

# Centering Black women's voices to advance anti-racist pedagogy and pro-Black approaches in early childhood settings

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**Abstract:** Despite calls for anti-racist and pro-Black pedagogy in early childhood settings within Canada, such approaches generally remain absent, and many past efforts have been erased or. Colorblind approaches continue to persist in early childhood care settings. This kind of systemic racism may be linked with the overrepresentation of Black (and Indigenous) children in the child welfare system. To date, few studies have investigated the possible mediating role of early childhood educators. Early childhood educators have the potential to serve as mandated reporters, and this article draws from Black feminist thought, Black critical theory (BlackCrit) and pro-Black pedagogies to explore how Black early childhood educators in Toronto, Canada can challenge anti-Black racism in childcare settings. Using these frameworks, the article aims to explore the resistance strategies of Black early childhood educators and specific ways they use their knowledge to resist anti-Black racism and enact pro-Black pedagogies. Nine semi-structured interviews yielded four key themes: (1) teachable moments to challenge anti-Black racism and advance anti-racism; (2) pro-Black approaches as liberatory pedagogical practice; (3) othermothering principles and community leadership to challenge oppression; and (4) resistance practices among Black early childhood educators. The findings revealed how Black early childhood educators affirm Black children's humanity and center Black ways of knowing while disrupting anti-Black racism toward themselves and the children and families they support.

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## Introduction

In Canada, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is under the jurisdiction of each of the ten provinces and three territories, where each has their own systems and regulations, including licensing, funding, and curriculum. In Ontario, ECEC involves various programs and services for children from birth to age 12 and includes licensed childcare programs (infant, toddler and pre-school), before and after school care, family home child care, and early years resource centers. Kindergarten settings, part of the K-12 education system for children four and five years old in Ontario, also include an early childhood educator, along with an Ontario Certified Teacher. Most of our authors reside in the province of Ontario, as do all our interviewees. The political climate in Canada differs from that in the United States, our southern neighbour, but we too have been affected by racist and discriminatory beliefs and practices in this country, a country which also shares a legacy of colonialism and enslavement. We also feel the impact and ripple effects from the culture wars and anti-Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion rhetoric and actions occurring in the

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United States, and we worry for the future of Black early childhood educators (ECEs) and Black children and families who urgently need justice and inclusion in both countries, and beyond. While issues of recruitment and retention of early childhood educators remain pressing in Canada as elsewhere, urgent work is also required to dismantle anti-Black racism in ECEC spaces (Kissi & Ewan, 2023) and uplift the hardworking Black educators who have spent many years in the field and are pushed to the sidelines through systematic anti-Black racism (Pimentel et al., 2023). Anti-racist and pro-Black pedagogies must be incorporated into ECEC spaces, and it is vitally important to center the Black voices who have been doing this work for decades, as will be described in more detail in the Canadian context section in this paper. Our research question asks: what are the system navigation practices and recommendations of Black ECEs?

To answer our research question, we explored the experiences of nine Black ECEs working in licensed childcare centers or Kindergarten settings in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Our goals were to explore how they navigate ECEC spaces and identify the resistance strategies they leverage to challenge anti-Blackness and anti-Black racism. As we examined their resistance practices and pro-Black practices, we drew from Black feminist thought (Brady, 2022; Collins, 1990), critical race theory (Berman, 2020; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), and Black critical theory (BlackCrit) (Dumas & ross, 2016; Wynter-Hoyte & Smith, 2020) at the intersection of pro-Black pedagogy (Boutte, 2022) and anti-racist pedagogy (Blakeney, 2005). Four key themes were identified: (1) teachable moments to challenge anti-Black racism and advance anti-racism; (2) pro-Black approaches as liberatory pedagogical practice; (3) othermothering principles and community leadership to challenge oppression; and (4) resistance practices among Black ECEs. Our rich findings demonstrate how Black ECEs use their own lived experiences to inform their anti-racist pedagogy and thereby challenge racism and engage all children in complex discussions around race. Prior to discussing these findings, we discuss the Canadian ECEC context, review the literature on anti-racist pedagogy in ECEC, outline our theoretical frameworks, detail our method, and explain our approach to data analysis.

### **Canadian Context of Anti-Racist Pedagogy and ECEC**

Anti-racist pedagogy is connected to critical theory; it can explain and counteract the persistent effects of racism by utilizing praxis to promote social justice and foster a more democratic society (Blakeney, 2005). Efforts to enact anti-racist pedagogy in ECEC in Toronto date back to the 1980s when the Congress of Black Women of Canada (CBWC), Toronto Chapter and many Black community members challenged systemic racism in childcare (Congress of Black Women of Canada [CBWC], 1989, 1992). The CBWC proposed the creation of a film, *Anti-racist Education, Children Are Not the Problem*, which was later changed to *Just Like Me, An Anti-racist Childcare Film Project*. This 30-minute documentary explored anti-racist education in ECEC spaces and kindergartens and was an informative tool for parents, caregivers, and educators. It was created after the CBWC Toronto, Ontario Chapter presented two workshops at the 1986 and 1987 annual conferences of the Ontario Coalition for Better Daycare [now the Ontario Coalition for Better Childcare], where ECEs who worked in Toronto childcare centers expressed concerns about the lack of anti-racist education (CBWC, 1989). The film was to serve as a resource for anti-racist training for families and ECEs on issues of race and racism (CBWC, 1989). Ten years later – and likely as an outcome of these efforts the municipality of Toronto, which at the time was responsible for overseeing child care, revised its operational criteria. The revised criteria included four new articles on anti-racism, including the requirement that all licensed child care programs in Toronto report any racial incident considered a serious occurrence to the city's Children's Services Division within 24 hours. Further, all ECEC centers were expected to create and implement anti-racism policies including procedural guidelines for responding to racial incidents in efforts to identify, address, and prevent racial and ethno-cultural bias, harassment, and discriminatory behavior (Toronto Children's Services, 1998). However, when the Ontario Ministry of Education took over licensing responsibilities for Toronto child care centres from the City of Toronto in 2015, the requirements to report racial incidents as serious occurrences were quietly dropped (Berman et al., 2017). Some centers formerly overseen by the city still have anti-racist policies on the books due to these decades-old requirements, but in practice these serve little purpose in the context of color evasiveness (Berman et al., 2017) and a lack of anti-racist pedagogies in ECEC spaces (Daniel & Escayg, 2019). Also worth noting is that within the past five years, the *Ontario Child Care Centre Licensing Manual*, a resource

published by the Ministry of Education that outlines legal requirements, has removed a section requiring child care centers to be inclusive (Ontario, 2025).

At present, multiculturalism prevails in ECEC spaces, but this approach does nothing to address issues of race, racism, or power. At the same time, Eurocentric assumptions continue to dominate: the experiences of Black children, families, and educators are at best unacknowledged and at worst vilified. Kissi and Ewan (2023) explored these issues in Canadian ECEC spaces and concluded with a call for a number of changes, including the need for a critical anti-racist approach. The College of Early Childhood Educators Ontario is the regulatory body of ECEs and the only such body in Canada. In 2020, it released a statement of commitment to anti-racism, and in 2025, it shared resources for encouraging discussions about race and racism with children and fostering equitable care for Black children and families (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2020; 2025a; 2025b).

Recent research in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia has revealed how the dominance of Eurocentric practices through ECE training and employment affects knowing and being among Black ECEs (Pimentel et al., 2023). In addition to the Eurocentrism they encounter, whiteness is the norm in ECEC spaces, and Black ECEs experience anti-Blackness and anti-Black violence during their education and their practice (Stirling-Cameron et al., 2023). Grant (2023) conducted a small-scale project in the Greater Toronto Area with Black ECEs, and concluded that ECE curricula and the prevalence of whiteness tends to shift or influence their culture as they aim to support and protect Black children from anti-Black racism.

### **Literature Review**

While anti-racist pedagogy has been one element of the broader research canon of anti-racist education over the last 30 years (Dei, 1996; Kailin, 2002), only recently have scholars begun to conceptualize anti-racism as it pertains to early childhood education (Escayg, 2019, 2020; Escayg & Farago, 2023; Husband, 2016; Iruka et al., 2023). It remains an area of critical practice that scholars continue to explore in general terms, most notably in the context of higher education. However, some have called for a more identity-specific anti-racist pedagogy that foregrounds the intersections of race, the positionality of educators and students, the production and expression of knowledge, and community involvement (Kishimoto, 2018). This type of responsive approach to teaching and learning is not limited to anti-racist concerns with the teaching process alone for example the simple incorporation of racial content in the syllabus – but rather advances a holistic methodology that incorporates the research interests of faculty members and their service within the institution and the broader community (Kishimoto, 2018, 2022). Anti-racist pedagogy scholars have explicitly identified race and racism as among the key issues related to inequity in American society, and have stressed the need to promote the development of critical, analytical, and reasoning skills “so students can identify race and racism and challenge them in our society” (Kishimoto, 2022, p. 115).

Anti-racist teaching requires intellectual and emotional effort from educators, and most scholars agree that self-reflection on how personal positionality and social identity informs one's classroom programming is one critical element to ensure effective anti-racist practice (Alderman et al., 2019). A specialized and collaboratively guided process of self-scrutiny can help educators become better equipped to enact anti-racist pedagogy. For some instructors, this process may include sharing personal and professional stories that highlight lived experiences with race and racism (Morettini et al., 2022), or incorporating the sociocultural knowledge of racialized groups, such as the diverse ways of being and knowing detailed in biographies, documentaries, and ethnographies (King, 2022).

### ***Anti-Racist Pedagogy in Early Childhood Education***

Analogous in many ways to how anti-racist pedagogy is operationalized in university classrooms, anti-racist pedagogy in the context of early childhood education acknowledges the saliency of race and racism in children's lives and the importance of utilizing learning spaces to combat the effects of racism. It is one component of anti-racism efforts in early childhood education (Escayg, 2020), which is itself a relatively new area of scholarship. In contrast to the longstanding pedagogical legacy of anti-bias education

(Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2019), anti-racism efforts engage specifically with issues of race, racism, and racialized privilege and power to illustrate how these affect the structural aspects of ECEC spaces and classrooms. This is not to suggest that scholars have not addressed race and racism in ECE. For instance, a few scholars have engaged with the tenets of critical race theory (CRT) to explore the prevalence of both educators' and young children's racial bias and microaggressions towards Black children in ECE contexts (see, for example, Blackson et al., 2022; Essien & Wood, 2024; Iruka et al., 2020). By contrast, anti-racist early childhood education efforts explicitly address ongoing inequities and injustices head-on, especially the violence of anti-Black racism, by encouraging practitioners and researchers to reimagine and reconstruct early years education from a perspective that recognizes the impact of racism (Escayg, 2019, 2020, 2025; Husband & Escayg, 2022; Iruka et al., 2023).

Anti-racist pedagogy can be defined broadly as an approach to teaching that is intended to disrupt the prevalence of racism – and in this case the inequities it reproduces in early years settings – by implementing equitable and inclusive classroom practices. An authentically anti-racist pedagogy moves beyond the simple use of diverse curricula materials in anti-racist learning environments, discussions, and activities (Allen et al., 2021; MacNevin & Berman, 2017; Thomas, 2025). These materials are certainly useful in helping students to obtain critical perspectives on racism, and how and why it functions, but ideally an effective anti-racist pedagogy will also destabilize the presence of racism institutionally and individually. This kind of destabilization may manifest in how educators build relationships with children, families, and other caregivers; the types of activities, behaviors, and knowledge bases that educators believe to be “universal” and therefore applicable to “all children” without due consideration of culture or context; the instruments that educators use to measure and evaluate the academic, social-emotional, and gross motor competencies of young children; and how educators perceive and establish relationships as part of a child's local community. Some scholars have stressed the need to implement anti-racist policies in childcare centers and preschools, noting that anti-bias and anti-racist teaching succeeds most effectively in environments where such an approach is a core element of the early years setting (Escayg & Farago, 2023; Tursi, 2023). In sum, anti-racist pedagogy is both about what we teach and how we teach – and more specifically, which applied learning outcomes guide content integration and determine assessment tools.

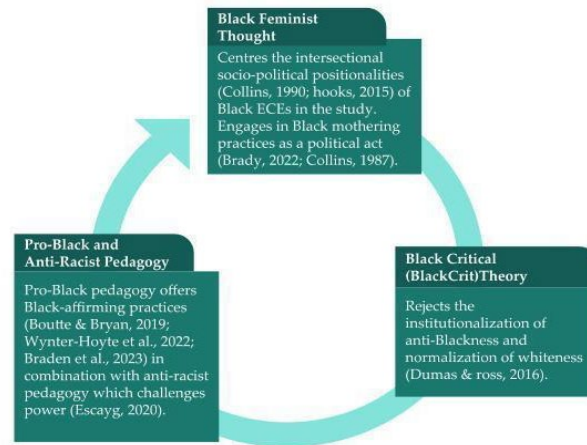
A conceptual body of scholarship has outlined the constructs of anti-racist pedagogy, and the empirical body of literature provides rich insights into how educators may operationalize anti-racist pedagogy in the classroom, the challenges they often encounter, and the strategies they have implemented to help children develop an accurate understanding of the nature of racism, including its central elements of racialized privilege and power. Husband (2010) developed a series of social studies lessons educating students on the history of enslavement and its impact on African Americans from an anti-racist perspective. Spencer (2022) explored how children's literature can be collectively examined in the early childhood classroom to support an anti-racist pedagogy. Galligan and Miller (2022) integrated an anti-racist pedagogical component by infusing race-related content into the first-grade curriculum. In a unit focusing on “hidden heroes,” Galligan and Miller applied an anti-racist approach by exploring who children considered to be a “hero,” engaging them in a critical discussion about their perceptions and then sharing the histories of individuals from racialized backgrounds who resisted racial injustice. After these discussions, Galligan and Miller encouraged the children to critique prevailing narratives that often privilege the sanitized backstories of white historical figures – much of which overlook their acts of inhumanity and violence against African Americans and Indigenous people. Importantly, Galligan and Miller noted that many racialized students were inspired by the stories of those who resisted, largely because such individuals looked like them. Reflecting on this pedagogical experience, Galligan and Miller noted that through “the intentional inclusion of leaders of Color resisting racism in curricula, the explicit interruption of racist messaging, the fostering of critical skills, and ... constant self-reflection, the students were empowered to see themselves as their own heroes” (2022, p. 37). This highlights the importance of self-reflection, a tactic that is indispensable to the successful enactment of anti-racist pedagogy and consistent with the self-awareness domain of social-emotional competence. Still, recent evidence suggests that anti-racist pedagogy, particularly for white educators, requires competence in all dimensions,

specifically social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, and self-management (Escayg, 2024).

## Theoretical Framework

**Figure 1**

*Theoretical framework*



This article draws from Black feminist thought by incorporating Black women's ways of knowing and being. Black feminist thought is grounded in self-definition through the situated knowledges of Black women (Collins, 1990; hooks, 2015), which includes Black women's epistemologies. It is particularly relevant to this research gleaning the experiences of nine Black ECEs, each of whom identify as women. Given the social-political social-locations of our participants, it is also important to incorporate elements of intersectionality, a concept that first emerged among Black feminists (Crenshaw, 1989; Truth, 1851). Intersectionality helps frame the embodied knowledge of the participants: in this case, an example of knowledge among the Black ECEs involved in the study is the Black feminist concept of othermothering. This refers to mothering children other than one's biological children, and may also be known as community mothering or parenting (Collins, 1987; hooks, 2015; Wane, 2000). Othermothering is a form of survival and resistance to anti-Black racist, patriarchal, ableist, classist, and oppressive systems – but it is also an emancipatory practice long known to Black communities, and pre-dating colonial contact. In the context of ECEC, othermothering could be understood as a tradition, and as highlighted by Turner (2024), a practice enacted by Black women in ECEC. By centering Black mothering as a form of resistance (Brady, 2022; Fearon, 2023), with active and engaged motherwork in response to and in spite of anti-Black racist and oppressive systems, including childcare, we can highlight the ways that Black women continue to employ mothering as a political form of resistance to white oppressive systems. In the context of this study, we focused specifically on how political acts including Black mothering and othermothering manifest through the responses and practices of Black ECEs.

Black feminist thought is closely linked with Black critical race theory (BlackCrit), which is a deepening of critical race theory with a specific focus on systems of anti-Black racism (Dumas & ross, 2016). Critical race theory centers on the idea that racism is deeply embedded within the dominant society and normalized through power dynamics and it is an umbrella term that encompasses the different experiences of marginalized people (Abawi & Berman, 2019; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). BlackCrit builds on critical race theory by focusing specifically on Blackness and how Black individuals are positioned in dominant society. For example, BlackCrit focuses on how Black bodies are marginalized in schools and other institutional settings (Dumas & ross, 2016). Scholars have stressed the need to reject assumptions about colorblindness (Berman et al., 2017; Bonilla-Silva, 2001), which perpetuates anti-Black racism under the guise of sameness leading to further marginalization of Black individuals. BlackCrit must be incorporated into ECEC settings because anti-Blackness can emerge in any social, economic, and cultural relationship (Dumas & Ross, 2016).

Pro-Black pedagogy has emerged from BlackCrit research, as a necessary response that affirms Black humanity (Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2022). In ECEC settings, pro-Black educational practices and approaches can center Black perspectives and disrupt anti-Black racist educational structures (Braden et al., 2023; Boutte & Bryan, 2019; Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2022;). These practices align with anti-racist pedagogy, as they challenge dominant ideologies by centering the experiences of Black children while dismantling anti-Black approaches (Escayg, 2020). Overall, the theoretical framework used in the current project was carefully selected to foreground Black feminist thought and the lived experiences and anti-racist practices leveraged by Black ECEs.

## Method

After receiving approval for the study protocol from the Toronto Metropolitan University's research ethics board (known as a REB in Canadian institutions which is equivalent to an Institutional Research Board [IRB]) under approval number [2023-436], the research team used purposive and snowball sampling (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) to recruit participants from Black-serving community grassroots organizations, professional early childhood organizations, and post-secondary institutions in Toronto, Ontario. Based on the research questions, we chose purposive sampling for the intentionally selected sites and individuals (Tajik et al., 2024) to learn from and understand the experiences of Black ECEs. We also employed snowball sampling, a purposeful sampling strategy (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019), to recruit individuals by asking participants who participated in the interviews to recommend or share about the study with other Black ECEs who fit the study's inclusion criteria. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine ECEs who self-identify as Black and woman. Funding was available to cover public transit or parking for all participants, but some had personal or work-related obligations that required flexibility, so three of the interviews were conducted in-person on the university campus in a private space and six were conducted on-line (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019). We chose to conduct individual interviews instead of focus groups to encourage participants to delve into their experiences in ways that may not have been possible in a group; for example, topics included past and current workplaces, and some participants might have been reluctant to share negative experiences about a workplace. This was also the method employed as an ethical consideration to protect the interviewee's confidentiality. Each interview lasted about 1.5 hours; they were all audiotaped with participant permission and then transcribed using pseudonyms, with the exception of one participant, Jarvine, who requested that her real name be used. Each participant received a gift card of \$20 to acknowledge their time. Questions explored anti-Black racism, interactions with co-workers, children, and families; pedagogy and curriculum; and recommendations for pro-Black classrooms. All interviews were conducted by team members who identify as Black women (the first author, the principal investigator on the project, and a research assistant): the third author assisted with seven of the interviews, and the sixth author assisted with one interview.

## Positionality

In this section, we acknowledge and reflect on how our identities, experiences, and social locations connect us to this research. Janelle, Georgiana, and Salado each participated in interviews.

**Janelle:** I am a Black faculty member of Afro-Caribbean descent who was born in Canada to immigrant parents. During my undergraduate studies, I co-founded and ran a youth-led-and-serving non-profit organization in a community I grew up in which provided post-secondary pathway mentorship, artistic, and community outreach programming and projects. It was through this community organizing that I came to academia ignited by my upset with the limited educational pathways afforded to Black student learners. I was and continue to be mentored by Black anti-racist scholars who supported my path to academia and I now teach and research Black Studies in the field of Early Childhood Studies. As a Black woman, I follow in the footsteps of my grandmother who was deeply engaged in political, social, and ethno-cultural organizing and volunteerism.

**Kerry-Ann:** In my experience, an authorial perspective firmly rooted in a Black diaspora identity transcends temporal, spatial, and geographical boundaries. Although born and raised in Trinidad, I

emigrated from the Caribbean to Canada during my teenage years, which were then followed by educationally formative periods spent at postsecondary institutions in Montréal and Toronto. In addition to having equally strong connections to both Trinidad and Canada as my family's "two homes," our ancestral roots can be traced back to the antebellum Southern U.S., further informing my commitment to anti-racism and justice. In its most fundamental aspect, the act of writing is often prompted by the aspiration to express a personal narrative or spiritual storyline that draws upon ancestral wisdom and resistance. Perspectives on race, racism, anti-racism, and justice are inherently shaped not only by personal experiences but also by the identities and stories of those whom we hereditarily embody. Thus, when I write on issues of race/racism, I honor the collective "We" of the diaspora, as well as the voices and legacies of lineages past (in short, I write for us).

**Georgiana:** I am a Black ECE of Afro-Caribbean descent. In my practice in ECEC spaces, my colleagues sometimes questioned me when I employed Black-focused pedagogies that did not fit a Eurocentric worldview. I realized that my childhood did not fit into the universal practice of stages and ages and white norms. Therefore, my ways of knowing and being could not go hand in hand with Eurocentric worldviews that did not acknowledge Blackness and Black knowledges.

**Rachel:** I am a white faculty member. Through conversations with Black students and colleagues about their lived experiences, concomitantly with my growing understanding of Black theoretical work, and the lack of attention to race and racism in ECEC, beginning about fifteen years ago I came to see the absolute necessity of committing to anti-racist work both within higher education and the early childhood sectors. I also had the benefit of being taught by two brilliant Black woman scholars during my MA studies, and growing up in a home where racism was never tolerated.

**Ella:** I am a white undergraduate student. I have been inspired by frameworks like Black feminism that promote equity and justice in ECEC settings and daily life. Social justice is very important to me, and through my experiences, observations and learning, I have come to know just how much it is imperative in ECEC spaces. I believe that it is vital for attention to be paid to promoting pro-Black education and care for children and educators.

**Salado:** I am a Black Somali Muslim undergraduate student who has experienced anti-Blackness throughout academia. This has informed my approach to creating pro-Black approaches in education and care settings. This project has allowed me to highlight the importance of affirming Black identities and centering on Black educators' voices to highlight systemic educational barriers that often exclude Black students. My experiences have deepened my commitment to centering on Black voices and advocating for culturally responsive pro-Black pedagogies.

### **Approach to Data Analysis**

For this qualitative study, we employed a thematic analysis approach utilizing deductive coding with a predefined set of codes applied to the text data and inductive coding from emerging codes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). We met together as a research and writing team and then engaged in live coding in groups or pairs, as well as individual color coding to explore potential patterns and connections (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). The first author created a coding table, examined codes for overlaps, and collapsed them into broad themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), which was shared for discussion with the full team. Next, based on group input the first author narrowed the codes into three main themes. Two of these are outside the scope of the paper, but the research team reached consensus on one overarching theme and five subthemes (Braun et al., 2019).

### **Results**

Our findings clearly revealed how Black women ECEs engage with the complex realities of Black children, bringing unique and nuanced understandings of Black children to their practice. They move away from simplistic assumptions and anti-Black racist assumptions of Black children to advance systemic change – and in the process, they enact their own forms of resistance and agency. This overarching theme

of engaging with the complex realities of Black children's experiences is closely linked with five subthemes: Teachable moments to challenge anti-Black racism and advance anti-racism; Pro-Black approaches as liberatory pedagogical practice; Othermothering principles and community leadership to challenge oppression; Resistance practices among Black ECEs; and Black joyful practices within ECEC settings.

### **Teachable Moments to Challenge Anti-Black Racism and Advance Anti-Racism**

The data pointed to the ways that Black ECEs engage with teachable moments that challenge anti-Black racism and advance anti-racism. These included: addressing racist incidents head on; using the self and one's way of knowing and social-location as a model/guiding point; using artefacts and children's tools through intentional curricular design. Some of our participants utilized teachable moments to engage with the complex identities of Black children. Aaliyah provided one example when her supervisor asked her to develop an activity in response to a White child using racist language towards a Black child, commenting:

What is the message we want to give them right? When that teachable moment arrived when those conversations are happening, because sometimes it gets very uncomfortable, and I've been asked in the past there was a program or school age program where it was a situation where I can't remember exactly what the child was addressed as and, and my supervisor didn't know how to deal with it at the time.

Teachable moments can manifest in daily activities, such as Jarvine selecting a brown skin tone crayon when coloring with children, or simply using herself as a representation. Jarvine commented,

... I'm just representing myself...I'm Black. Yeah, my hair was coarse... I [am] an example and a representation.

This teachable moment reflects Jarvine's embodied knowledge and positionality. Leilani also shared an experience in her first ECE placement in a Canadian setting when a curious child asked:

...one child who asked, "...why does she have dark skin?...why is your skin so dark?" I told the educator in the room I want to use [as] a teachable moment for that child. I said, I want to do a language circle, and I'm going to bring a book... *Babies of the world* - and I shared that the world is filled with different people, and full of diversity, and we have to be inclusive as human beings, as small as we are, to understand that everyone...we look different.

Leilani went on to describe the book and the reactions of the two teachers in the room, commenting:

that one [teacher] who had the problem, she wouldn't say anything, but the other one said she really liked that story, and she liked how I brought it across because she was there when that child asked why my skin is dark, so I use that as a teachable moment.

Desma, who works in a school-based setting in a kindergarten classroom, referred to incorporating teachable moments into her curricular development:

they're [in] kindergarten [and] they talk about the stop lights and stop lights were invented by a Black person, you know what I mean. So those are in the tricycle, which was like another thing that we did and then the first Black woman to go to the moon.

Desma noted that she strives to center Blackness throughout her practice, using relatable objects and ideas that would interest kindergarten students. Stacy also referred to using books and puzzles to open complex discussions around difference with children.

I also incorporate a lot of books and different cultures and different diversity. And these kids need to know that they're special. You know, everybody's special, even though our skin color is different. I have a different shade of Black or a different shade of Brown, or you have a Whiter skin, or you have olive [skin] and I have books to support all that. And it's also age appropriate, so that the kids can relate and see themselves in those books. And puzzles...you know, with the food that they eat.

By meeting children where they are at, tools such as books and other artifacts can initiate rich conversations around racial and ethno-cultural differences (MacNevin & Berman, 2017), and Stacey uses them to reinforce the ideas she introduces to children. Stacy also incorporates herself as an entry point to open complex and nuanced discussions about racial identity with children, using comments such as, "I have a different shade of Black or a different shade of Brown," thereby actively moving away from a color-blind approach (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). Ensuring that children can relate and see themselves reflected is part of an active stance and supports a liberatory pedagogical practice, as will be described in the next subsection on pro-Blackness.

### **Pro-Black Approaches as Liberatory Pedagogical Practice**

Pro-Black approaches, as described in the theoretical framework section, challenge anti-Black racism and offer responses that affirm Blackness in its fullness. We found that our participants describe their liberatory pedagogical practice as not merely teaching about anti-Black racism, but also about incorporating a pro-Black approach to engage the fullness of Black humanity. For example, Aaliyah draws on Afrocentric models of learning by reclaiming African languages, such as incorporating Twi activity books and songs. Other examples of pro-Black approaches include challenging Eurocentricity, family involvement in room design, and reclamation of African language. Solange utilizes teachable moments to engage with her liberatory practice, which sometimes involves going outside the box to foster tactile and real-life learning:

...for blood cells, I put cotton balls in the water and the teacher, the director would ask me what I was doing and I say they [the children in her classroom] wanted to learn about blood [to] see where blood comes from ...why do people bleed.

Solange creates hands-on learning modules and activities related to questions asked by children, despite facing challenges from staff enacting epistemic anti-Black violence. Solange's form of liberatory pedagogical practice transgresses the normative confines of traditional Eurocentric teaching and learning. Despite the ongoing push back to engage in hands-on activities, Solange draws on her past experiences growing up in a Caribbean country where lessons were taught through tactile learning rather than sitting down and consuming a lesson from an instructor. Here practice therefore transgresses Eurocentric boundaries. Desma referred to the richness of Blackness in rejecting white savior models:

Like appreciate the building that we [Black individuals] built for you or the roads... Stop it now and just let's celebrate and talk about Blackness. Blackness is deep, it's deep. I'm still learning.

Desma's commitment to Blackness and its richness and complexity is part of a pro-Black approach; she also stresses that she is still learning, reinforcing that Blackness is a decolonial construct and therefore an ongoing process. In imagining a pro-Black approach, Stacy commented:

All Black kids [Laughs]. That is not a good thing to come out of an ECEs mouth, no [Laughs]. [Pause] Pro-Black, I never thought about that. A lot of involvement from parents. The parents are more involved in the programming that's going on in the rooms and facilitate the learning aspect with the children... more culture, more culture, color. A sense of belonging. [Pause] being able to speak Patwa if they want to...

Stacy was not the only participant to hesitate proposing a Black-only space: others made similar comments – with self-edits due to the expectations of being an ECE professional. Her imagining of a pro-Black approach is one where families are deeply involved in the programming and learning as well as one that is racially, ethno-culturally, and linguistically diverse. Stacy's liberatory ideas of a pro-Black approach include the fostering of community and deep engagement with families.

### **Othermothering Principles and Community Leadership to Challenge Oppression**

Our participants foster community parenting and othermothering models – both in their work settings and in the broader community. Participants in the study shared various examples of othermothering principles, such as volunteerism, professional development design, initiating organizations, and authoring books. For example, Solange described her work as an author and publisher, casually commenting “*I'm also a publisher of the book*” as an aside during the interview. Desma described her work in the design and delivery of professional development by stating;

she [the principal] wants me to... talk to the staff about anti-Black racism...I've been doing that for the school at the staff meetings.... I get time to do it, but no... monetary compensation.

Desma, who works in a school setting, is tasked with addressing anti-Black racism on a voluntary basis for staff in her school through professional development. Some participants engaged with Black-serving organizations outside of work, such as joining their own faith-based communities, launching Black-centered learning groups, or developing literacy programming for Black children. Just as Desma has assumed an action-oriented approach to support the learning and professional development of her work colleagues, other participants shared community othermothering models. It takes a village to support Black

children – not only within the classroom, and many doing so on their own time and as volunteers. Black volunteerism is not unique and is a common fact of life for many Black individuals in Canada (Connely et. al, 2014).

### **Resistance Practices among Black ECEs**

Resistance practices were prevalent in the study through self-advocacy in the workplace settings by navigating employment channels, directly challenging anti-Black racism at the intersection of their women identities head on, calling for systemic change, and rejecting saviourism and deficit-based approaches. Black volunteerism is tied to activism and pushing back against the status quo (Kitossa et. al, 2019). Elements of resistance recurred throughout the narratives of participants. Alaiyah shared her experience of losing her job and filing a grievance to regain her position, commenting;

And I refused to take it. I said no, because I know at the end of the day, she's only going to make my life a living hell, and I love what I do and I should not have somebody robbed me of that.

Aliyah was enacting resistance to returning to an anti-Black working environment. Some participants responded to colleagues directly; Rhea described her response to a colleague who used stereotypical language to make assumptions under the guise of questions about her Black woman identity.

So, I responded back and I said, "Well, I don't understand the summertime when you go on vacation, why you want to keep my skin color...in regards to the extensions in my hair, when White people or people of other nationalities go out there on the beach, they come back from their vacation and they have those same looks that you were talking about... I don't understand how when I see some White people and they try to be like them to pretend that they're Black. So they start to talk like – I don't know what a Black person talks like, because we're all from around the world...all of a sudden it's like they're Jamaican or they're this or they're that." Her response to me [was] "oh I am joking." And I'm like, "well, when people say things like that, it picks [on] their identity or that's who you are and I'm not calling you racist, but you've got privilege over what I have." That was the end of it.

Rhea chose to address her colleague directly: in this form of resistance she provided a lesson on privilege that ended the derogatory comments she had received from her white colleague about her hair, food, and body shape. Desma commented on what resistance might look like, noting that

...professional development, it needs to be incorporated. I feel that some form of [a] course needs to be mandatory and not optional.

She continued that

... it should be for educational purposes. There should be some information available for them [educators] to be able to implement pro-Blackness. They need that support...but it also needs to be mandatory for them to implement it.

In these comments, Desma stressed the significance of mandatory pro-Black education and professional development both pre-and-in service in ECEC. Finally, Mirabelle stated,

personally, I don't want to know about the struggles we went through. I want to know what we are going to do about it.

Mirabelle wants to move away from Black suffering, just as Desma considers Black individuals to not require saving and therefore action-oriented approaches are needed.

### **Black Joyful Practices within ECEC Settings**

Black joyful practices can be leveraged to resist and refuse the systemic nature of anti-Blackness and bolster pro-Black pedagogy by moving away from deficit-based approaches and focusing on Black brilliance (Kinard et. al, 2021). The study participants described various ways they incorporate Black joyful practices. The data presents these Black joyful practices through rituals and relationality, acknowledging difference as an asset, engaging in embodied knowledge and Black women's ways of knowing, and intentional practice to reject ideals of sameness which reinforce whiteness. For example, Rhea said:

I love it. We have a greeting when we come in - so I give them [children] the options. High five, power [gestures what is referred to as props, daps, or a fist bump], whatever you call it, you could do a dance, or you can just walk in. So my classroom, I like my classroom to be an open place for them where they can explore where it's no longer me saying no, you can't have this, you can't have that. I value their input. I think that it's so important for the children to be able to explore things.

When asked about where she would like the findings of this study published, Leilani referred to the knowledge that the Black ECEs are providing:

I think the findings from the research should be really advertised or become available, so that people are mindful that there are Black educators, and we are trendsetters, and we are making a difference in the sector. We have a voice. Maybe create a journal or magazine or something, send it to different centers, whether it's for profit or not for profit, so that they know we have lots of Black educators in Ontario, and are passionate about the sector. We'd love to see something of great magnitude especially for our young Black children, so they get something to aspire [to] when they see that there are Black educators in all different capacities. We should aspire because we have beauty and brains, as everybody else.

These comments by Leilani capture the richness of Blackness and the work of Black educators in Ontario, reinforcing a pro-Black approach. In her work, she assumes a Black joyful orientation and rejects anti-Black racist tropes. In reflecting on pro-Black classroom, Leilani commented,

You support Black. You encourage diversity within the room that the materials in the room are representative of Black and Black cultures.

Black joy also emerged in the comments and affirmations of Black children when Desma engages with them about their hairstyles to build relationships, drawing from her own embodied childhood knowledge. Mirabelle referred to the intentionality to incorporate Afrocentric practices into her previous workplace:

...the center I last was working [at]...had a lot of Black staff. So we were doing things all the time, cooking activities, displays, and Caribana. There's a whole thing up on the walls... all around the whole entire center...displays, dolls and... artifacts and things like that. We would all bring stuff in. We have the African fabrics, we would make that, like you know, we had it right throughout [the year].

Mirabelle commented that these Black joyful practices were collaborative and ongoing throughout the year, demonstrating that her colleagues were able to incorporate aspects of their identity and racial background into the classroom in an intentional and sustained manner.

## Discussion

Angela Davis reminds us that, "Being racist or antiracist is not about who you are; it is about what you do" (in University of Houston: Graduate College of Social Work [UHGCWSW], 2018). Therefore, we have responded and acted. This article presents our important findings, which will inform future research and policy. Foundational to anti-racist pedagogy is the quality of the relationships educators build with students and their families. We found that the Black ECEs we interviewed challenge anti-Black racism by placing themselves at the center of Black children's lives. Consistent with previous research, they actively focus on race and racism as part of children's lives to practice anti-racist pedagogy (Escayg, 2020). For example, they use teachable moments to challenge notions of color-blindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2001) and actively engage with race and opportunities to discuss racism such as when Mirabelle thoughtfully engages in Afrocentric teaching year-round. Other scholars have noted that educators may share stories as ways to engage with lived experiences of race and racism (Alderman et al., 2019; Morettini et al., 2022). Examples of starting with the self through storytelling about race and difference include Leilani answering a question about her skin tone or Jarvine using her hair as a tool for opening conversations about her Blackness. Some ECEs used books, toys, and other artifacts as a starting point for complex discussions about race and racism, consistent with other research highlighting the utility of picture books in engaging children about social identities, racial markers, and racism (Davidson & Fouts, 2024; Fontanella-Nothom, 2019; Gardner-Neblett et al., 2023; Husband, 2019). Our participants engaged with children through accessible avenues: for example, Desma teaches children about the Black inventor of the tricycle, which is akin to the Hidden Heroes unit described in the literature review. Our findings also revealed that Black ECEs not only engage with anti-racist pedagogy through their own practice: they act as leaders for non-Black staff and are often called upon to design and deliver curriculum and intervene in instances of blatant racism, which imparts a high degree of emotional and additional labor.

The study participants also engage with pro-Black approaches as part of a liberatory pedagogy. They

draw from Afrocentric principles, diverse Black epistemological practices, and reimaginings of what pro-Black spaces might look like, and offer linguistic, socio-cultural, and decolonial practices that support pro-Blackness. For example, through the linguistic pedagogies, Black ECEs create and imagine pro-Black spaces such as Aaliyah's practice of engaging children in African languages such as Twi and Stacy's reimagining of pro-Black spaces where Patwa can be spoken freely. These pro-Black approaches go hand-in-hand with anti-racist pedagogy – both challenge the dominance of power, and in particular, whiteness, by offering Black-affirming practices. Indeed, our findings revealed that our participants exemplify the pedagogical intersections of anti-racism and pro-Black pedagogy; for, as Iruka et al. (2021) noted, “to be anti-racist within the context of Black children first requires understanding how to be pro-Black and to provide nurturing, safe, and responsive environments for Black children, their families, and their communities (p. 175).

Pro-Black approaches work conjointly with BlackCrit, which frames Blackness through non-deficit-based practices that promote the liberation of Black children, families, and communities. Black ECEs including Stacy view families and communities as deeply embedded in pro-Black classrooms, meaning that engagement in Black practices is not limited to the classroom space. Envisioning communities as part of classrooms is deeply connected with othermothering principles, a key feature of Black feminist thought (see Wane, 2000). As Black women, our participants consistently engage with their socio-political intersectional locations to identify and challenge marginalization – and as a result, most engage in community and othermothering practices both inside and outside their professional setting. These efforts include publishing books, initiating literacy programs for Black children, establishing community organizations, and leading professional development programming in their place of work – all examples of Black ECEs leading and engaging in activism to address systemic barriers. They referred to everyday practices such as intervening in curricular design for their non-Black peers in order to support Black children. Some had not been asked to offer pro-Black and anti-racist pedagogical interventions, and some had even experienced barriers to doing so (e.g., Leilani's teachable moment around race), but still managed to assume a leadership role through active resistance. Anti-Black racism continues to manifest in environments affecting children, for example racial microaggressions between colleagues. We observed examples of resistance to these microaggressions, such as Rhea's response to her white colleague, as well as advocacy for much-needed professional development.

We also observed many examples of participants leveraging Black joyful practices as forms of resistance. These practices are illustrated in the relationship-building between Black ECEs and children in their care, such as the expressive and unique greetings that Rhea incorporates into her classroom. Relationship-building is an important element of anti-racist pedagogy and pro-Black approaches (Escayg, 2025), including what has been called *revolutionary love* for Black children in the place of ‘fake love’. The distinction between revolutionary love and ‘fake love’ highlights that being polite does not support the fullness of Black children's humanity, and many Black educators go above and beyond to support Black children, families, and communities (Johnson et al., 2019). The participants continue to build strong relationships with Black children, families, and communities. For example, Desma praises the hairstyles of Black children and bonds with them over similar styles that were part of her childhood. Some participants imagined what pro-Black spaces might look like by resisting deficit-based assumptions tied to Blackness and highlighting the possibilities of the sharing of Black knowledge and the capacity of Black educators. For example, Leilani imagines pro-Black approaches in the classroom through materials that showcase the diversity of Blackness; and Mirabelle draws from her experiences of Black joyful practices in her previous workplace, which incorporates Afrocentric and Black cultural practices, materials, and activities year-round. Together, pro-Black approaches and anti-racist pedagogies can be liberatory and serve as direct forms of resistance to systemic anti-Black racism and intersecting forms of oppression.

### Conclusion

We explored the experiences of ECEs identifying as Black women in Ontario, Canada to meet the urgent call for anti-racist—and specifically pro-Black pedagogy – in ECEC programs. We explored their

ways of knowing and being through individual interviews and identified one overarching theme: engaging with the socio-cultural realities of Black children. We also identified five subthemes: Teachable moments to challenge anti-Black racism and advance anti-racism; Pro-Black approaches as liberatory pedagogical practice; Othermothering principles and community leadership to challenge oppression; resistance practices among Black ECEs; and Black joyful practices within ECEC settings. The participants provided varied and rich narratives that exemplify a vast wealth of knowledge and practices. Clearly, Black ECEs in Toronto (and likely worldwide) embody anti-racist and pro-Black practices in their everyday work. They serve as a reminder of the ongoing work that is needed to combat anti-Blackness and the assumption of whiteness as the norm, while also showcasing the everyday resilience and efforts to make space for the rightful existence of Black ECEs and Black children within ECEC programs that imagine just futures and possibilities. When Black educators enact anti-racist pedagogy through pro-Black approaches, Black children experience a learning environment characterized by joy, freedom, and safety. The participants continue to engage in anti-racist pedagogy, bolstered by a commitment to ensuring educational equity and racial justice, and to promote the well-being of Black and other racialized children. Simply put, they engage in transformative praxis with a spirit of revolutionary love (see, for example, Braden et al., 2025; Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2021) and radical hope: love "in action."

## Declarations

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