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Researh Article

Operationalizing radical hope: Broadening whole-child approaches to restructure the whole system

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Abstract: Although a "holistic" tenet of equitable early childhood education and care, focusing on the whole-child overlooks how systems maintain inequality. Predicated on individual-level interventions, the whole-child approach prioritizes "fixing" children, but not the oppressive systems that contextualize children's realities. This paper describes historic and ongoing oppressive reasoning that guide educational theory and developmental science. Relatedly, cultural knowledge embedded in the Afro-centric, Ghanaian principles of Sankofa guide our looking back to identify the etiology of asymmetric power relations that characterize formal education systems, which helps redirect how we move forward to rectify unjust systems starting at personal and social levels.

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Introduction

To be truly visionary we have to root our imagination in our concrete reality while simultaneously imagining possibilities beyond that reality (hooks, 2014, p.110)

We* reject presumptions about the 'permanence of racism' (Warmington, 2024) and its 'ordinariness' embedded in formal educational institutions starting in early childhood (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Gillborn, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Towards undoing racism, we promote a paradigm shift from whole-child approaches prevalent in early childhood education and care (ECEC) to equitably reconstructing the whole system. In ECEC, the whole system refers to the interconnected components (e.g., programs and organizations, policy and governance, higher education and professional development, research and advocacy) that collectively shape the experiences, opportunities, and outcomes for children, families, and educators. We empathize with the racial and vocational battle fatigue common among early educators given low pay and poor work conditions (Lloyd et al., 2021). To fortify our professional commitment, we enact the five pedagogies of radical hope – patient, critical, sound, resolute, and transformative (Webb, 2013) – as active principles guiding systemic change, transformation, and collective action in ECEC. Using an evidentiary narrative approach (Altheide & Johnson, 2011; Wyatt et al., 2018), we highlight moments of practice that exemplify the challenges we see and explore how a whole systems approach could address the strengths and needs of children and their families.

We acknowledge our settler embodiment in U.S. lands as four cis-gender women with PhDs and academic and personal interests in ECEC. While outraged by persistent conditions that marginalize young children and a predominantly female field, we have needed to moderate our own advocacy to be polite and professional. Our identities inform our practice and urgent need for radical hope and critical

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* We problematize academic writing conventions that dictate the use of third person to reflect the *hubris of the zero point* (Castro-Gómez, 2021), or abstract people from geo-political histories to perpetuate a "zero-point epistemology" associated with "rationality." This "view from nowhere" reinforces a Eurocentric "standard" (Mignolo, 2009). We use first person to acknowledge our interpretive roles, and engage in the critical recommendations we suggest to readers.

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perspectives in ECEC and beyond. Author 1 is a Muslim, first-generation bilingual Egyptian American. Author 2 is a first-generation, bilingual/bicultural immigrant. Author 3 is a multilingual 1.5 generation Asian American immigrant. Finally, Author 4 is a woman raised in a home of mixed races and ethnicities from a working-class poor background, and is multilingual, but not in her heritage language.

Drawing on critical theories, anti-racist education, and Freire's (1973) concept of critical consciousness, we move beyond dominant whole-child approaches to build capacity for systemic transformation by directly confronting the structural forces that shape inequities in ECEC. A "whole-child" perspective should not exist in isolation—it must be situated within a "whole-system" framework that acknowledges and seeks to transform how policies, economic structures, and institutional practices inequitably shape children's development and educational experiences.

To this end, we propose a conceptual re-framing informed by an intersectional, critically developmental, and inclusive lens—one that not only identifies the roots of asymmetric power relations but also mobilizes collective action across sectors to dismantle and restructure these systems equitably. Transformative change requires policy makers, community organizations including businesses, healthcare providers, families, and educators to challenge broad social, economic, and political structures that perpetuate inequality.

An equity-centered, anti-racist approach must also be decolonial and anti-capitalist, recognizing the extractive nature of interconnected economic and political systems (Kundnani, 2023). In particular, we examine how exploitative dynamics within a neoliberal system are embedded in the formal education industry, where standardized assessments, curricula, and educational publishing often prioritize profit and compliance over equity and meaningful learning (Ku, 2024). As such, we support systemic changes in ECEC given this key site where entrenched inequities are reproduced. We challenge the status quo in ECEC, where standardized curricula and assessments reinforce deficit-based views and inequitable power structures. This reconceptualization helps redirect how we (e.g., early childhood educators, professionals, researchers, teacher/personnel educators, caregivers, and advocates for children) act to rectify unjust systems.

With prevalent narratives that normalize racism, we call for urgent, intentional action to eliminate harm. Drawing on case examples from our lived experiences, we model critically conscious praxis to connect inclusive developmental theory to practice. We highlight how personal, social, and structural factors shape our recommendations and offer strategies to redress inequities in interactions with colleagues, children, families, administrators, policymakers, and funders. We advocate for collaboratively supported, liberatory opportunities that drive multi-sector reform, grounded in radical hope. In particular, we aim to: 1) outline the need for reconceptualizing ECEC given how ableism, racism, and linguicism intersect to shape dominant narratives about children's development 2) provide conceptual frameworks that account for children's development in relation to unjust systems and asymmetric histories; and 3) link theory to our lived experiences and "moments" that guide just practice at personal, social, and structural levels through critical consciousness (Freire, 1973; 1993).

Urgent Need for Reconceptualization

Despite decades of evidence outlining the harms embedded in theoretical models, research, and applied practices and policies that overlook or even harm populations of young children, problematic approaches persist (Bloch et al., 2014, Yelland, 2005). We highlight the urgent need to build on critical scholars' coordinated work on Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education (RECE), to challenge mainstream ideas regarding how young children learn and grow and call for practice, policy, and research reforms in ECEC to uproot oppression that shapes policy and practice (Bruno & Iruka, 2022; Reconceptualizing Early Child Education, 2022). Focusing on the whole-child has been and remains a tenet

of ECEC "quality" (Nagasawa & Medellin-Paz, 2024)**. Although "holistic" and seemingly inclusive, the whole-child approach leads key partners (e.g., scholars, policy makers, practitioners) to overlook how systems (and people within them) maintain inequity. A whole-child approach prioritizes "fixing" children by identifying perceived deficits, especially children with disabilities or at risk for developmental delays, without an urgent focus on "fixing" oppressive systems thus treating racism, classism, ableism, sexism, linguicism, ageism, heterosexism, religious discrimination, and xenophobia as permanent fixtures.

While seemingly comprehensive and compelling, an underspecified commitment to the "whole-child" portrayed in educational and developmental frameworks masks power asymmetries. Although described as neutral or even benevolent, broad cultural systems (e.g., formal education, schooling) actively reproduce existing social inequalities and class structures by privileging dominant cultural values and knowledge (Apple, 2017). "Standards" and milestones serve as tropes that perpetuate allocations of privilege and disenfranchisement through practices embedded in the hidden curriculum and common practices within human services. For example, the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) depicts the whole-child perspective, centering children within community contexts with equally sized sections representing nutrition, environment and services, employee wellness, and physical environment (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Notably, these portrayals do not explicitly include realities of malnourishment given food scarcity and food deserts, persistently low wages and high turnover within the mostly female early childhood workforce, or aspects of the physical environment that include neighborhood or school-based violence, racism, and gentrification. While these issues affect individuals across the lifespan, their impact is heightened for young children given the formative period of early childhood coupled with the disproportionate effects on families and ECEC providers. Given interconnected systems, anti-racism efforts necessarily include anti-capitalism (Kundnani, 2023).

We go beyond theoretical approaches that benevolently center the "whole-child," yet ignore oppressive systems. Specifically, we draw on the Akan philosophical principle of Sankofa, which in the Twi language of Ghana means, "it is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten" (Asante & Mazama, 2009). Going back to the past to help reconstruct the future (Osei, 2020) fosters reexamining whole-child approaches that place the burden for change on the child or family, rather than on the harms and barriers that systems and institutions perpetuate. Instead, we advocate for incorporating a whole-child developmental focus within a whole-systems analysis.

Conceptual Guiding Re-Orientations Towards Centering Anti-Racist Praxis

Applying the Sankofa principle guides us to outline key conceptual omissions. Recognizing epistemological and disciplinary distinctions among perspectives (e.g., theory, conceptual approach, framework), we draw from tools to guide our conceptualization, analysis, and action. We acknowledge the political and cultural roots of these theories and view their integration not as an eclectic exercise but as a transformative and justice-oriented effort to build solidarity across frameworks. We favor conceptual approaches that consider development in comprehensive, relational manners. The lack of reflexivity risks obscuring and perpetuating the oppressive features from which it originates (Apple, 2017). We draw from conceptually capacious approaches to 1) critically represent asymmetric ecologies and structures that inform development, 2) locate individual and collective meaning-making drawing on strengths and navigating challenges within the contexts, and 3) illustrate developmental pathways and implications for ECEC from an intersectional perspective.

While intending to critically and holistically locate individual development within a whole system, these tools provide an illustrative (i.e., not exhaustive) guide to orienting work at structural and local levels. The tools provide a base that can be refined with other relevant conceptualizations (e.g., culturally or religiously informed perspectives), and woven with additional approaches to specify learning processes

** Non-critical use of terms like "quality" and "evidence-based" have historically and continue to center indicators, samples, and experiences that reflect dominant experiences and identities (i.e., able, white, middle to high socio-economic status). This evidence regularly excludes or marginalizes a range of developmental practices and how they manifest and are recognized across groups underrepresented in existing scholarship (e.g., bilingual, differently abled, racially minoritized, poor). If included, given hierarchical systems of knowledge production, representation fixates on perceived individual needs or deficits, rather than highlighting strengths and broad forms of knowledges and structures that inform how knowledges are accessed and regarded.

and promote developmental and educational possibilities (e.g., literacy and translanguaging, inquiry into nature and natural science, social and emotional learning including empathy and anti-racism) (Immordino-Yang et al., 2024).

Whole Systems Approaches De-Center People

Given a whole-systems approach to understanding the whole-child, we begin with approaches that specify structures including racism, sexism, classism, and ableism as currently unavoidable dimensions of the social and political ecology. Table 1 introduces critical theories but does not account for developmental processes for individuals or young children's education and care.

Table 1
Theories that account for the structural inequities

Scope of Approaches and Characteristics	Exemplars and Key Contributions	Implications on ECEC
Critical Race Theory (CRT): Reflects how social conceptions of race/racism and ethnicity manifest in social practices, politics, and law	CRT (Delgado & Stefancic; 2023; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) examines how racism is embedded in laws, institutions (e.g., schools), and everyday practices that maintain power structures and inequalities.	CRT frameworks demonstrate how racism is embedded in education systems including inequitable access to ECEC opportunities, biased educational curriculum and assessments, and disproportionate outcomes including suspension and expulsion rates.
Intersectionality: Originated in legal analysis and legal theory	Crenshaw (1989), Collins and Bilge (2016) highlight the intersectional nature of social categorizations that create overlapping systems of discrimination and advantage.	Although not typically applied to ECEC, intersectional approaches highlight patterns of interactions within stratified levels of advantage and privilege in children and adults.
Disability Studies and CRT (DisCrit) lay a foundation of legal and historical approaches that explain how ableism and racism deny rights of racially minoritized people with disabilities.	DisCrit combines critical disability studies and CRT to describe how racism, disability, and ableism are built into educational interactions and tools (Annamma et al., 2013).	DisCrit calls attention to the urgent need to rethink traditional quality measures towards an inclusive, child-centered approach (Beneke & Love, 2022).
Critical Language and Race Theory (LangCrit) challenges social and local stigmatizing assumptions regarding language, identity and/or race (Crump, 2014).	LangCrit examines connections between language and race resulting in language racism where power relationships and status relate to skin color and language category.	LangCrit can be used to create humanizing classrooms where children are accepted even if in society, they are minoritized because of race or language status.
Critical Spatial Theory (CST) examines how space and place are not neutral but shaped and used by social, political, and economic forces (Helfenbein & Huddleston, 2021).	CST focuses on power dynamics and resistance within spatial contexts related to social justice, cultural representation, and environmental sustainability.	Although not explicitly applied to education or the ECEC context, CST provides a lens to understand and explain how opportunities and resources in the whole system are inequitable and dependent on where one lives.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) explicitly examines the relationships between race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, 2023). Starting in the legal field, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) and Solorzano (1997) brought CRT to educational spaces to address forms of oppression that exist and are perpetuated. The institution of schooling is a primary reflection of and conduit for structural racism given influences of cultural and socio-economic biases in curriculum and assessments (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015). Institutional racism is manifest interpersonally and individually, where racism is conceptualized by thoughts, categorizations, and attitudes (e.g., preference for dolls with light or white skin tone).

Expanding the scope of single axis identification (e.g., race), intersectional frameworks account for the interlinkages between the privilege and oppression associated with our multiple social positions (Crenshaw, 1989). Emerging from critical legal studies, intersectional framings originally uplifted the

intersection between gender and racial oppression of Black women. Further, DisCrit (Annamma et al., 2013) uses situated intersectionality as a lens for understanding the meanings of whole-systems analysis of race and disability. DisCrit challenges deficit-based narratives of children with disabilities, particularly those from racially and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Within the economic, political, and power structures, the medical model influences how disability is framed in terms of needs for curing or fixing, as if disability is something individuals should "overcome" through intervention. In addition, DisCrit centers a social model that argues that the built environment (i.e., consisting of, but not limited to social arrangements and norms structured around able-bodiedness) maintains barriers associated with disability. Beyond problematizing social problems, DisCrit provides a strengths-based approach that recognizes and builds on the cultural, linguistic, and ability-related assets of individuals with disabilities. Integrating DisCrit into our analysis highlights how language and assumptions rooted in pathology and ableism shape perceptions of disability, particularly in early intervention/early childhood special education (EI/ECSE).

As with CRT and DisCrit, LangCrit acknowledges how society, politics, and history shape ideals that reflect and reinforce the perspectives and privileges afforded to dominant groups. LangCrit examines how dominant ideologies privilege standardized English and white, middle-class norms of communication, while marginalizing multilingual learners including African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and Indigenous language users. Policies and standards that penalize children for using home languages or dialects perpetuate linguistic oppression. By examining power structures embedded in language hierarchies at the intersections of language, class, and race, we challenge how local languages are devalued in educational spaces (Crump, 2014).

CST extends analysis of asymmetrical power relations to notions of space and how it is inequitably constructed and used (Helfenbein & Huddleston, 2021). For example, school and classroom systems often separate children with disabilities during activity time, or school zoning policies separate communities by family income and race, demonstrating how spatial arrangements uphold inequities. CST challenges our understanding of who has access to certain spaces, who feels welcome or excluded, and how physical environments shape children's early learning experiences.

These and other critical analytic approaches highlight the legal and political dimensions of physical and social structures that influence children's development and education within stratified social contexts. By combining approaches that focus on the whole child within the whole system, the ECEC and EI/ECSE workforce can engage in transformational efforts to challenge systemic inequities.

Locating Children's Development Within Inequitable Systems

Theoretical approaches that account for systemic asymmetries can be combined with ecological approaches that center children's development (Godfrey & Burson, 2018). Importantly, oppression-sensitive ecological approaches do not reduce the identities and experiences of people who are marginalized to their/our disenfranchisement. Rather than centering deficits or profiles of marginalization that need "saving," we highlight ecological models that 1) demand restructuring oppressive systems as we collectively reject the 'permanence of racism" and choose justice given our shared humanity, 2) replace deficit perspectives with narratives that center historic resilience and competence, 3) highlight developmental assets, goals, and framings that transgress "normative" developmental trajectories. Table 2 outlines macro-level theories that embed development within inequitable social contexts but do not center action-oriented recommendations.

Table 2
Developmental ecological models that anchor assets within oppressive structures

Scope of Approaches and Characteristics	Exemplars and Key Contributions	Implications on ECEC
Integrated Developmental Model	Garcia Coll et al. (1996) provides an integrative model that anchors development within social stratification	An explicit focus on stratified contexts centers on how children learn to navigate them as foundational to their

	theory, highlighting competencies and risks of minoritized children and families.	survival and competence. Further, an asset-based focus on minoritized youth highlights the multi-layered nature of strengths and vulnerabilities within cultural contexts.
Phenomenological Variation in Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST)	Spencer (2006) critiques unspecified bio-ecological developmental approaches and highlights structural inequities that influence the development of all children, varied assets and vulnerabilities of all humans, and individual meaning making processes around diverse experiences.	Although generally used with youth populations, adapting to early childhood helps to identify the influence of stratified social contexts from young ages, the urgent need to reform systems to promote the well-being of all individuals, and the critical focus on individual meaning making.
Indigenous Connected Framework	To offset disconnections resulting from colonialism, system racism, and climate change, Ullrich (2019) centers relationality, reciprocity, and interconnectedness among people, land, spirit, and all living beings, challenging Western individualistic notions of development.	Centering Indigenous knowledge systems, languages, child-rearing practices, calls for the inclusion of Elders, storytelling, and land-based learning as foundational to identity and learning. For ECEC, resistance to colonial educational structures reclaims culturally sustaining ways of knowledge production.

The integrated developmental model anchors children's development within social stratification theory emphasizing the prevalent impact of racism, discrimination, oppression, and segregation on the developmental competencies of minoritized children and families (Garcia Coll et al., 1996). This integrated model highlights two previously understated issues. First, minoritized children learn to navigate stratified contexts including media that represents them/their group negatively. Second, it highlights developmental competencies of minoritized youth and their families which reflect their humanity and contribute to individual and collective development. Even when we build on cultural wealth given high private or within group regard, minoritized youth cope with negative social mirrors that are in low public regard (Rivas-Drake et al., 2009).

In critiquing unspecified bio-ecological developmental approaches, Spencer (2006) enumerated three primary flaws: Flaw one: Context ignored; Flaw two: Racism ignored; Flaw three: General lack of a developmental perspective when considering youth of color (p. 829). To address these limitations, Spencer's PVEST provides a framework to understand diverse (i.e., all) people's lived experiences and meaning making about their realities while explicitly outlining systemic barriers to guide reparative practices (2006). Rather than focusing on a discrete experience (e.g., reading score), PVEST incorporates youth perspectives (e.g., motivation to read). Focusing on meaning-making helps unpack developmental processes, highlighting within-group variations around otherwise congruent experiences (e.g., silent reading). Second, PVEST attends to experiences within contexts with persistent stratified conditions (e.g., discrimination) shifting from mechanistic models (e.g., reductionist, deterministic) in favor of organismic models (e.g., integrative), that are developmentally holistic, intersectional, and ecologically sensitive and implore just action towards just systems (Velez & Spencer, 2018). For example, the Indigenous Connectedness Framework links child well-being to collective well-being and spiritual connectedness, nurtured through ceremonial practices (e.g., dancing) within intergenerational, environmental, and family connectedness rooted in relations to God as the all-encompassing Creator (Ullrich, 2019).

Taken together, these perspectives challenge deficit-based models by emphasizing the strengths, competencies, and interconnectedness embedded within communities. By integrating them, we move toward a holistic, justice-oriented developmental approach that acknowledges systemic constraints and uplifts culturally rooted assets that support resilience and collective flourishing within a system.

Connecting the Child, System, and Equity-Oriented Practice

Exploring asset-based models featuring everyday practices of children and families centers their cultural and communal wealth within systemic vulnerabilities and how they navigate stratified contexts. Table 3 summarizes micro-level critical developmental theories that are sensitive to contexts, suggesting everyday entry points for action.

Table 3

Models that reflect asset-based micro practices of daily routines within stratified contexts

Scope of Approaches and Characteristics	Exemplars and Key Contributions	Implications on ECEC
Cultural Funds of Knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), Yosso (2005) Community Cultural Wealth, and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) (Paris, 2012) draw from the cultural wealth of communities and their strengths to move toward social and racial justice.	These models highlight families' cultural resources that are essential to informing classroom instruction and promoting relationships with families, requiring educators to support children sustaining their cultural heritage and home language(s).	Within pedagogies, recognizing cultural assets and wealth moves from deficit mentalities to examining how we can use the cultural strengths of young children to activate children's background knowledge, provides scaffolds for learning, and makes strong connections between and across the various knowledge bases at home and school.
Developmental Niche described by Super and Harkness (1986) weaves perspectives from anthropology and psychology to describe youth's micro-level contextual ecology.	The developmental niche reflects the form and function of variations in physical contexts, the psychology of caregivers, and the practices caregivers engage in to promote children's development.	Educators examining the developmental niche have a coherent lens to identify and build upon practices that affect development including their values and varied contextual features.

Asset based models draw on diverse types of cultural wealth embedded in the everyday practices of children and families. Even in ECEC, educational approaches may harbor a tacit assumption that learning about family practices is not "worth" the effort, particularly if families are from a lower socioeconomic background or culturally marginalized. Educators can bridge home-school connections and promote learning "…by capitalizing on household and other community resources, we can organize classroom instruction that far exceeds in quality the rote-like instruction these children commonly encounter in schools" (Moll et al., 1992, p. 132). Funds of knowledge accumulate, as described by Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) model (2005) that reflects the assets, skills, and knowledge of communities of color and specifically includes aspirational, family, social, linguistic, and resistant capital. Beyond reflecting them, truly inclusive and asset-based approaches promote children's development through culturally sustaining educational approaches (Paris, 2012).

Exploring the micro-level contextual ecology of a child's developmental niche (Super & Harkness, 1986) helps contextualize a family's practices and how they socialize their child. For example, although a family may value unstructured, outdoor play, time, access, and resources may limit how families can explore parks and playgrounds only during selected times that do not reflect these values.

Promoting Children's Development through Liberatory Models

An asset-based understanding of the whole child within the community highlights individual and community funds of knowledge and sources of wealth and resilience, particularly as families navigate stratified contexts (e.g., assimilate, resist, transform). Next, we turn to conceptual models that center cultural wealth and resilience as tools for liberation and collective humanization. Table 4 explains these praxis models by connecting asset-based perspectives to liberatory practices.

Table 4
Promoting development through liberatory models that center humanizing pedagogies

Scope of Approaches and Characteristics	Exemplars and Key Contributions	Implications on ECEC
Reggio Emilia Inspired	Community members and educators countered the aftermath from two world wars with a belief that children presented the best opportunity for a peaceful and prosperous future forming dozens of preschools in the province of Reggio Emilia, leading literal and figurative rebuilding (Edwards et al., 2012).	Reggio Emilia views ECEC as a holistic, interactive system within the environment of the school and community where children, teachers, families, parents, and other parties work together toward a common objective.
Radical Hope	Radical hope honors the resilience of marginalized communities by centering community-driven approaches allowing educators to be agents of hope that view care as world-building.	Radical hope begins to reimagine traditional developmental milestones that can be rigid and culturally biased.

Historically and in contemporary contexts, Reggio inspired early childhood approaches are designed to be emancipatory and linked to local issues and priorities (Senent et al., 2021). Originating in Italy after WWII, families advocated for city support of parent-led schools that would embody and promote democratic ideals for their youngest citizens (New, 2007). With its constructivist orientation, the Reggio Emilia approach grew collaboratively with children, fellow teachers, and parents as "a pedagogy of relations, listening, and liberation" (Moss, 2016, p.173). Reggio approaches promote local control and guidance. Each center is viewed as a system in which all these relationships are activated and supported. Education is the right of all children and an opportunity for the growth and emancipation of the individual and the collective, and a responsibility of the community (Infant-toddler Centres and Preschools Istituzione del Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2010).

Similarly, radical hope provides a future oriented approach that integrates collective memory, faith, and agency (Damhof & Gulmans, 2023; Mosley et al., 2020). Radical hope provides a psychological and social framework that extends beyond individual resilience and acknowledges past struggles in order to envision collective transformation. Radical hope is rooted in history, resistance, and a vision for a just future. This type of hope is an active commitment to social change, particularly for marginalized groups who have faced systemic oppression. By grounding hope in historical consciousness, radical hope offers both a means of psychological well-being and a foundation for political action. Damhof and Gulmans (2023) extend this notion by linking radical hope to the concept of futures literacy, emphasizing the role of imagination in shaping alternative futures. In a crisis—whether due to climate change, political turmoil, or social injustice—imagination becomes a necessary tool for breaking cycles of oppression. Imagining the impossible is itself a radical act, as it enables individuals and communities to perceive new pathways beyond existing constraints. Radical hope is not just about enduring hardships, but about challenging dominant narratives that limit possibilities. Instead, radical hope values diverse ways of growing and learning, especially across cultures, disability, trauma, adversity, and other circumstances.

Such liberatory approaches help us engage in imaginative re-thinking, particularly given bleak or oppressive contexts. Speculation beyond the ordinariness of oppression allows for seemingly absurd possibilities where collectives disrupt entrenched systems and cultivate a renewed sense of agency. This ability to act towards potential futures empowers individuals to reclaim their/our narratives. We now turn to narrating "moments" in our personal-professional experiences and ways to re-story them.

Method: *Stories and Counter-Narratives as Evidence*

Drawing from Sankofa guidance to look back at what we have missed, our method supports

revisiting poignant "moments" in our lived experiences that are not reflected in or diverge from the evidence base. To address these omissions, we draw on collective autoethnography (Chang, 2021), practitioner-as-researcher perspectives (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) and storytelling or testimonio (Casanova et al., 2021; Pérez Huber, 2009), to convey our experiences in various early childhood education contexts. These approaches stem from diverse epistemological traditions. Centering storytelling as part of Indigenous methodologies counters and resists research methods that have historically exploited Native communities (Iseke, 2013) and marginalized others. Testimonio creates a space for sharing personal narratives (Pérez Huber, 2009) attending to impactful events and the strong emotions that make them memorable.

Phenomenological in essence, story-centered approaches amplify often overlooked experiences of minoritized individuals from an intersectional perspective. They promote just and inclusive research by using personal experiences as primary data to expand understanding of social phenomena (Chang, 2021). The retelling of stories can be healing and contributes to mean-making through collective witnessing. Learning emerges through the interpersonal exchange between the storyteller and listeners (Pérez Huber, 2009), who may in turn share their own reactions and stories towards collective action.

Analytic Approach

Using an "evidence-as-process approach" (Wyatt et al., 2018, p. 761) to engage in critical reflexivity, we embed our "moments" in iterative research-practice-theory processes that problematize the non-inclusive nature of the dominant ECEC scholarship base and related policies and practices. As reflective practitioners with multiple entry points to ECEC, we identified particularly salient illustrative "moments" that represented dissonance between our desire to establish just practice and personal-professional experiences that diverged from these goals. Following practitioner-inquiry approaches (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), we individually reflected on our experiences and shared cases with co-authors and members of respective communities of practices (e.g., colleagues in professional associations) to analyze meaning and relevance to the field. Importantly, rather than entrenched narratives of "unfortunate" and persistently oppressive circumstances, we framed the stories as "teaching moments" or vignettes from a lens of radical hope (i.e., patient, critical, sound, resolute, transformative) to outline steps towards critical action at personal, social, and structural levels.

Results: *Our Narratives and Their Meanings*

The narratives center four "moments" in our personal-professional trajectories and related reactions and actions. In reflecting on the lessons from each story, we highlighted primary themes related to "standardized" assessment, naturalistic observation, data-based decisions, and learning to identify and describe injustice and ways to respond to each at personal, social and structural levels, as a change in one level of the system often requires reexamining the other levels and their relationships to each other (Macha & Claßen, 2025). These narratives represent systematically analyzed practitioner-as-researcher moments situated within broader social, cultural, and structural contexts. Our narratives are not isolated anecdotes but intentional, analyzed accounts that connect individual experiences to broader educational and structural dynamics. By examining our lived experiences as evidence, we reveal how systems of assessment, policy, and professional preparation manifest in everyday moments, thereby offering insights that extend beyond the personal to inform collective understanding and action within ECEC.

One Size Fits all, Some, or None

One-size-fits all assumptions about children, such as the whole-child approach, perpetuate injustice by devaluing legitimate everyday practices. Consider Author 1, a BIPOC educator overwhelmed co-parenting premature twins. She was surprised at her discomfort welcoming Ms. Pat, a (white) EI specialist (and her white gaze) into their home for her twins' assessment, sensing that her family and home were being assessed (i.e., judged). Ms. Pat asked mom about the twins' self-feeding and usage of spoons. Nervous they would be considered "behind," mom clumsily shared that she typically seats them in her lap, scooping with pita bread. Concerned Ms. Pat would consider this practice "foreign," mom was relieved

to hear; "I work with a lot of South Asian and East Asian families, and I hear comments like this all the time - except it's naan or chopsticks. I'll note that in the margins." Author 1 sensed deeper rapport fueled by Ms. Pat's cultural fluency and humility, which helped re-set the tone of their EI relationship.

Practitioners and teacher-educators can learn to identify the harms embedded in "standardized" assessments or imposing DAP-based norms that oppressively erase cultural and individual variations (Souto-Manning, 2018). In sharing this scenario in higher education courses, ECEC students readily outline cultural and contextual influences on practices, such as recognizing that caregivers' concerns for food scarcity may demand that more food land in a child's mouth, rather than their surroundings. Access to laundry resources or spare clothes may affect families' willingness for children to experiment with self-feeding or certain activities. While self-feeding is often associated with chicken nuggets and Cheerios, teacher candidates describe variations including compressing rice and meat or scooping saucy dal. Students with applied ECE experiences note that digit dexterity and other complex skills are not accounted for in "standardized" assessment tools (i.e., privilege fingers, spoons, and forks as in the Battelle Developmental Inventory; Newborg et al., 1984 with preference for non-inclusive tools reinforced by guidelines from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). An EI developmental specialist painfully recalled that to support a child's self-feeding goals, she felt pressured to recommend disrupting the grandparent's loving cultural practice of feeding their grandchild. Narrowly assessing the discrete skill of self-feeding illustrates the harm of imposing "norms" onto all children or extracting the whole-child from familial, cultural, and circumstantial contexts and relationships that inform them.

Personal: As caregivers or professionals, we can remind ourselves of our own and children's humanity. As an educator and caregiver, Author 1 worried how deficit-based, prescriptive practices might impact her children in educational systems. Professional practices can violate children's dignity and cause moral injuries when we fail to protect children (Alvarez & Farinde-Wu, 2022). In her professional capacity, Ms. Pat used family input to challenge harmful norms (see Table 1) and affirm family strengths (see Table 3). Creating a third space allowed her to engage families meaningfully and stay grounded despite dehumanizing systems (Barrera et al., 2012).

Social: Practitioners moving families' varied everyday practices, such as self-feeding, from the margins to the center is important for just theory-practice, and building authentic rapport with families (Super & Harkness, 1986). While these practices may not be represented in textbooks, teacher candidates studying ECEC can bring their whole-selves (i.e., personal-professional values and experiences) into class discussion about diverse practices and ways to support and sustain them (Paris, 2012).

Structural: To advocate for just practice, ECE professionals may join with students and colleagues to advise policy makers, researchers, and practitioners to broaden assessments and suggested interventions. Rather than erasing family behaviors or ascribing deficits to practices outside the (White and/or Western) "norm," practitioners may suggest both/and instead of either/or approaches while sustaining cultural approaches and explaining to caregivers why children's independent practices are valued in ECE (Paris, 2012). Ultimately, we need to collaborate to reform ECEC structures reflected in "standard" practices and guidelines to reflect the range of approaches that better-fit children and families as the center of professional practice and training (i.e., not just in the margins, or as a counter-story).

To Assess, Sometimes Keep It Natural

Author 2 has experience administering standardized assessment to young children. Standardized assessments play an important role in determining a child's eligibility for EI services. However, these assessments often fail to capture a child's strengths, interests, and needs. For instance, many assessments limit the number of times an evaluator can present a question or prompt. If a child does not respond within the prescribed attempts, the item can be marked "not observed" or "incorrect." Although these cases can be acknowledged in evaluation reports, it can significantly impact the results, potentially leading to an underestimation of children's abilities and skills. Author 2 evaluated a child who didn't respond during a set of tasks about identifying colors and size differences. Minutes later, while walking with the family to their car, Author 2 watched that same child excitedly pointing out and comparing the cars in the parking

lot—naming colors and commenting on sizes.

This example reveals the disconnect between standardized assessments and authentic learning raising important questions: *what are we doing to our children when we rely heavily on standardized assessments to determine their eligibility for EI services? Are we unintentionally penalizing children, particularly those who need more time, multiple modes of engagement, or familiar context to demonstrate their abilities?* To support children's development in an inclusive manner, EI professional standards and personnel preparation could include alternative assessments that recognize the child's strengths in the natural environment (Hancock et al, 2021). More flexible, play-based, and caregiver-informed ways to observe and document development and learning can help capture a strength-based understanding of child development.

Personal: Practitioners administering standardized assessments must navigate the tension between professional expectations and their ethical responsibility to accurately represent a child's abilities (Cycyk et al., 2022). Author 2, having firsthand experience with these assessments, recognizes how rigid testing conditions can misrepresent a child's developmental strengths, leaving evaluators with an incomplete or misleading picture. This can be dehumanizing for practitioners who witness children demonstrating skills in natural settings that they could not express in a controlled environment. Caregivers, too, may feel disheartened when they see their child's true capabilities overlooked due to assessment protocols. Acknowledging these limitations encourages practitioners to reflect on their own practices, seek ways to supplement standardized assessment with observations from natural settings, and advocate for more accurate and equitable assessment methods (see Table 2).

Social: The over-reliance on standardized assessments reinforces deficit-based narratives about children, particularly those from historically marginalized communities, as eligibility for EI services is often determined by these standardized measures (Newton et al., 2024). If families and practitioners can collectively push for assessment practices that prioritize children's authentic abilities rather than their ability to perform in artificial conditions, we can target services to build on opportunities and strengths.

Structural: Given the overreliance on standardized assessments, there is an urgent need to reform assessment policies and eligibility criteria to ensure they reflect the authentic ways in which children learn and express their abilities (Bagnato et al., 2011). Policymakers, researchers, and practitioners must work together to develop systems that incorporate caregiver insights, play-based observations, and multiple opportunities for children to demonstrate their skills across time. Without these systemic changes, we risk continuing to over-or misidentify children from EI services based on narrow, outdated, and inequitable assessment practices. By expanding the definition of eligibility criteria for services, EI can become more inclusive, responsive, and truly centered on the strengths of the child.

Silent Segregation, Let's Stand Up to the System

Author 2, a mother-scholar in EI/ECSE, faced challenges enrolling her bilingual child in public kindergarten. Despite her expertise and advocacy in the field, the enrollment system perceived her child's bilingualism as a deficit rather than an asset. The enrollment team unilaterally assigned the family to a school they had not chosen—one with a higher population of children receiving special education services justifying it would provide more resources for children with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). This decision was made based solely on a questionnaire-type form, which indicated that the child was bilingual, without inquiry into the child's strengths, interests, language history, or level of exposure to the second language or resources (e.g., bilingual books, bilingual peers).

Such practices reflect a systemic bias where assumptions replace individualized, data-informed decisions without meaningful family input. Young children with disabilities face persistent injustices faced at the intersections of race, disability, language, and other marginalized identities (Beneke & Love, 2022). These injustices include deficit-based and limited perceptions of disability excluded from child's culture, the privileging of whiteness, and English language as the norm for developmental benchmarks (Morgan et al., 2012; Watson et al., 2020). This case highlights two important concerns 1) the untold stories of families who may not be familiar with advocacy for inclusive education, and 2) centralizing services in school

districts. The system should provide time and opportunities for the enrollment team and caregivers to communicate. Questions for families may include, "Can you tell me about your child's language development journey? Which languages were spoken at home, and how did they learn them? How does your child use each of their languages in different settings (e.g., at home, with peers)? Are there specific contexts where they prefer one language?" These questions can help enrollment teams make data-driven decisions. Similarly, families can ask, "What specific resources does the school have to support bilingual children? What professional development opportunities are provided so teachers are prepared to work with bi/multilingual children? How does the school plan to support my child's language development?" Educators must move beyond assumptions to ensure that decisions about bilingual children are grounded in a data-driven, strengths-based approach that considers the child's unique abilities and family priorities, values, and resources.

Personal: This experience underscores the emotional toll of systemic bias on families, even those who are familiar with advocacy. Despite being a mother-scholar with expertise in EI/ECSE, Author 2 faced structural barriers when enrolling her bilingual child in public kindergarten. The frustration she experienced highlights how caregivers may encounter assumptions that frame bilingualism as a deficit. For caregivers who are less familiar with advocacy, these barriers may go unchallenged, leading to decisions that affect children's educational trajectory. This emphasizes the need for families and educators to proactively engage in meaningful dialogue, ensuring that a child's language background is seen as an asset rather than a justification for deficit-based decisions.

Social: This case reflects broader patterns of inequity in school systems that disproportionately impact bilingual children, who are likely immigrant-origin and multiply minoritized (see Tables 1& 2). Many caregivers, particularly those from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds, may not have the resources or knowledge to navigate educational systems effectively. As a result, children may be over-identified for special education services or placed in settings without a clear understanding of their strengths and needs. Educators must actively work to dismantle these myths about bilingualism by fostering awareness, conducting family-centered assessments, and ensuring that bilingual students are placed in inclusive learning environments.

Structural: The practice of assigning bilingual children to specific schools or programs under the assumption that they may require additional services during the academic year, without individual assessments or communication with caregivers, is a form of silent segregation. The centralization of services for children with disabilities or bilingual learners in specific schools undermines the principles of inclusive education. District-wide policies must be reevaluated to ensure that placement decisions are inclusive. Additionally, school systems must provide professional development for enrollment teams to recognize and challenge deficit-based assumptions about bilingualism and partner with families so that all children experience inclusive and equitable educational opportunities.

What Do You Call That?

Author 4 recalls her early childhood memories spending Saturdays with her stepfather buying groceries and running errands. These early memories include how others decided it was wrong for her as a light-skinned Puerto Rican girl to be out with a dark-skinned Black man. Before the age of five, she processed disgusted facial expressions and slurs and responded to people asking her if she was ok while with and in front of her Black stepfather. At the time she noticed how wrong these experiences felt, but didn't have the words or ability to express what had happened or name her emotions. When she tried to talk about it at home, she was often shut down with comments about "ignoring people" or that "some people are just rude." She spent years trying to ignore direct experiences of racism, even when shoved in her face and managing the emotional toll. It wasn't until college courses in social work that she finally had the ability to process these experiences and discuss ways to respond to others' overt racism. These discussions also helped her understand her step-father's reaction to her inquiries as a child, as the trauma and violence of these situations left a lasting mark on him. Reflecting as an adult educator, she knows that

if she had the opportunity to label and explain what was wrong earlier, it could have made her childhood a less stressful and a more comforting time of her life.

Personal: This story highlights the power of naming oppressive systems and the experiences that stem from them. When we silence or minimize these experiences, we are teaching children acceptance, implicitly conveying the notion that these experiences need to be tolerated, not challenged or processed. By "rebelling" against the ideas that children are too young to have these conversations, we are rejecting the notion that we should silence these conversations and embracing inclusivity of experience (Ahiyya, 2022) see Tables 1 & 2.

Social: Sharing this story with her university students, Author 4 has found many with similar stories in their own upbringing or observed in their classrooms. Related discussions provided a space for students to share and ask questions about oppressive systems and what acknowledging them means for their pedagogy and practice, inviting conversations with young children guided by read-alouds (Nguyen, 2022). One student remarked that these conversations "gave her permission" to engage in the kinds of practices she already felt were right by reframing the shared experiences of racial trauma that many students had experienced (Alvarez & Farinde-Wu, 2022).

Structural: By ignoring the existence of these structures or using euphemisms to mask their true nature, we are effectively dehumanizing the children and their families who are experiencing racism, ableism, or language racism in their everyday lives. Through the combination and use of the approaches outlined in Table 2, we can explicitly name these oppressive forces. As such, we can equip our educators in the field with the ability to explain these heavy concepts to young children, developing awareness of racism that can lead to sustained changes in the behavior of children leading to systemic change over time (Cooper et al., 2022).

These "moments" provide cases that illustrate multiple levels and ways in which "standardized" assessments that are not representative or inclusive of all children continue to be repeated across contexts, reinforcing the need to incorporate critical literacies and restorative justice practices at personal, social, and structural levels. Beyond assessments and standardized curriculum, reflecting on holistic "moments" experienced by children and their grownups helps outline the strengths of people and how they face vulnerabilities (e.g., human characteristics, systemic barriers). Considering how to incorporate conceptual tools in navigating vulnerabilities and building on assets draws on the five pedagogies of radical hope – patient, critical, sound, resolute, and transformative – to motivate personal, social, and structural level actions that in turn affect systemic change. Indeed, beyond demands for convenient "solutions" to complex social problems, Cacho (2012) argues that radical hope is essential: "This project is not concerned with whether something is politically practical or logistically possible because these approaches need to assume that legal apparatuses are legitimate and fixable. If we suspend the need to be practical, we might be able to see what is possible differently" (p. 31). Without moments to pause, reflect, heal, imagine, and strategize, individuals and communities face risks of fatigue, burnout, and even physical or social death (i.e., succumbing to notions of the 'permanence of racism' and other types of oppression including inaction). Thus, small individual and social intentional acts of reimagination operationalize radical hope and cumulatively help restructure towards a just whole system.

Discussion and Implications

As we deconstruct individualistic theoretical approaches that center the "whole-child" and overlook oppressive systems, we offer ways to reconstruct whole-systems that center equity and resist racism, sexism, classism, and ableism. Currently, overlapping systems of oppression characterize educational scholarship and developmental science, harming adults and children. Furthermore, a focus on the whole-child does not address interconnected systems of violence embedded in housing segregation, intergenerational poverty and unemployment, racism, or environmental challenges that infuse children's educational contexts and perpetuate intersectional injustice (Hong, 2011). For example, in inclusive early childhood classrooms, children with disabilities and diverse backgrounds are expected to develop and

learn as their peers who are White, able bodied, native English speakers, and U.S.-born with U.S. born, college-graduate caregivers who are employed full-time and house-owners (Park et al., 2021; Thorius et al., 2019). Eurocentric underpinnings of ECE have been translated into professional practices that center developmentally “appropriate” practices (DAP) (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2019). These practices are reinforced through various “normative” “standards,” while violently excluding the lived experiences of minoritized children (Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018), devaluing or dismissing racially inclusive and cultural ways of knowing and being (Yosso, 2005), and ignoring oppressive contextual features that affect the development of all children and adults (Spencer, 2017). Likewise, predefined developmental timelines consider some behaviors of minoritized children “atypical,” which may render them “at risk,” even though assessments overlook common experiences of the global majority (Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018).

(Unjust) systems endure partly because individuals may intentionally or otherwise collude in upholding them, inflicting countless micro and macro violent “moments.” Injuries involve intergenerational and childhood trauma, professional-personal guilt from inflicting harm on others, and fear given (in)ability to protect ourselves and others from harm, including colonial perspectives that mask and perpetuate inequities across the educational spectrum (Alvarez & Farinde-Wu, 2022). Unspecified contextual approaches dominate ECEC preparation of researchers and practitioners, inform policy, and inform how funds are allocated. The widely accepted “whole-child approach” in ECEC distracts vested parties from redressing unjust contextual (i.e., systemic) influences. Choosing to omit factors that explicitly name inequities from analyses and interventions represents privilege and immunity of predominantly White, well-intentioned scholars and leaders, perpetuating injustice in ECEC and other related systems. Ecological approaches that do not specify or demand to redress inequitable systems within contexts of children’s development perpetuate oppression through evasion (Butler et al., 2019).

We upend our approach and move from whole-child approaches guided by “normative” views of development that prioritize “fixing” children and their perceived deficits and towards supporting children in part by “fixing” oppressive systems. To promote child development and just ECEC, we need to identify and rectify unjust structural features and work towards a context where research-theory-practice causes no harm to children and families and seeks to undo harms of racism and interlocking systems of oppression. On macro levels, we offer multiple conceptual frameworks that specify asymmetrical power structures (see Table 1: CRT, intersectionality, DisCrit, LangCrit). Locally, we locate children’s development within stratified contexts (see Table 2: PVEST, integrated developmental theory, Indigenous framework). While noting vulnerabilities, we highlight the assets and wealth of children, families, and communities (see Table 3: funds of knowledge, community cultural wealth, CSP), and provide liberatory models rooted in history while providing speculative approaches for humans and society (see Table 4: Reggio, radical hope).

On micro levels, we offer illustrative “moments” that instantiate harms and draw on aspects of radical hope (i.e., patient, critical, sound, resolute, transformative) to suggest actionable steps to support collaboratively re-developing systems to promote sustainable, justice-based efforts at personal, social, and structural levels. Ultimately, radical hope serves as both an anchor and a catalyst. It anchors communities in their historical and cultural resilience while propelling them toward transformative action. Radical hope is not only about resisting oppression but also about fostering creative, collective responses to the challenges of our time. It is through this interplay of history, imagination, and action that radical hope becomes a force capable of reshaping not only individual lives but entire societies.

By embedding intersectional, critical developmental, and inclusive lenses, we aim to empower ECEC educators to challenge and dismantle inequities. Multi-level actionable steps can build momentum and transformative implications for practice, policy, and research to constructively engage with the whole system and empower early childhood educators as agents of change, in collaboration with other co-conspirators (e.g., housing, transportation, healthcare (Ku, 2024)). A justice-based whole-system approach creates a more inclusive environment, which emphasizes strengths, support, and accessibility. Importantly,

given ongoing settler colonialism, we warn ourselves that many "acts of 'inclusion' reproduce or create marginalization and exclusions…[because] inclusion, in its (neo)liberal formations, can (un)intentionally re-enact reified, appropriative, essentialist, and tokenizing colonial relationships'' (Nxumalo & Cedillo, 2017, p. 104). Because of this danger, multiple vested parties need to challenge "standard" narratives and collectively imagine and narrate ways we can work towards justice for all people and nature.

Conclusion

While holistic early childhood approaches appear inclusive, their lack of specificity provides the illusion of inclusion while masking individual and contextual differences and inequalities. Prevailing scientific methods exclude minoritized children, and unspecified, decontextualized theories that center the whole "generic" child (i.e., White, male), perpetuate injustice when applied to racially, culturally, and intersectionality diverse children. Applying principles of Sankofa helps us identify the harms of unspecified ecological approaches, specifically noting how historic White-centric, middle-class assumptions and practices persist and are perpetuated by adherence to some professional standards. Rejecting notions of the permanence of racism, we radically lean into hope to imagine beyond current realities and enact transformative change in ECEC and beyond at personal, social, and structural levels.

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