta, and selected North African countries were purposefully selected as illustrative - not comprehensive - examples to showcase contrasting histories, linguistic and cultural diversity, and policy environments. Comparative analysis across these country sections informs regionally relevant policy priorities, showing how the framework can generate actionable strategies for embedding anti-racist, culturally affirming practice across Mediterranean contexts. Mapping each case to the framework reveals promising practices and persistent gaps, as well as the influence of historical legacies, policy landscapes, and socio-political realities on local enactments. This insight demonstrates the framework's dual utility: (i) as an analytical lens for evaluating existing practices, (ii) and as a generative guide for creating locally responsive, culturally sustaining anti-racist pedagogies. The analysis advances debates on linguistic justice, identity, and inclusion, highlighting language as both a barrier and a lever for equity. By integrating theory, practice, and policy, the article calls for moving anti-racism from aspiration to embedded practice through sustained investment in teacher education, high-quality ECEC provision, inclusive curricula, effective community partnerships, and context-sensitive policy. Anchored in love, justice, and historical consciousness, the framework positions Mediterranean ECEC as transformative for equity, solidarity, and cultural renewal.

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## Introduction

Racism influences children from the earliest years, shaping biases and social roles that, if unchallenged, persist into adulthood (Fanon, 2008/1952; Iruka et al., 2022; Tatum, 2017; Williams et al., 2024). Early childhood is therefore a critical period for forming ideas about identity, difference, and fairness, and a key space where educators can either reinforce or combat inequities through culturally responsive, anti-racist, and inclusive practices (Banks, 2006; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2021).

As diversity in nationality and language increases in early childhood settings - particularly in the Mediterranean - racism needs to be addressed as both a pedagogical and structural issue (Council of Europe, European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 2024; Sultana, 2016). Such diversity brings not only opportunity but also significant challenges; it underpins stark and persistent differences in the availability, quality, and affordability of early childhood education across the region. As comparative research has shown, these disparities are deeply structured by policy landscapes, social inequalities, and varied responses to migration and demographic change - a pattern extensively documented in country cases such as Algeria, Egypt, Greece, Malta, and others (Sollars & Toran, 2025).

The late Sultana (2012, 2017) emphasises situating education within the multiple, intersecting

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histories of Mediterranean societies, where colonial legacies, migration, and hybrid identities converge. He advocates reimagining education as a transformational space for affirming, rather than erasing, difference. The Mediterranean's history of cultural exchange, shared living, and shifting borders offers rich but underused resources for constructing anti-racist pedagogies (Braudel, 2023/1972; Chambers, 2008). As a frontline for poverty, displacement, climate stress, and intense migration-driven diversity, the Mediterranean offers a critical proving ground for building inclusive, intercultural, and multilingual early childhood education that actively dismantles systemic racism.

The key argument in this article is that Mediterranean traditions and critical philosophies provide productive foundations for advancing equity and challenging racism in early childhood education. The framework developed draws on key theorists: Fanon (1961, 2008/1952) on the psychological legacy of colonialism; Freire (1970/1968) on education as liberation; hooks (1994) on relational, love-centred pedagogy; Ladson-Billings (1995, 2021) on culturally relevant pedagogy; West (1993, 2004) on love and justice; and Braudel (1958) on the *longue durée* as the historical backdrop linking contemporary inequities to their roots. The conceptual framework introduced here is intended as both an analytical lens for assessing strengths and gaps in current practice, and as a generative guide for co-creating new, contextually responsive anti-racist pedagogies.

To illustrate the application of this framework, four contrasting contexts - Greece, Italy, Malta, and selected North African countries - were chosen for their varied colonial histories, migration patterns, linguistic and cultural diversity, and stages of equity-related policy. These cases reveal common patterns and distinctive expressions of the framework's tenets: critical consciousness, empathy, cultural affirmation, and participatory community learning. Together, they offer a representative cross-section of regional diversity and practical insights for policy and practice.

The article proceeds in six sections: philosophical and historical foundations; a proposed conceptual framework; counterarguments and challenges; mapped country-based examples; policy priorities; and a concluding reflection. Throughout, the Mediterranean is engaged as a space marked by intersecting histories, multiple languages, contested identities, and uneven social conditions - all factors shaping early childhood education from access and curriculum to belonging.

### **Philosophical and Historical Foundations**

#### **Fanon and the Child: Decolonial Possibilities in Mediterranean Early Childhood Education**

Frantz Fanon's anti-colonial writings - especially *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008/1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) - offer critical insights on how race, identity, and colonial power are internalised from early childhood. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon (2008/1952) explains that children become conscious of racial 'difference' through the white gaze, creating a fractured self rooted in inferiority. This is directly relevant in Mediterranean early education, where African, Arab, Roma, and migrant children face subtle and overt racialisation through curriculum, discipline, and lack of representation (Al-Hroub et al., 2025; Christodoulou & Antoniou, 2025; Said, 1978; Kóczé, 2020).

Fanon critiques colonial language practices that erase home languages and cultural expressions, alienating children in favour of dominant tongues (Delpit, 2006; Souto-Manning, 2013). He advocates teaching that is linguistically and culturally affirming, challenging assimilation and respecting children's identities. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon (1961) highlights colonialism's psychological violence, dehumanising and fragmenting communities. This demands learning environments that are emotionally secure, critically aware, and counter internalised racism. For Fanon, decolonisation is transformative rehumanisation - disrupting colonial legacies and restoring dignity, agency, and voice, vital in Mediterranean contexts with layered colonial histories and racialised politics. He emphasises revitalising suppressed traditions and languages, offering educators a model for restorative, liberating pedagogy from the earliest years.

Fanon challenges early educators to move beyond caretaking or cognitive instruction toward

cultural and psychological intervention. This resonates with Cannella and Viruru's (2004) argument that notions of childhood and development are inseparable from colonial and postcolonial power relations, and that disrupting inequitable systems requires questioning how children are positioned within global and local hierarchies. When education validates children's identities, fosters critical consciousness, and opposes racial hierarchies, it becomes a radical act (Fanon 2008/1952, 1961; Lamsal, 2024). Fanon's legacy repositions early education as a space of freedom, dialogue, and decolonial possibility.

### **Freire's, hooks's and West's Pedagogy of Liberation, Love, and Justice for Mediterranean ECEC**

Building on Fanon's critique, Freire's (1970/1968) pedagogy centres critical consciousness (*conscientização*) for transformative learning. Instead of memorisation, educators create participatory spaces where children question, interpret, and co-construct meaning - including critical story analysis, discussions on justice, and integrating diverse voices (Freire, 1970/1968; Souto-Manning, 2013). Such practices foster neurodevelopment, empathy, moral reasoning, and social awareness. Early education needs to be seen as a vital site for nurturing relationality, ethics, and critical reflection - not merely preparation for schooling. Reflection needs to lead to action; it is essential that educators adopt anti-racist pedagogies and confront systemic inequities (Mirabile et al., 2025). Curricula needs to resist historical neglect and racial narratives, aiming to change future outcomes (BLAM UK, 2025; Pratt & Rosiek, 2021). As hooks (1994) states, classrooms need to be "locations of possibility" where uncomfortable truths meet visions of justice.

bell hooks (1994) envisions education as a process of freedom, fostering critical reflection, voice, and agency from early stages. She advocates caring pedagogy respectful of multilingual and multi-ethnic identities, crucial where children feel marginalised. hooks (1994) redefines love as a political act affirming dignity and resisting structural injustice. She urges educators to create anti-oppressive environments rather than ignore power dynamics. Through voice and participation, hooks challenges norms of child passivity, promoting active learning. Her holistic vision respects each child's full humanity - mind, spirit, and body - and calls for creativity and relational depth.

Cornel West, in *Race Matters* (1993) and *Democracy Matters* (2004), critiques systemic racism, materialism, and nihilism that harm Black communities. His ideas offer a radical framework relevant to Mediterranean early education, highlighting love as political commitment to dignity and justice. West (1993) exposes deep roots of systemic racism and cultural invisibility impacting ethnic and racialised children, including Roma and sub-Saharan Africans (Kóczé, 2020). He opposes education commodification, urging a humanistic, relational approach against neoliberal standardisation. His work invites educators to reclaim early childhood as a space of resistance, relational ethics, and radical hope.

Drawing on the insights of Freire, hooks, and West - in alignment with Fanon's call for psychological and cultural liberation - their perspectives recast early education as far more than preparation for school; instead, it emerges as a powerful arena for justice, agency, and critical hope.

### **Ladson-Billings and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy for Mediterranean Early Education**

Alongside the distinct contributions of Freire, hooks, West, and Fanon - whose pedagogies converge in emphasising liberation, critical consciousness, and resistance to oppression - Ladson-Billings' (1995) theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) provides a core framework for reimagining early childhood education in Mediterranean contexts marked by deep cultural, racial, and linguistic diversity. CRP centres academic achievement, cultural proficiency, and critical consciousness: affirming children's identities, building on lived experience, and equipping them to question inequity. In Mediterranean settings dominated by assimilation pressure and Eurocentric curricula, CRP shifts focus to multilingualism, community wisdom, and the everyday realities of racially marginalised children: migrants, Roma, and sub-Saharan Africans. Rather than seeing children as deficits, Ladson-Billings (1995) champions an asset-based approach, valuing cultural capital as essential for learning.

CRP stresses the role of community in education, resonating with the collectivist cultures of much of the Mediterranean. Operationalising this means including families, elders, and cultural practitioners in curriculum, storytelling, and events - enriching learning and challenging inherited colonial models

(Bonello, 2022; Bonello et al., 2025; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nxumalo, 2019). Viewing children and families as cultural beings positions early childhood education as a site of affirmation and resistance, embedding community knowledge and values (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2009).

Ladson-Billings (1995) reframes educational inequality through the 'education debt', shifting from a focus on achievement gaps to historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral debts owed to marginalised communities. This perspective urges educators to look beyond test scores and readiness - recognising how colonialism, migration policy, and racism shape children's experiences (Baldacchino, 2018; Bonello, 2022; Sobane et al., 2018). Her challenge to curricular whiteness aligns with moves to decolonise early childhood education (Baldacchino, 2018; Belseth, 2024; Bonello, 2022; Viruru, 2005) and introduce plural, inclusive histories from the outset. Her portrayal of educators as cultural workers highlights the need for critical self-reflection to prevent reproducing dominant ideologies. Children, Ladson-Billings argues, are never too young for justice or fairness: anti-racist, culturally sustaining education needs to start early, laying the groundwork for critical consciousness from the beginning.

Together, Freire, hooks, West, Fanon, and Ladson-Billings provide a framework for reconceiving Mediterranean early childhood education - not just as preparation for school, but as a vital space for identity, justice, and cultural renewal.

### **A Historically-Grounded Perspective for Anti-Racist ECEC in the Mediterranean**

Drawing on Fanon, Freire, hooks, West, and Ladson-Billings, a historically grounded perspective highlights the need for transformative early education in the Mediterranean. Braudel's *longue durée* (1958, 2023/1972) urges us to consider how deep, gradual structures - e.g., climate, economy, and social patterns - shape societies beyond short-term events. For educators, this means recognising how colonialism, empire, religion, and travel still influence early childhood systems and identities (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Green, 2024).

Braudel (2023/1972) presents the Mediterranean as inherently pluralistic and dynamic, formed by ongoing interaction and exchange, which resists monocultural curricula and anchors ECEC in local histories, environments, and daily life - rituals, play, food, and language. This lens helps educators see how migration and trade histories continue to inform classroom language policies, as in Malta's debates over Maltese, English, or heritage languages (Panzavecchia, 2024; Parnis & Schembri, 2023). Such choices reflect a legacy of pluralism and cultural negotiation, showing how daily routines are shaped by enduring dynamics. Braudel's approach offers tools for designing inclusive, historically grounded spaces affirming diverse identities and knowledges.

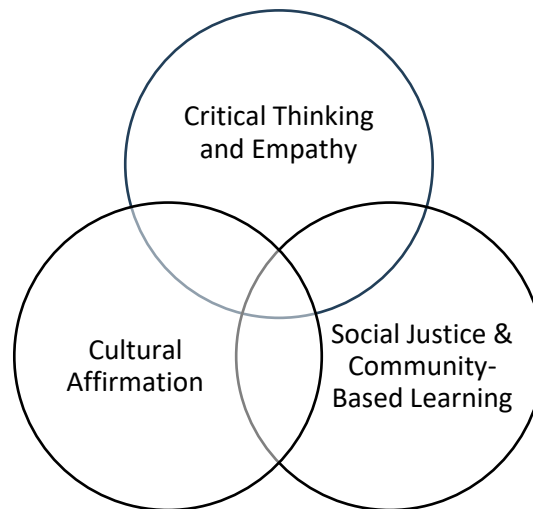
By embracing the *longue durée*, Mediterranean ECEC can foster historical awareness and social transformation, preparing children for complex, equitable futures.

### **Conceptualising Anti-Racist Pedagogy for Mediterranean Early Education**

Building on Braudel, Freire, Fanon, hooks, West, and Ladson-Billings, and situating these ideas in the varied linguistic, cultural, and socio-political conditions that characterise early childhood education across diverse Mediterranean contexts, this study proposes a conceptual framework for anti-racist early education in the Mediterranean. It is grounded in three tenets: (i) critical thinking and empathy, (ii) cultural affirmation, and (iii) social justice and community-based learning (see Figure 1). These address the region's plural histories and ongoing exclusion shaping children's experiences.

**Figure 1**

*A possible conceptual framework for anti-racist early education in the Mediterranean: Integrating critical thinking, empathy, cultural affirmation, social justice and community-based learning*



**Critical Thinking and Empathy.** Freire (1970/1968) and hooks (1994) emphasise education as liberatory dialogue, fostering critical consciousness and empathy from early years. Children are encouraged to question norms and power, becoming active co-constructors of meaning through storytelling, dialogue, and multimodal expression (Banks, 2019). Safe, respectful spaces are vital, especially in Mediterranean contexts marked by ongoing white supremacy (Mazawi, 2008; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013) - where cultivating empathy alongside critical awareness helps children connect across differences, recognise shared humanity, and act in ways that challenge injustice.

**Cultural Affirmation.** This tenet resists assimilation, stressing the validation of diverse identities, languages, and histories (Braudel, 1958; Fanon, 2008/1952, 1961; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). Many education systems privilege monocultural narratives and marginalise minority languages (Sleeter & Carmona, 2017; Mavioglu, 2024; Mignolo, 2011). Advocates like Ladson-Billings (1995) and Ouane & Glanz (2011) call for curricula celebrating pluralism and mother-tongue education to reinforce cognition and community ties (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Inclusive histories and representational equity (Said, 1978; Banks, 2019; Fanon, 1961) help all children see themselves reflected in learning.

**Social Justice and Community-Based Learning.** West (1993) frames justice as public love, urging educators to centre solidarity and ethical responsibility in dismantling racial hierarchies. This vision aligns with Freire's and hooks's advocacy for relational, socially transformative learning (Freire, 1970/1968; hooks, 1994). Mediterranean ECEC needs to move beyond inclusion, becoming sites of injustice recognition and collective reflection (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Noddings, 2005). Strong partnerships with families, elders, and community practitioners counter colonial top-down models (Baldacchino, 2018; Bonello, 2022), building learning environments that mirror children's lived realities (West, 1993; Said, 1978).

These critical theories provide a historically grounded, culturally responsive basis for anti-racist pedagogy in Mediterranean early education. The framework centres children as meaning-makers within complex histories, resisting assimilationist norms and affirming diverse identities and knowledge. Such practices lay foundations for transformative, justice-oriented, and decolonial early education.

### **Counterarguments and Challenges to Anti-Racist ECEC in the Mediterranean**

While the framework provides a strong base for anti-racist early childhood education in the Mediterranean, major challenges persist. Chief among them is the risk of cultural essentialism - overgeneralising a "Mediterranean identity" that erases diversity in race, language, religion, and history (Bhabha, 1994; Braudel, 1958; Gilroy, 1993; Hall, 1996). "Soft multiculturalism," or the celebration of

diversity without addressing power, can entrench inequities (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Leonardo, 2004; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Tate, 1997) especially in societies shaped by colonisation and nationalist policies (Baldacchino, 2018; Bonello, 2022; Bonello et al., 2025; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Mazawi, 2008). Racialisation is evident in language use, grouping, exclusion, and underrepresentation - affecting Roma, Black, and migrant children (Iruka et al., 2022; Kóczé, 2020; Majid et al., 2021; Sultana, 2012).

To overcome these barriers, anti-racist education needs to be embedded in broader equity and rights commitments. When race is politically sensitive, focusing on inclusive history, multilingualism, and community storytelling can nurture dialogue and critical awareness (Freire, 1970/1968; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Noddings, 2005). Key is teacher capacity-building in critical race literacy, historical analysis, and dialogue, alongside curriculum reform valuing linguistic pluralism and strong home-school partnerships (Center for Racial Justice in Education, 2024).

Further, most Mediterranean countries do not collect ethnicity data in education (High Level Group, 2021), obscuring inequities and hindering targeted action. Thus, qualitative research and community voices become crucial. Framing anti-racist work around “linguistic justice,” cultural rights, and local histories can drive change where race is contested (Sultana, 2012; Majid et al., 2021). Storytelling, affirming home languages, and co-created curricula support inclusion even under restrictive policies.

Despite these obstacles, the Mediterranean holds transformative promise - if education resists reductive labels, addresses structural barriers, and adapts to changing realities (Braudel, 1958, 2023/1972).

### **From Practice to Policy: Advancing Anti-Racist Practice for Mediterranean Early Education**

Critical pedagogues and postcolonial scholars have long argued that historically grounded, anti-racist approaches necessitate to be embedded in both policy and practice across the Mediterranean. Early childhood strategies need to move beyond critique to propose concrete, locally responsive actions that address structural inequities. The illustrative cases from Greece, Italy, Malta, and selected North African contexts demonstrate how key elements of the framework - critical consciousness, empathy, cultural affirmation, and participatory community learning - are applied or, in some instances, remain underdeveloped. Chosen for their recurring themes and diverse approaches to early childhood education, these examples reveal shared challenges and highlight the systemic changes required. Mapping them against the framework provides both an analytical lens and practical guidance for contextually responsive pedagogy. Each section begins by specifying which aspects of the framework are exemplified, making explicit the connection between theory and practice.

#### **Migration and Intercultural Pedagogy in Greece**

This example from Greece demonstrates how critical consciousness and cultural affirmation - hallmarks of the proposed framework inspired by Freire and Ladson-Billings - are enacted in early childhood policy and practice, through initiatives that foster social justice awareness and validate diverse identities among young learners.

The demographics of Greece have changed due to continuous migration from the Middle East, South Asia and North Africa, leading to increasingly multicultural early years education settings (Damanakis, 2005; Gemi & Feta, 2025). Lioliou (2013) shows how using drama-based pedagogy promotes empathy and inclusion when dealing with non-traditional classrooms, even where traditional monocultural approaches are the norm. Arvanitis (2024) similarly shows that incorporating real-life issues, such as displacement, into a differentiated curriculum enhances critical thinking and engagement. Young children took action for refugee inclusion through public exhibitions of participatory visual arts. Teacher education also plays a key role. These educational responses in Greece continue to illustrate the framework’s emphasis on critical consciousness and cultural affirmation in practice. Tsigilis et al. (2006) reveal that cultural diversity coursework has a positive effect on future educators’ attitudes towards inclusive teaching in Greece.

However, challenges persist. According to Penderi and Kokouvinou (2019), Greek educators, though aiming to promote warm classrooms, they lack confidence in integrating students' linguistic and cultural identities. These practices vary according to factors such as urban context, prior training, and years of experience. Giavrimis and Dimitriadou (2023) further highlight how ethnocentric attitudes - shaped by poorly structured policies - undermine efforts toward integration, reinforcing the need for pedagogies that affirm multilingualism and diverse social identities.

In this context, multilingual policy and pedagogy are not just cultural add-ons but central equity issues. Strengthening teachers' ability to support home-language use alongside Greek can address structural disadvantages faced by migrant and minoritised children, directly aligning with the linguistic justice dimension of the framework. Without substantive changes to practice, the identification of diversity risks becoming a token gesture (Sotiropoulou, 2020). As Pantazis et al. (2019) argue, robust investment in teacher education modelled on critical and relational pedagogies is essential to advance equity and inclusion. These findings highlight that real progress in diversity and inclusion requires moving beyond recognition to meaningful, sustained changes in educational practice.

### **Italy: Civic Education and Reggio Emilia**

Italy's case, especially via the Reggio Emilia Approach, is used to illustrate participatory community-learning and empathetic practice. These aspects of the conceptual framework, grounded in Freire and West, materialise in Italy's democratic engagement, child voice, and inclusive pedagogy initiatives highlighted below.

Italy's Reggio Emilia Approach offers a well-established model for anti-racist and inclusive early education. Rooted in democratic post-war ideals, it promotes diversity and intercultural understanding, focussing on child-centred, inquiry-based learning (Edwards et al., 2012; Smedile & Ramírez-García, 2024). Manera (2022) and Wood (2016) also demonstrate how core principles of Reggio practice, such as *progettazione* and participatory evaluation, challenge assimilationist norms, strengthen children's voices and valorise cultural diversity. The *Fare Scuola* initiative rethinks school spaces in marginalised areas as sites of equity and dialogue (TAMassociati, 2022), and the City of Reggio Emilia's municipal anti-racism plan embeds such principles at a systemic level (Council of Europe, 2023). Tripi (2025) discusses how the 'Pedagogy of Listening' supports co-created knowledge formation and cultural stance by exemplifying practices such as children's assemblies and narrative documentation.

Despite its emphasis on participation and inclusion, Reggio settings continue to face challenges related to linguistic diversity (Smedile & Ramírez-García, 2024). Integrating children's home and heritage languages into documentation, project work, and parental engagement would further Reggio's democratic ethos by affirming language differences as valuable resources rather than deficits. Kofler and Herzer (2019) argue that teacher education in Italy requires to move beyond passively managing diversity and instead adopt critical, reflective approaches that actively address these challenges. Ongoing engagement in Italy exemplifies the framework's focus on participatory community learning and empathy-driven ethical consciousness.

Meanwhile, civic education initiatives like School Territory Environment Pedagogy (STEP) (Benadusi, 2022; Borghi, 2014) address the transversality of sustainability, cultural heritage, and citizenship in childhood training, despite barriers such as sporadic training and fragmented implementation (Savio, 2015; Ianes et al., 2020). Continued reflection and collective action are needed to ensure that civic education initiatives move beyond sporadic implementation to become embedded, equitable, and responsive to all children's needs.

### **Malta: Intercultural Understanding, Interfaith and an Emergent Curriculum for ECEC**

In Malta, intercultural and interfaith curriculum approaches exemplify enacted cultural awareness and multilingual affirmation, aligning with the framework's focus on linguistic justice and identity validation rooted in hooks and Ladson-Billings. This section examines how these principles inform educational responses to diversity and belonging.

Through the lenses of racism and Eurocentrism, Borg and Mayo (2015) trace the creation of Malta's educational structures and call for an anti-racist pedagogy grounded in critical reflection, action, and historical consciousness. This call is reflected in initiatives translating such principles into practice. The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Malta supports asylum seekers and refugees through legal, psychological, and social services, while promoting inclusion and intercultural understanding (Jesuit Refugee Service Malta, n.d.). Its Communities of Hospitality initiative connects local faith-based groups and migrant families through shared activities such as school support and cultural orientation, fostering empathy and belonging. JRS Malta also engages in school and community outreach to build solidarity and challenge exclusion. Similarly, the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society (MFWS) (n.d.) advances anti-racism through the 'Interfaith Children's Dialogue', fostering empathy among children from diverse backgrounds, and public seminars equipping participants to speak out against racial discrimination.

These efforts reflect the framework's focus on cultural awareness and multilingual affirmation in early years education. Bonello et al. (2025) document how professional and pedagogical shifts in Malta - from prescriptive to emergent curriculum, informed by Reggio Emilia - enable early years settings (0-7 years) to become multicultural, inclusive, and socially active. Yet implementation remains uneven due to limited training and infrastructure. While the Maltese National Minimum Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1999) promotes multiculturalism and inclusion, persistent gaps remain. Similarly, Parnis and Schembri (2023) and Vassallo (2020) identify systemic obstacles such as weak policy coherence and underdeveloped intercultural competencies among school leaders.

In Malta's bilingual Maltese-English system, increasing migrant language diversity has intensified debates on curriculum and teacher preparation, with growing focus on linguistic justice (Panzavecchia, 2024). Practices such as integrating migrant children's first languages in songs, displays, and storytelling not only affirm identity but counter deficit views of non-official languages (Ministry for Education, 2021). Valuing the diverse languages and experiences of all children remains central to achieving the aims of multicultural education in the early years.

### **North Africa: Reclaiming Indigenous Knowledge and Language Rights**

The North African context (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia) demonstrates the framework's emphasis on reclaiming Indigenous knowledge and advancing critical language studies, informed by Fanon, Ladson-Billings, and Braudel. Here, early education efforts to revitalise language and culture embody restorative practice and develop critical consciousness.

In Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, there are growing movements to reclaim Amazigh language and cultural identity in early education. This challenges the traditionally hegemonic status of Arabic and French in the formal education system (Ennaji, 2005; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). In Morocco, efforts include trilingual schooling (Hannouchi, 2018), integration of children with additional needs into the school system (UNESCO GEM Report., n.d.), and the World Bank's rural Early Child Development (ECD) initiative, which targets marginalised Amazigh communities (World Bank, 2021). Tamazight is incorporated into more than 2,000 schools, albeit unevenly (Middle East Monitor, 2025). These developments in North Africa continue the illustration of cultural affirmation and linguistic justice central to the framework.

Language is a foundational component of identity and a site of ongoing contestation in anti-racist early childhood education across the Mediterranean. Recent policies and practices, including translanguaging initiatives (Tari, 2023) and efforts to promote linguistic justice in Malta and North Africa (Ennaji, 2005; Parnis & Schembri, 2023), illustrate how classroom language choices affect children's inclusion, self-concept, and access to equitable learning. The discussion foregrounds multilingualism as both an opportunity and a challenge for anti-racist pedagogy, reflecting its centrality in contemporary debates.

In Algeria, inclusive classroom practices such as translanguaging and cultural storytelling are expanding (Tari, 2023), though barriers remain, including zerolingualism, curricular gaps, and

ambivalence toward French and Tamazight (Quattrini, 2024; Cherifi, 2024). In Tunisia, Ben Maad (2014) proposes the 'Awakening-to-Languages approach' - a strategy for fostering empathy and multilingual awareness within an anti-racist framework. National efforts, like Tunisia's Multisectoral Early Childhood Strategy (Ministry of Women, Family and Children, 2017), aim to scale these practices, but implementation challenges persist. Progress in North African early education demonstrates both advances and persistent challenges in embedding cultural affirmation and multilingualism as core principles of anti-racist practice.

### **Contextual Contrasts and Framework Implications**

Across the four contexts, all demonstrate - though in varying degrees - commitments to the framework's core tenets, often shaped by strong community engagement and socially embedded pedagogies. Greece and Malta foreground intercultural dialogue and multilingualism in policy but face gaps in teacher training and implementation. Italy exemplifies empathy-driven, participatory practice via Reggio Emilia, yet struggles with system-wide scaling. North African reforms stress cultural restoration and linguistic justice, though adoption is uneven. These contrasts reveal that while principles resonate broadly, their expression is shaped by historical legacies, policy landscapes, and socio-political conditions - reinforcing the framework's value for guiding context-responsive anti-racist pedagogy across the Mediterranean.

While this mapping has provided concrete illustrations from Greece and Italy and more conceptually oriented insights from Malta and North Africa, it is not intended to be exhaustive or to present each case with equal depth. Variations in the level of analysis reflect differences in available evidence and regional scope; accordingly, the conclusions need to be interpreted as indicative patterns rather than definitive or uniformly substantiated findings. Nevertheless, the insights gained from this mapping inform the key policy priorities presented in the next section.

### **Policy Priorities for Anti-Racist Early Education in the Mediterranean**

Drawing on the comparative analysis above, the following policy priorities identify essential domains for advancing and sustaining anti-racist early childhood education across the Mediterranean. These recommendations respond to both enabling factors and persistent barriers, highlighting the importance of coordinated, contextually responsive policy action.

#### **Embedding Anti-Racism in Teacher Education**

Transformative anti-racist early education hinges on reimagining teacher education as the cornerstone for systemic change. Early childhood educators need to be prepared to foster critical reflection, challenge racial and cultural hierarchies, and enact culturally sustaining pedagogies. This calls for training programmes - at pre-service and in-service levels - that explicitly include:

- *Colonial histories and migration*: Addressing how past and present movements shape identities and opportunities (Bhabha, 1994; Braudel, 1958, 2023/1972; Said, 1978).
- *Critical race theory and anti-bias practices*: Equipping educators to recognise, interrogate, and disrupt systemic inequities (Alfayez, 2024; Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Freire, 1970/1968; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995; West, 1993, 2004).
- *Linguistic justice*: Promoting multilingualism and affirming children's languages as central to inclusion (Fanon 2008/1952, 1961; Freire, 1970/1968; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Majid et al., 2021).

Frameworks such as the Anti-Racism Framework for Initial Teacher Education demonstrate that only sustained, institution-wide reforms - rather than isolated professional development workshops - prepare educators to address systemic racism adequately (Leeds Beckett University, 2023). National policies need to mandate anti-racist content in teacher preparation, ensure ongoing professional development, and promote avenues for community partnership and accountability (Gay, 2018; UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024; Welsh Government, 2024).

## Committing to Anti-Racist Early Education as an Equity Strategy

Anti-racist ECEC lays the foundation for equity, inclusion, and social transformation. Research confirms that inclusive early education reduces racial bias, improves outcomes for marginalised groups, and creates momentum for positive citizenship and justice (Bigler & Liben, 2007; Gilroy, 1993; Iruka, 2022; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Said, 1978;). Central to this is:

- *Multilingual, linguistically just curricula*: Affirming children's histories and identities, and using language as a lever for equity and belonging (Freire, 1970/1968; Fanon, 2008/1952, 1961; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995).
- *Culturally responsive pedagogy*: Validating diverse experiences, challenging deficit narratives, and nurturing empathy and social cohesion (Freire, 1970/1968; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021).

Across the Mediterranean, countries such as Greece, Italy, Malta, and regions of North Africa demonstrate context-sensitive approaches: reclaiming Indigenous languages, fostering translanguaging, and integrating linguistic diversity within curricula (Majid et al., 2021). These examples, presented in this article, illustrate local strategies for resisting racism and fostering inclusion, without implying one-size-fits-all solutions.

Investments in ECEC yield lasting economic and social dividends. Given demographic changes and entrenched inequalities, the Mediterranean urgently needs comprehensive, high-quality, and accessible early education for all (Toran et al., 2025). This requires:

- Sustained political commitment and increased funding
- Coordinated intersectoral action focused on equity and accessibility
- Systems for robust monitoring and evaluation

## Moving Anti-Racist Early Education from Aspiration to Practice

To translate anti-racist commitments into reality, it is essential for Mediterranean policy to support innovations such as:

- Reclaiming and validating Indigenous and minoritised languages (North Africa)
- Implementing multilingual civic and anti-racist education (Italy)
- Advancing intercultural, inclusive pedagogies and curricula (Greece, Malta)

Language emerges as a central site of equity work, influencing access, participation, and belonging across diverse contexts. These interventions need to reflect local histories and engage wider dynamics of migration and pluralism, positioning early education as a space for linguistic justice, empowered voice, and meaningful inclusion.

In summary, these priorities operationalise the proposed framework for anti-racist ECEC at a systems level, anchoring transformative practice so it can be embedded, scaled, and sustained across the Mediterranean region.

## Conclusion

This article has developed and applied a conceptual framework for anti-racist early childhood education in the Mediterranean, embedding it in the region's rich cultural traditions, multilingual realities, and complex histories (Braudel, 1958, 2023/1972; Fanon, 2008/1952, 1961; Freire, 1970/1968; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021; West, 1993, 2004). Drawing on comparative insights from Greece, Italy, Malta, and North Africa, this analysis distills region-specific policy priorities - strengthening teacher education, advancing multilingual curricula, and fostering robust community partnership - showing how locally derived examples operationalise the framework's core tenets: critical consciousness, empathy, cultural

affirmation, and participatory community learning.

Mapping these contexts uncovers both promising practices and persistent challenges, shaped by deep legacies, policy landscapes, and socio-political realities. The framework thus serves as both an analytical lens for evaluating current practice and a generative driver for locally grounded, culturally sustaining anti-racist pedagogy. But obstacles remain: uneven policy support, educator confidence gaps, and the risks of cultural essentialism or overgeneralised “Mediterranean identity”.

Addressing these demands historically informed, intersectional solutions, targeted multilingual practice, inclusive curricula, and real community partnership. Crucially, these imperatives echo calls from children’s rights leaders, with the Mediterranean Children’s Movement and its president, Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, championing high-quality, accessible early education as a pillar of dignity, participation, and equity for every child (Times of Malta, 2022).

Turning anti-racism from aspiration into embedded practice now means sustained, prioritised investment in teacher education and high-quality ECEC for all (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024). Only through enduring, holistic commitment can anti-racist, multilingual, and inclusive learning become reality across this diverse region. In a Mediterranean defined by pluralism and contested identities, early childhood education can unite, renew, and transform (Sollars & Toran, 2025; UNESCO, 2021). Anchored in love, courage, and a clear recognition of diversity, this framework offers both a path and practical guide for a more just future.

## Declarations

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