

## Anti-racist pedagogy in early years and childhood settings

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“We were certainly on the margin, no longer at the center, and it hurt.” (hooks, 1994, p.24)

The idea for this *Thematic Issue on Anti-Racist Pedagogy in Early Years and Childhood Settings* emerged after an inspiring conference titled “*Cha(lle)nging Childhoods: Reimagine Childhood in Uncertainty and Inequality*” (ConferenceCES, Istanbul, June 2024) organised by the *Journal of Childhood, Education & Society*. In our discussions as scholar-activists, we felt a deep need to hear from academics and practitioners around the world - to better understand what is happening on the ground, and to collectively consider how we might challenge racist education systems across different contexts.

More recently (as well as historically) general and regional elections in several European countries have highlighted how persistent anti-refugee, anti-asylum seeker, and anti-Muslim rhetoric from both right-wing and social democratic parties has fuelled the rise of far-right movements. For example, France's *Rassemblement National* and Germany's *Alternative für Deutschland* have made significant gains, while in Austria, the far-right *Freiheitliche Partei Österreich* has emerged as the leading political force. In the coming months and years, we can expect to witness the effects of far-right representation within education policies. In countries where far-right organisations are gaining strength, the most profound impacts will be experienced by people from global majority communities.

At the same time, there are signs of hope in the growing mobilisation of anti-racist movements within UK and US politics. The election of Mayor Zohran Mamdani in New York, the emergence of the progressive, left-wing, pro-Palestine, pro-LGBTQ+, and anti-racist *Your Party*, alongside the growing support for the Green Party - which has increasingly aligned itself with more radical political positions in the UK - collectively indicate expanding possibilities for coalition-building. These developments suggest a potential to exert greater influence on political representatives to pursue more substantive and transformative policy actions.

Education - from classroom practices to policy-making - remains a central battleground for political ideologies (Habib, 2018; Yıldız, 2025). It would not be an exaggeration to invoke the Italian revolutionary Antonio Gramsci (1986) on the concept of *hegemony* to describe this ongoing struggle. Across the world, the ruling classes understand that the creation of an ‘imagined national community’ (Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991) requires intervention from the earliest stages of life. In this way, education becomes a tool to construct and maintain a hegemonic worldview - one that upholds existing social structures and hierarchies by dividing people along lines of race, class, gender, religion, sexuality, and other visible or invisible signifiers.

The promotion of so-called *fundamental British values* - a racist, colonialist, and assimilationist ideology - through the curriculum in England and Wales; the state-sanctioned secularism in France through

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the promotion of *laïcité*; or the emphasis on *Leitkultur* (dominant culture) in Germany collectively illustrate how Western colonial and racist ideologies operate through educational discourse and policy (Habib, 2018; Yıldız, 2021). These practices exemplify the ways in which state apparatuses deploy education as a tool to sustain social order through subtle yet pervasive forms of ideological and cultural control.

Researchers, educators and practitioners using a critical race lens have theorised about the ‘ordinariness’ of racism embedded in formal and informal educational institutions and settings (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Gillborn, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1998). As Ramon Grosfoguel insightfully describes, racism constitutes ‘a global hierarchy of superiority and inferiority along the line of the human that have been politically, culturally and economically produced and reproduced for centuries by the institutions of the capitalist/patriarchal western-centric/Christian-centric modern/colonial world- system’ (2016, p.10).

Racism is on the increase globally and yet there is a remarkable lack of support, guidance and training for educators to tackle racism in school and community education settings (Lander, 2014). Culturally responsive educators and anti-racist educators have been seeking ways to resist and tackle the ‘colour-blind’ approach (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) that has been adopted by educational institutions. Educators who are actively challenging institutional racism, in response to the rising racism, are often drawing upon the tenets of critical pedagogy (Freire, 2000; Freire, 2005), as well as on the radical anti-racist education visions of hope and community as described by bell hooks (hooks, 2010, 2013a, 2013b, 2014). A radical anti-racist vision also demands a transformative approach to society in order to create a more just and democratic world (Kundnani, 2023). By radical anti-racism, we refer to the understanding that racism is structural, and therefore, these structures must be dismantled (Césaire, 2000).

These papers in this timely and thoughtful collection highlight that the idea of the ‘permanence of racism’ (Warmington, 2024) is as prevalent today as it has been in the last four decades, and needs to be addressed urgently, directly and with determination. Challenging racism is, undoubtedly, a difficult and thankless task. Yet, as anti-racist, anti-fascist, anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist educators, we draw strength from the resistance, hope, and actions of grassroots organisers, trade unionists, and young people. Their work continues to inspire and sustain our collective struggle.

After all, this is not a new fight. We stand on the shoulders of giants who confronted these same challenges before us, paving the way for us to teach, organise, and imagine a more just and equitable world. It is now our turn to nurture that same spirit of hope, resistance, and solidarity - to ensure that education becomes not a tool of domination, but a means of liberation.

### **What we edited: A glance at the articles in this thematic issue**

This thematic issue is the culmination of an editorial and peer review process lasting approximately one year, including the call for papers. It contains 22 articles accepted for publication. Of these articles, 19 are research articles and 3 are review articles. The articles were written by 54 authors (*Anisa Sultana, Anne Briscoombe, Barbara-Ann Hamilton-Hinch, Beth Wilkinson, Blanca Barco, Charmaine Bonello, Claudine Lam, Crystal Watson, Cynthia R. Martin, Da Hei Ku, Denisha Jones, Duha Ceylan, Ella Ballentine, Erin Blessitt, Eva Dierickx, Georgiana Mathurin, Gry Olsen Ulrichsen, Hajjar Ben Sliman-Ghomari, Helen Eriksen, Isabel Ruddick, Jaleesa Steward, Janelle Brady, Jessie-Lee D. McIsaac, Josephine Gabi, Juliette Wilson-Thomas, Justin West, Kato Luyckx, Kerri Johnson, Kerry-Ann Escayg, Kiara Sexton, Lianna Pizzo, Lyle Hamm, Manju Varma, Michel Vandebroek, Milena Pimentel, Moashella Shortte, Molly Doherty, and Mona M. Abo-Zena, Nihdi Menon, Nikki Fairchild, Oona Fontanella-Nothom, Penny Rabiger, Philadelphia Morgan, Rachel Berman, Salado Abdulle, Sarah Elisa Stein, Serra Acar, Shaddai Tembo, Sonja Arndt, Sung-Ryung Lyu, Trina Fraser, Tuba Bircan, Vini Lander, and Zahra Bayati*) from nine different countries (*Australia, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Malta, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States*).

Examining the keywords (Figure 1) of the articles published in this issue on the topic of anti-racist pedagogy in early years and childhood settings reveals that the subject is approached from various angles. The emphasis is on concepts such as Early Childhood Education (ECE), childhood, anti-racism, racism, pedagogy, critical, theory, and race.



proposing a more progressive and transformative anti-racist pedagogy. They argue that regulatory frameworks must become more explicit and inclusive regarding race to develop anti-racist practices within the sector.

The third paper, by **Nihdi Menon**, aims to reimagine anti-racist pedagogy in ECE. In the Canadian context, the study critiques dominant developmental discourses that view refugee children's experiences through a lens of deficit. Using the case of a Syrian refugee child and her mother as an example, Menon draws on Black feminist thought, the sociology of childhood, and critical pedagogy. The findings reveal that racism is commonplace and reproduced in everyday educational practices. The study argues for adopting desire-focused frameworks that centre marginalised knowledge and affirm the voices, agency, and resistance of refugee children.

The fourth paper, by **Nikki Fairchild, Vini Lander** and **Anisa Sultana**, examines the scope of academic literature in the United Kingdom concerning racially minoritised children, families, and practitioners in ECE and Care. A systematic search using the PRISMA method across JSTOR, Web of Science, and SCOPUS databases identified 24 studies meeting the specified criteria. Analysed through a CRT framework, these studies are grouped under themes such as racism, inequality, policy, workforce, and children's experiences. The findings reveal that the literature in this area is limited and that racism continues to be a systemic issue within ECE policies and practices.

The fifth paper, by **Sarah Elisa Stein**, examines how early childhood educators navigate professional identity amid policy. Using Critical Feminist Theory and Critical Phenomenology, their study employed interviews, surveys, and autoethnography with ECE practitioners. Findings reveal practitioners reclaiming their expertise against devaluation, resisting systemic marginalisation created by credentialing barriers, and envisioning transformative, equity-focused leadership that centres community knowledge and lived experience over standardised credentials.

**Blanca Barco**, in the sixth paper, focuses on how baby room access policies in Chile function for cultural and neurodivergent diversities groups. Using an intercultural, decolonial, radically anti-racist, and critical feminist approach, Barco conducted in-depth interviews with directors and educators, along with group interviews with families, across eight baby rooms opened after 2006 and selected from different geographical regions. Barco's findings align with the decolonial and anti-racist pedagogical practices that resist structural racism, showcasing democratic transformation efforts that foster an inclusive "we," as exemplified by food practices that challenge monocultural norms.

The seventh paper, by **Molly Doherty**, focuses on how white early childhood educators engage with justice-centered pedagogies amidst political backlash against Diversity, Inclusion and Equity initiatives. Rooted in Critical Whiteness Studies, the author uses a photovoice and arts-informed methodology, where educators, as critical friends, participated in dis/assemblage artmaking to analyse photographs concerning race and racism. The findings reveal that this collaborative artmaking process encouraged bravery, established critical friendships, and provoked critical reflexivity. Doherty positions dis/assemblage as a vital metaphorical process for deconstructing and re-building educators' understanding of their whiteness and its impact on their teaching spaces and practices.

The eighth paper, by **Penny Rabiger**, examines the paradoxes encountered in anti-racism work in schools, early years, and childhood settings. Applying the lens of CRT and Critical Whiteness Studies, Rabiger collected data through mixed qualitative methods (anonymous survey, in-depth interviews, focus group). The findings reveal that racism is often framed as a phenomenon belonging to the past and external to schools, while anti-racism work is framed as a modern endeavor. This temporal framing hinders deep structural change and increases the risk of anti-racism efforts remaining superficial and performative due to institutional inertia and white ignorance. Critiquing the limitations of performative anti-racism, Rabiger calls for a more sustained, systemic approach to dismantling racial inequities.

The ninth paper, by **Sonja Arndt**, proposes a methodological shift in ECE research to foster anti-racism, using feminist poststructuralist philosophies. Arndt analyses one teacher's narrative experiences of

racism within her teaching team. The methodology is reconceptualised through three key concepts: Kristeva's notion of revolt as constant critical questioning, the sharing of teachers' realities via multimodal "culture stories," and Deleuze & Guattari's a rhizomatic lens to map the non-linear, interconnected nature of these experiences. The findings highlight the pervasive, often "casual" racism that marginalises culturally diverse teachers, arguing that such innovative, fluid research approaches are crucial for disrupting entrenched prejudices and reorienting attitudes toward difference.

The tenth paper, by **Oona Fontanella-Nothom** and **Cynthia R. Martin**, focuses on a multi-year teacher-researcher partnership aimed at enacting anti-racist pedagogies. Grounded in CRT, the research employs a critical counterstorytelling methodology, using reflections and classroom data. Two key insights emerge in their research: the importance of intentional "slowness" in building a trusting, sustainable critical race partnership, and the development of specific criteria for selecting children's literature that challenges dominant narratives and fosters critical conversations about race and racism with young children. They highlight the deliberate, relational work required to sustain anti-racist practices in ECE.

The eleventh study, carried out by **Duha Ceylan**, **Tuba Bircan** and **Michel Vandebroek**, critiques the concept of "white childhoods" as a dominant, racialised framework shaping European ECE systems. Drawing on interviews with Syrian mothers and ethnographic observations in Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands, they employ a decolonial and abolitionist methodology, including speculative vignettes. They reveal how white childhoods are enforced through linguistic assimilation, emotional policing, and maternal surveillance, harming racialised families. Beyond critique, they use speculative futures to envision abolitionist alternatives where care is collective, multilingualism is celebrated, and belonging is unconditional, calling for a complete reimagining of ECE beyond reform.

The twelfth study in this issue, conducted by **Claudine Lam**, critiqued how early childhood educators often use multiculturalism and diversity discourses to obscure discussions of race and hinder antiracist education. The research, conducted using a critical qualitative methodology that included walk-in interviews, photovoice, and group discussions, involved seven immigrant educators. The findings indicate that an excessive reliance on multiculturalism promotes a "sameness" approach and colourblindness that depoliticises race, reinforces an "us and them" binary, and engenders a colonised, racialised "other." The article posits that the explicit articulation of race and the decolonisation of Eurocentric power structures are indispensable for the development of a genuinely antiracist pedagogy.

The thirteenth paper in this issue, by **Eva Dierickx**, **Kato Luyckx** and **Hajjar Ben Sliman-Ghomari**, employs Educational Design Research to co-develop and evaluate a professional development programme (PDP) aimed at enhancing anti-racist competences among early childhood educators. Through literature review, classroom observations, and interviews, six key design principles are identified, including diversity knowledge, intercultural skills, and critical reflection. The collaboratively designed PDP was piloted with ten educators. Findings from focus groups and questionnaires indicate significant self-reported improvements, such as increased use of inclusive language, heightened bias awareness, enhanced teaching skills, stronger collaboration, and greater confidence to act against racism, underscoring the programme's positive impact.

The fourteenth study, conducted by **Janelle Brady**, **Kerry-Ann Escayg**, **Georgiana Mathurin**, **Rachel Berman**, **Ella Ballentine** and **Salado Abdulle**, explores how Black early childhood educators resist anti-Black racism and enact pro-Black pedagogies. Using Black feminist thought and BlackCrit as frameworks, they held semi-structured interviews with nine Black educators. The findings identify key themes: utilising teachable moments to challenge racism, implementing liberatory pro-Black approaches, applying othermothering principles for community leadership, engaging in resistance practices, and fostering Black joy. The results highlight how these educators affirm Black children's humanity and center Black ways of knowing, offering crucial strategies for anti-racist and pro-Black transformation in early childhood settings.

The fifteenth paper, by **Shaddai Tembo**, **Beth Wilkinson**, **Erin Blessitt** and **Isabel Ruddick**, examines the formation of the Bristol Early Years Forum for Anti-Racist Practice, a UK grassroots initiative led by early years educators. Using collaborative autoethnography, the authors explore their motivations,

the tensions of leading anti-racist work, and the strategic use of white identity to promote racial literacy. Key findings highlight the balance between creating discomfort and providing support (the "kick and a cushion" approach), the importance of joy as resistance, and the ethical complexities of white educators leveraging their privilege for systemic change within a predominantly white profession.

The sixteenth study, by **Gry Olsen Ulrichsen, Zahra Bayati** and **Helen Eriksen**, explores the development of an antiracist pedagogy in Swedish and Norwegian ECE through the speculative concept of "pluralist proximity." The authors, using collective and performative research methods including collaborative image creation, investigate how visual arts can perpetuate or challenge racial stereotypes. They argue that dominant "colourblind" approaches in ECE fail to address structural racism embedded in cultural archives and visual materials. The findings suggest that pluralist proximity—a collective process involving individuals from different racialised positions—enables critical reflection, disrupts ingrained racial hierarchies, and fosters visual racial literacy among educators. This approach is proposed as a vital tool for creating more equitable and democratic educational spaces for young children.

The seventeenth paper, by **Milena Pimentel, Justin West, Moashella Shortte, Kiara Sexton, Trina Fraser, Anne Briscoombe, Kerri Johnson, Barbara-Ann Hamilton-Hinch, Crystal Watson** and **Jessie-Lee D. McIsaac**, uses a participatory photovoice methodology to explore how graduates of an ECE diploma programme apply Africentric principles, such as Ubuntu, in their practice. The research aims to understand their experiences and identify necessary support. Findings reveal five key themes: 1) "I am the foundation," 2) Connection, 3) Cultural identity, 4) Self-expression, and 5) Support. While educators felt empowered to create inclusive, culturally affirming environments, they reported a significant lack of support from colleagues and administrators, hindering their anti-racist work.

The eighteenth paper, by **Mona M. Abo-Zena, Serra Acar, Da Hei Ku, and Lianna Pizzo**, critiques the limitations of the "whole-child" approach in ECE for overlooking systemic oppression. They advocate for a paradigm shift toward a "whole-system" framework guided by the principles of Sankofa and radical hope. Using an evidentiary narrative method, they analyse personal "moments" from their professional experiences to illustrate systemic harms. Their findings reveal how standardised assessments and practices perpetuate inequity. They propose integrating critical theories and asset-based models to restructure systems, and offer actionable steps for creating anti-racist, liberatory educational environments at personal, social, and structural levels.

The nineteenth and last research paper, by **Shaddai Tembo** and **Denisha Jones**, explores early years practitioners' perspectives on the feasibility and value of "Proud of the Skin I'm In" (PoSii), a racial literacy programme for young children. Data gathered via a ninety-minute online focus group with six educators from England, Wales, and the US, found that while practitioners welcomed structured opportunities to discuss race and identity, they expressed concerns about their confidence, implementation logistics, and the disproportionate burden of this work falling on minoritised staff. The study concludes that supporting racial identity must be an intentional, shared pedagogical responsibility with sustained institutional support, rather than relying on individual goodwill.

The first review paper in this issue, by **Philadelphia Morgan** and **Jaleesa Stewart**, examines "soft expulsions"—the unofficial removal of children from preschool—and their disproportionate impact on Black children and children with disabilities. Using CRT and DisCrit as a foundation, the authors argue that these practices reflect systemic racism and ableism. The authors critique colourblind policies and offer multi-level solutions, including anti-bias training, trauma-informed support, and policy reforms to promote accountability. Their strong systemic analysis and actionable strategies highlight an often-overlooked form of exclusion and advocate for transformative, anti-racist change in ECE, making a valuable contribution to equity discourse.

The second review paper in this issue, by **Charmaine Bonello**, proposes a philosophical framework for anti-racist ECE in the Mediterranean. Bonello draws on the work of theorists such as Fanon, Freire, and hooks to provide a context-sensitive model based on critical consciousness, empathy, cultural affirmation, and community learning. Using cases from Greece, Italy, Malta, and North Africa, Bonello effectively

demonstrates the framework's usefulness in analysing and developing locally relevant pedagogies. This review paper is a valuable theoretical contribution that successfully integrates philosophy, policy, and practice, offering a historically grounded vision for transformative early education in a diverse region.

The third and last review paper, by **Nidhi Menon, Lyle Hamm, and Manju Varma**, critiques the limitations of Canada's multicultural framework in ECE. They argue that the framework obscures the systemic racism experienced by Indigenous, Black, and racialised communities. The authors propose a transformative anti-racist pedagogy, drawing on CRT, Indigenous epistemologies, and critical pedagogy to disrupt structural inequities. The authors provide a rigorous theoretical deconstruction of colourblind ideologies and developmentalism. They offer a practical framework for educators centered on critical reflection, decolonising knowledge, and community building. This review paper is a vital contribution that compellingly argues for moving beyond superficial diversity toward justice-oriented practice in Canadian ECE.

In conclusion, this thematic issue represents a significant and comprehensive contribution to the field of anti-racist pedagogy in ECE. Collectively, the 22 articles provide an honest, powerful, and multi-faceted critique of the systemic racism embedded within policies, practices, and dominant developmental discourses across various international contexts. The research compellingly demonstrates how colourblind ideologies, performative inclusivity, and Eurocentric frameworks perpetuate harm and maintain inequity. A key strength of this collection is its move beyond critique to offer tangible, transformative alternatives. The studies showcase innovative methodologies, from critical counterstorytelling and photovoice to decolonial and abolitionist approaches, that effectively deconstruct whiteness and centre marginalised knowledge. They emphasise the necessity of intentional, relational work, critical self-reflection, and sustained systemic change over superficial reforms. The findings unanimously argue for a paradigm shift from a "whole-child" to a "whole-system" approach, underscoring that anti-racism is not an additive curriculum but a fundamental reorientation of educational purpose. This issue stands as an essential resource, equipping educators, researchers, and policymakers with the theoretical grounding and practical strategies needed to envision and build genuinely liberatory, equitable, and anti-racist early childhood spaces.

## Declarations

### *Authors' Declarations*

**Acknowledgements:** We, the guest editors, would like to express our sincere gratitude to the researchers who served as external reviewers for this thematic issue.

**Authors' contributions:** The authors contributed equally to this editorial paper.

**Competing interests:** The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

**Funding:** No funding receiving for this editorial paper and thematic issue.

**Ethics approval and consent to participate:** Not applicable

### *Publisher's Declarations*

**Editorial Acknowledgement:** This is an editorial paper that has not undergone the peer-review process.

**Publisher's Note:** Journal of Childhood, Education & Society remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliation.

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