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Article abstract

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Amplifying the Encounters of Young Black Children with Anti-Black Racism: An Exploration of Parents' and Early Childhood Educators' Perspectives on Early Learning and Child Care Environments

Milena Pimentel, Jessie-Lee McIsaac, Crystal Watson, Emma Stirling-Cameron, Nicholas Hickens, and Barb Hamilton-Hinch

Milena Pimentel (she/her) is a student at Mount Saint Vincent University pursuing her bachelor of arts in child and youth study. Her research interests include culturally responsive pedagogy, antiracist frameworks in early childhood education, and social and emotional development of young children. As the daughter of immigrant parents, originally from Brazil and living in Bermuda as an Afro-Latina, many of her childhood experiences inform her research interests.

Dr. Jessie-Lee McIsaac (she/her) is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Education and Department of Child and Youth Study at Mount Saint Vincent University. She holds a Tier II Canada Research Chair in early childhood (diversity and transitions) and directs the Early Childhood Collaborative Research Centre, which engages families, as well as partners in policy and practice, in research to enhance early childhood well-being. As a white scholar and a settler of European descent, Dr. McIsaac is interested in sharing stories from communities that enable culturally safe and responsive environments for families with young children. Email: Jessie-Lee.mcisaac@msvu.ca

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Emma Stirling-Cameron (she/they) is a doctoral student in the Department of Population and Public Health at the University of British Columbia and a graduate research assistant at the Centre for Gender and Sexual Health Equity. She holds a master's degree in health promotion from Dalhousie University. Emma is a critical, mixed-methods researcher with a program of research that focuses on health equity, with an emphasis on refugee and migrant health. She has experience parenting a child of African descent, which has influenced her research practices, methodologies, and interests. Emma is a white settler of European ancestry who resides on the unceded traditional territories of the xwməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwx̌wú7mesh (Squamish) and Səlilwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

Nicholas Hickens (he/him) is a healthcare professional of Caribbean descent with experience in various research and health-related initiatives. He has an educational background in applied human nutrition, biochemistry, and biological and applied sciences. He is a McCall McBain and Rhodes Foundation finalist scholar and a candidate in family medicine at McGill University. His research interests include chronic diseases and infections in primary care, the optimization and management of health care systems, public health ethics, decolonization of healthcare, and empowering the well-being of marginalized and vulnerable populations.

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The road map for change is in our hands. It's time to take action with urgency, care, and intentionality.
(Eizadirad & Abawi, 2021, p. 15)

The early years of development are a significant time for children. They are exposed to new stimuli and experiences that impact their learning, well-being, overall development, and life-long health (Center on the Developing Child, 2010). Recent federal commitments to early learning and child care (ELCC) in Canada are bringing heightened

There is ongoing attention to equity and inclusion in early learning but a paucity of stories on diverse experiences. This study sought to understand the experiences of Black children in Nova Scotian early learning and child care environments through the perspectives of their parents and early childhood educators (ECEs) working in African Nova Scotian (ANS) communities or with Black children in Nova Scotia, Canada. Following in-depth interviews with parents and ECEs (n=15) three interrelated themes were identified using reflexive thematic analysis: anti-Black approach to curriculum; inaction on racism, social justice, and equity; and precluding Black children from culturally safe environments. The results highlight critical issues of racism in early learning environments and the importance of building culturally safe environments for young Black children and their families.

Key words: *early childhood education, anti-Black racism, colour-evasiveness, positive racial identity, equity*

attention to the importance of the early years (Government of Canada, 2022). The commitments toward inclusive, high-quality, and culturally responsive child care are essential to support families and children. There is a need to critically examine the socioeconomic and racial disparities within early childhood systems that contribute to the education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2013), which is described as the reframing of Black children's learning from a deficit lens and rather placing emphasis on the result of historical, economic, and political decisions. Black children experience a plethora of anti-Black violence in school settings. Boutte and Bryan (2021) identify five types of anti-Black violence that occur in schools: (1) physical, (2) symbolic, (3) linguistic, (4) curricular and pedagogical, and (5) systemic. These acts of violence have ongoing negative impacts on Black children's psychological, educational, and social well-being. This requires critical attention by policy makers to improve the outcomes for young Black children and enhance their well-being.

This study examines the experiences of Black families and early childhood educators (ECEs) working in African Nova Scotian (ANS) communities or with Black children in Nova Scotia, Canada.

These findings inform future directions and action needed to deconstruct anti-Black racism in early childhood environments to ensure cultural safety for young Black children and their families. Cultural safety has been defined as "an environment which is safe for people, where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need. It is about shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience, of learning together with dignity, and truly listening" (Eckermann et al., 1994, as cited in Williams, 1999, p. 213). This definition supports the meaningful integration of culturally responsive practices that build young Black children's cognitive capacity and challenge the dominant narrative on racialized people. Overall, taking up such practices will lead to liberatory education for young Black people in Canada, an education that empowers them to become the leaders of their own learning (Hammond, 2021).

Literature review

Anti-Black racism in Canada

Despite Canada's reputation as a multicultural country, racism and discrimination remain prevalent. The construct of race and practices of racism are revealed throughout society, such as through law, policies, and schooling (Brown & Brown, 2020, p. 73). Anti-Black racism encompasses dangerous racial stereotypes that are sometimes displayed in people's behaviours by way of implicit biases or assumptions when engaging with persons of African descent (Mullings et al., 2016). Black people in Canada experience anti-Black racism daily, causing harm and chronic adverse effects on their well-being. The mechanisms of race as a social construct disproportionately

block opportunities for Black persons and perpetuate the cycle of anti-Black racism manifesting in economic and political marginalization of African Canadians, impacting educational opportunities, and leading to poverty and increased representation in the criminal justice system (Frank et al., 2021; Mullings et al., 2016).

Iruka and colleagues (2021) explain the effects of institutional racism on Black persons, stating that “it legitimizes historical, institutional, cultural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal actions that advantage whiteness, subsequently benefiting [w]hite people” (p. 177). This notion reinforces the ideology of white supremacy, which creates unequal life opportunities for Black people, hindering their ability to overcome generational poverty and racism (Iruka et al., 2021).

The social and economic challenges Black people experience can demoralize the well-being and stability of Black families (Livingstone & Weinfeld, 2015). Institutional racism can affect young children in their communities, child care, and school environments (Trent et al., 2019), making the education system a sensitive topic to address among Black families. This sensitivity often derives from the pervasiveness of Eurocentric and colonial principles embedded in this system, which leads to racial discrimination. Colonialism has been defined as “a perpetuating spatio-temporal structure that imposes intersecting global hierarchies in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality, spirituality, economic system, and geography, that organizes bodies into complex hierarchal social organizations” (Kerr, 2014, p. 88). Though young persons were traditionally and historically seen as requiring and deserving of protection, these privileges were not afforded to Indigenous and Black children who were seen merely as property in Canada (Maynard, 2017, p. 210; see also Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

Research has found that young Black children often experience hostility in schools (Hamilton-Hinch et al., 2021; Maynard, 2017, p. 212), resulting in unjust, dehumanized, and criminalized encounters within the system that “spirit murders” their Black identity (Love, 2016). Black children are aware of teachers’ low expectations and lack of knowledge about their identity (Hamilton-Hinch et al., 2021; Maynard, 2017). These attitudes have contributed to an overrepresentation of Black children in behavioural and special education classes, with children being placed on individual program plans (Daniel, 2020; Hamilton-Hinch et al., 2021), yet there is limited research that captures the experiences of young Black children accessing ELCC programs in Canada. Given the profound value of positive interactions among students and their educators in the overall development of young children (Boutte, 2008), there is an urgent need to address these failures within the education system and, more specifically, the ELCC system. While most of the literature reflects the reality for Black children within schools, there are important parallels between the school system and early childhood environments.

Anti-Black racism in ELCC programs

The presence of anti-Black racism in schools can be conceptualized through the power that curricula have to produce and reinforce white supremacy (Brown & Brown, 2020, p. 74). Similarly, within ELCC programs, Eurocentricity and colonial principles continue to dominate early childhood frameworks and policies (Brown & Brown, 2020). Anti-Blackness has been manifested through the exclusion of Black culture and language in early learning curricula, which affects Black children’s engagement and attitudes toward learning and limits their opportunities for educational success (Escayg, 2021). This imposition creates environments that perpetuate settler colonial and Eurocentric middle-class values and culture (Iruka et al., 2021; Nxumalo & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2022).

Alternatively, Africentric (or Afrocentric) approaches to curriculum and pedagogies center Black identity. Africentric approaches in education settings mean that young children are provided opportunities to learn about the world, concepts, and history from an African perspective (Asante, 1991). This has the ability to empower Black children, enhance their self-confidence, self-determination, and self-esteem, and affirm their Black identity. Harris

(1992) argues that positioning oneself within the context of Eurocentric postcolonialism and post-slavery imposes harm and can be destructive for Black people, emphasizing the importance of Africentric approaches. As a result of the Eurocentric values entrenched in ELCC environments, educators often conform to colour-evasive attitudes. We adopt the term *colour evasiveness*, which challenges the social construction of race and ability in the term *colour blind* and rather accurately describes the avoidance of conversations about race (Annamma et al., 2017). This is especially salient when the ELCC system is predominantly white. There are about 9,000 ECEs in Atlantic Canada, and 90% of them are white woman-identifying persons, making Atlantic Canada the region with the least racial and culturally diverse ECEs compared to the national average (Uppal & Savage, 2021). The perception that “not seeing colour” equates to fairness fails to acknowledge the actual harm that doing so inflicts on Black children. Choosing to avoid someone’s race fails to recognize important aspects of their identity, history, struggles, and legacies (Boutte et al., 2011).

Further, colour evasiveness limits children’s opportunities to recognize and name racism (Annamma et al., 2017) and acquire strategies to address and counter racism (Boutte et al., 2011). This limitation is significant because children have the potential and capabilities to engage in meaningful, honest, and critical conversations about race. Early childhood is an optimal time for this because children’s brains are in what is known as a critical period of development (Center on the Developing Child, 2007). Young children are able to notice racial differences from a very young age; some believe that this can happen as young as six months old (Mott Young et al., 2021). However, MacNevin and Berman (2017) note that ECEs often fail to reflect the extent to which race is applied during children’s play and social life in ELCC environments. ECEs play a key role in messages children absorb and can be effective in changing their racial attitudes and setting foundations for acceptance and respect. Yet, oftentimes ECEs are not given the tools to address complex issues with children, and they resort to minimizing and negating these types of incidents in their ELCC environments (Daniel & Escayg, 2019; Farago et al., 2015; MacNevin & Berman, 2017). Researchers have identified that often educators are fearful and feel unprepared to address these issues with young children (Diaz et al., 2021; Husband, 2010).

Methodology and research design

The Nova Scotia (NS) government recently signed a federal-provincial ELCC agreement that aims to make child care more accessible, affordable, inclusive, and culturally responsive. While there is an opportunity to ensure ELCC programs reflect and respond to the needs of Black and ANS communities, there is little understanding of the current experiences of Black families and ECEs within the ELCC system. Therefore, this study sought to respond to the following research question: *How do ECEs and parents of Black children view and experience anti-Black racism in ELCC environments?*

We used critical race theory (CRT) and Black critical theory (BlackCrit) as theoretical lenses to explore experiences within the ELCC system. CRT is a conceptual theory developed in the late 1970s that sought to address racism and oppression to understand further the ways race and power are constructed and reproduced (Caldwell & Crenshaw, 1996; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Originating from legal studies, it is a theoretical framework that centers race and racism and recognizes the power and privilege the white race has in structures and systems. Applying CRT is an iterative process that centers on equity within a structure (Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010). The framework’s relevance to systems and research in education was introduced in 1995 when Ladson-Billings and Tate emphasized the educational institution as a site of white dominance and racial oppression. More recently, Dumas and ross (2016) theorized BlackCrit in the field of education within and in response to CRT.

BlackCrit seeks to understand how policies and institutional practices reproduce Black suffering. It moves beyond

CRT to centralize anti-Blackness and understand its manifestations in institutional practice (Dumas & ross, 2016). Further, BlackCrit helps explain how and why Black bodies remain “marginalized, disregarded, and disdained” (Dumas & ross, 2016, p. 417) even in spaces such as education, where the dominant narrative celebrates uniqueness and diversity (Dumas & ross, 2016). Our study applied five framing ideas from CRT and BlackCrit that guided our understanding and meaning making from the data: (1) anti-Black racism is endemic and intersectional within all social, economic, historical, and cultural spaces; (2) claims of neutrality, objectivity, colour evasiveness, and meritocracy are futile in the fight for equity; (3) experiential knowledge and storytelling are essential forms of data; (4) counternarratives interrogate and challenge the dominant ideology, and (5) the focus must remain on the pursuit of social justice (see Table 1).

Table 1: Framing Ideas from CRT and BlackCrit that Informed Our Study

Anti-Black racism is endemic and intersectional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Racism, and more specifically anti-Black racism, is endemic and permeates Western society and its systems. • Colonialism positions whites as dominant and superior to Black people. • This oppresses Black people and reproduces Black suffering.
Claims of neutrality, objectivity, colour evasiveness, and meritocracy are futile in the fight for equity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CRT criticizes equality (not equity) driven principles and concepts, such as colour evasiveness and meritocracies, which occupy much of our institutional frameworks. • Structures and policies are not dismantled and rebuilt, but equity recognizes the permanence of racism, its impacts on racialized people, and further inequalities.
Experiential knowledge and storytelling are essential forms of data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CRT emphasizes the inclusion and empowerment of underrepresented and marginalized voices. • Through the use of storytelling and a narrative approach, CRT provides counter statements and counternarratives to prevalent issues that are common in our society.

Counternarratives interrogate and challenge of the dominant ideology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civil rights and libertarian views do not address all aspects of mistreatment or inequality but provide only surface-level assessment of racism or discrimination. • CRT and BlackCrit seek to interrogate white supremacy and think about ways schools become desegregated spaces where Black children and their families are the objects of education policies.
Social justice must be pursued	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CRT and Black Crit are underpinned by a commitment to social justice and advocacy. • Working toward equity in education and child care for Black children and families often presents unique circumstances that decrease the opportunities for equitable care.

Methods

This study uses a qualitative description (QD) approach to provide a rich description of the experiences of Black families and ECEs through interviews (Neergaard et al., 2009; Sandelowski, 2009). The research team acknowledged racism as endemic and the harm of colour evasiveness, and at the same time QD allowed the researchers to remain close to the data and examine the data from a race-conscious perspective throughout the interview and data analysis process (Neergaard et al., 2009). Participants included both parents ($n = 7$) and ECEs ($n = 8$) in NS. Table 2 describes the racial and locational demographics of included participants. Parents were eligible if they had a Black child aged between 18 months and 5 years old. ECEs were eligible to participate if they self-identified relevant experience working with young Black children (18 months to 5 years of age, not yet in grade primary) or if they worked in a child care program located in a historic ANS community. ECEs may have worked within child care centres, family home daycares, or publicly funded Pre-primary Programs.

Mount Saint Vincent University and Dalhousie University Research Ethics Boards approved this research project. The research team recruited participants through social media and key community groups (developed through earlier work by members of the research team) and organizations (e.g., family resource centres, child care centres, libraries, family home daycare agencies) in the Halifax Regional Municipality. Before we conducted formal interviews, community key community groups were consulted to evaluate the interview guide and provide feedback on the proposed questions. Following the interview piloting, qualitative, in-depth, semistructured interviews were conducted through Microsoft Teams ($n = 3$), over the phone ($n = 12$), or in-person ($n = 1$), which aligned with institutional guidelines for data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants chose the interview method and spoke to the project coordinator (PC) and/or a research assistant (RA). Verbal consent was obtained before each interview. Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and were conducted between June and December 2021. Participants were compensated with a \$40 gift card.

Reflexivity is integral to qualitative research, whereby the researcher “positions themselves” in the research context (Poth & Creswell, 2018, p. 229). The researcher must understand their own “biases, values, and experiences” which are part of the research study (Poth & Creswell, 2018, p.229). For this study, two of the three principal investigators

self-identified as ANS women, the other as a white woman. The PC identifies as a white woman with a child of African descent, one RA identifies as an Afro-Latina woman, and the other RA identifies as a male of African descent.

Table 2: Demographic Information of Participants Included in the Study

ECE Pseudonym	ECEs			Parents			
	Racial Identity	Years of Experience	Area of Work	Parent Pseudonym	Relationship	Community	Parent Racial Identity
Deandra	Black	20+	Preston Township	Imani	Mother	Halifax	Black
Olivia	white	Less than 1	Halifax	Michelle	Mother	Preston Township	Black
Sue	Black	20+	Preston Township	Kiyana	Mother	Hammonds Plains	Black
Gianna	Biracial	1	Halifax	Jasmine	Mother	Halifax	white
Taylor	Biracial	20+	Halifax	Aaliyah	Mother	Halifax	Black
Megan	white	10+	Antigonish	Alicia	Mother	Halifax	white
Rebecca	white	Less than 1	Truro	David	Father	Halifax	Black
Hannah	white	15	Halifax				

All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and verified. Data was analyzed using a QD approach and interpretive thematic analysis to identify and define emerging codes and establish themes through the shared experiences of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Three research team members engaged in a collaborative and iterative coding process, whereby meaning making occurred throughout the analytic process (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Throughout the coding process, the reviewers, with support from a principal investigator, met to discuss and refine codes and establish a common understanding of code meaning informed by participant experiences. The whole research team met virtually using Google Jamboard to review the codes and collaboratively develop themes by exploring shared meaning across different codes relative to the project's research question (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The results section was informed by these group discussions to reflect our QD approach aimed at voicing the experiences of families and ECEs through the lens of CRT and BlackCrit.

Results

Three major themes reflecting the ways in which ELCC programs underserve and deny Black and ANS children of equitable opportunities were identified: *anti-Black approach to curriculum*; *inaction on racism, social justice, and equity*; and *precluding Black children from culturally safe environments*. It is noteworthy that although the major themes below are presented independently, there is interconnectedness among all three.

Anti-Black approach to curriculum

Black ECEs and parents reflected on the mainstream approaches to curriculum, stemming largely from Eurocentric values and beliefs. Participants observed this Eurocentrism throughout their ECE training, careers, and their

children's educational experiences. They discussed the ways that this impacted the experiences of Black ECEs and Black children in ELCC programs in NS. Black ECEs discussed the ways the dominance of these approaches have affected their ability to implement programs and curriculum that are culturally responsive and inclusive. Taylor (biracial ECE) explicitly reflected on their career as being directed by a Eurocentric approach:

I am Canadian, right? And people may not see that, so my entire career has been a Eurocentric approach and now all of a sudden, I'm an Africentric approach and I realize all that time that I've been infusing these things, people didn't understand.

Taylor continued explaining the resistance they have been met with from others in the field when trying to infuse an Africentric approach, having been told, "No, you can't do that." Further, white, heteronormative approaches to curriculum establish power dynamics for ECEs interested in intentionally applying a critical lens in ELCC settings. Deandra (Black ECE) elaborated on preparing new Black ECEs with knowledge to recognize the power struggles that are entrenched in these settings and resist norms. They noted:

When you get out into the field, don't be afraid to share who you are, but [Black ECE students] are already being hindered because some of them are going into centres where there are no Black people and there are Black children and then if they bring something in from their community they are being told, "No we don't do that here, you cannot do that here."

Gianna, a biracial student in an Africentric cohort at a local community college, discussed witnessing white educators restricting a Black child from engaging in active play despite being outdoors:

So they have this gate that never used to be there and I had asked about it and I guess one of the children who was of African descent he liked to jump a lot and run but they didn't want that, so to stop it, they put the gate up so that he couldn't do that anymore, which like really surprised me because it's outdoor and I just felt that shouldn't be stopped.

With the pervasiveness of Eurocentric ideologies, parents and ECEs sought a different approach. Kiyana, a Black mother, expressed a desire for and the possible benefits of having an Africentric approach to subjects such as music (e.g., drumming) that would allow for Black children to embrace and celebrate their identities in ELCC programs. Kiyana explained:

Yeah, the one that they had was an older white lady with a ukulele, but it would be very nice to have an Afrocentric [Africentric] music class. Yeah, more diversity in the classroom and just not to other anyone, just to be inclusive in general and in everything that we do, and deconstruct colonialism and that type of curriculum.

These desires were described through parents' concerns about the current Western and Eurocentric approach that does not accommodate the unique needs of Black children. David said:

And if we as Black parents then decide that we'll leave it up to the school and government to educate our children, we're just setting them up to fail, because all they'll learn is the cultural experiences of someone else who is incapable of teaching them of their BIPOC experience.

Inaction on racism, social justice, and equity

ECEs provided examples of their personal encounters with issues of racism within their ELCC environments. One white ECE recounted an incident where a group of girls in their classroom were against playing with a Black baby doll. The ECE reported having to intervene, despite feeling unprepared for the conversation: "I was like this is much bigger than my brain right now" (Olivia). In the context of social justice, ECEs mentioned how their

programs responded to the discovery of children's remains on former residential school properties across Canada and the George Floyd case in the US (see Kitchen & Berry, 2022). Gianna stated that their ELCC program did not acknowledge these atrocities and they encountered resistance as they attempted to incorporate lessons on residential schools:

After the Indigenous children, that, all that happened, I tried to do something with that with them and they were like no I don't think you should do that because they wouldn't understand it or their families wouldn't talk about it.

In the context of George Floyd one parent noted:

I know that they did put out a statement like on their website as well, just like the Black Lives Matter movement and how they support the movement, and I think that was it. I didn't really see that much. (Aaliyah)

Many participants noted the lack of equitable opportunities available for cultural and heritage celebrations, especially those that acknowledge Black identities. Taylor expressed concern for the surface-level and tokenistic recognitions of cultural holidays, compared to thematic celebrations they witnessed while working in ELCC programs (e.g., Valentine's Day, St. Patrick's Day).

I mean, Chinese New Year comes up or African History Month comes up, but they're—they're just putting posters up or they're putting decorations up or they'll do a display on a table that has books that might represent that holiday or that event, and I'm thinking, okay, that's a step, but what are you doing? Are you hosting any workshops about that? Are you incorporating anybody that is of that, of that descent that would be able to contribute to the conversation? No, you're not.

Parents expressed similar feelings. For example, Michelle noted: "I just feel like that should really be pushed more, and that the teachers are aware that African Heritage Month isn't the only time that we need allies." Some ELCC environments, however, made attempts to embrace and promote appreciation for other cultures and customs. David noted that, initially, educators expressed concern for their child's shyness and reservations during their time in the program. David went on to recount an opportunity they had to visit their child's program:

My daughter's school, I went to do the drumming with her. She drummed and she sang and the teachers were just in awe, because this little child is just often sitting and playing by herself. Then all of a sudden she is the loudest, the proudest, and she was just enjoying herself.

Some ECEs felt their programs were making intentional efforts to be more inclusive and representative. But Olivia acknowledged that these strategies may depend on individual programs and ECEs:

I feel like I've been through a couple good [ELCC] centres and a couple good programs but I've definitely been in some where it's not really the belief. And again, especially with the centre, it's kind of—or even the pre-primary program—it's, it's also dependent on the beliefs and philosophies of the educator.

Parents often felt that ECEs were responsible for ensuring environments that were safe for their children, as Alicia mentioned:

But I think, you know, it's huge and I think really all, like all teachers, all ECEs, they really need to look at their white privilege, like there has to be a serious course for them to be able to realize how much they affect our Black children [...] actually having to have some responsibility for an ownership for what they've done to affect a child or other African-descent people.

Furthermore, it was evident that not all white ECEs had an awareness of the harmful effects of colour evasiveness on the development of young Black children. For example, Hannah, a white ECE, stated:

It's just a great experience just seeing them—seeing them all interact, and it's great to see that kids at a certain age they just—they don't see colour, right? They play with everybody. It's nice to see.

Precluding Black children from culturally safe environments

As a result of the two themes explained above, cultural safety was often absent in ELCC programs. ELCC settings were described as white-dominated spaces, with white ECEs, directors, boards, and/or administrators. Parents and ECEs discussed and reflected on the diversity within their programs, noting the lack of representation. Most parents explained how the diversity and representation in programs influenced their choice of a child care program. Remarks were made by several parents, including Michelle (“I valued the diversity, you know”) and Alicia (“They had no Black workers”). Some parents noted that they did not have high expectations given their own past experiences. Michelle elaborated, stating, “I know you know they're not gonna have you know ANS teachers and staff.” Kiyana related, “I didn't expect to find a daycare that like would have everything that I'm looking for.”

Most parents desired representation because they wanted to ensure their children felt a sense of belonging, along with measures to embrace their culture and heritage. For example, Imani said:

You know, because representation matters. When you see a teacher who looks like you and says “Oh wow” you know it opens up this world for a child.

Similarly, Alicia stated:

But I would also love to see, you know, a school that is focused on and has teachers that are just for Black children and only have Black workers so that they can help them, inspire them and help them with their self-esteem and the connections they have and to understand.

ECEs, too, reflected on the racial diversity of staff in their workplaces, noting that most were white, except for the few who worked in historic ANS communities—which in that case were mostly Black. ECEs expressed similar perceptions to parents on diversity and representation in ELCC settings, often linking the importance of representation with children's sense of belonging. Gianna recounted one of their experiences:

There was this one little girl there, she was biracial and she looked just like me [...] she had like the little curls [...] so the first day I straightened my hair and then I came in and kind of saw that she had curls and that no one else really had curls so I was just like “Okay, I'm not gonna straighten my hair, I'm gonna show her I have curls as well so she can have that sense of belonging, and it was really funny because she started calling me Mommy.

Parents reflected on the harm that lack of representation in ELCC programs has on their young Black children. For example, this was discussed in the context of hair, which carries personal and emotional meaning within Black culture and identity. Parents reported having to educate ECEs on what was appropriate regarding their Black child's hair, and many discussed incidents and discrimination pertaining to their children's hair. David stated:

I remember, there was an outbreak of head lice in the school at the daycare. And then one of the teachers called me up and said, I think your son brought head lice to the school [...] I said, there's the possibility of my son having lice on his head, it's because he was rubbing against someone who had it [...] And so, these are some of the troubling things that that you would experience where you have to constantly explain things that, to you, it comes naturally.

Further, Imani highlighted the impact of a lack of representation in ELCC settings on their child, noting their child's reluctance to believe a Black person could be an educator:

During the lockdown I tried to find all these YouTube channels with educators that were Black [...] but it was interesting that my kid that they were like, "Hmm, how does she know that?" and I'm like "but she's a teacher," but because they've never seen a Black teacher it was sort of like resenting or not sure of the message.

Both parents and ECEs also discussed how diverse toys, books, and other resources can be an opportunity for children to see and understand themselves. ECEs noted that their programs made efforts to improve the diversity of childcare resources. Hannah, for example, stated: "I'd say probably over the last five years we've kind of become more inclusive in our toys." Contrarily, however, Hannah noted barriers with obtaining such resources, noting: "I guess we'd need funds to be able to have more diverse stuff and things that are from different cultures."

Additionally, Imani reflected on the portrayal of Black children in materials at their child's program. They explained:

In my children's daycare there was this picture of emotions right and then there's a picture of emotions like sad, happy, grumpy, whatever, you know, angry, and the Black kid was angry.

It was clear that this parent's concern was profound as they went on to state the ramifications of this misrepresentation imposed on Black children:

It shows my little girl that Black boys were angry and it is nothing being angry but angry is always associated with being bad.

Parents and ECEs also reflected on the overpunishment and recriminations of Black children in childcare settings. Kiyana provided one recount of their experience, stating:

When I picked him up—I told you about the biting—so he bit someone right before I picked him up just now, and I was kind of reading through the paper and it's like "she made him go sit by himself and told him not to bite his friends and whatever."

Additionally, Kiyana went on to state:

I just think of the you know of the thing of where Black kids are disciplined more harshly and things are made a bigger deal when the kid is racialized.

Because of the challenges parents discussed when it came to caring for their Black child, they often envisioned how programs could better serve their Black children and families. Michelle, whose children were enrolled in a program in a historic ANS community, stated:

I valued the diversity you know, they—most of them were Christian, so you know saying grace was a must and everybody did it together. A lot of the food, it was like hearty, home-cooked meals, it wasn't like your—I don't know, I don't know what the other daycares really have, but it was like home-cooked traditional like "mama" food [laughter]. I just feel like it was such a sense of community and yeah there was just so much love there and I don't know if it's going to be the same at the new one [child care program].

Discussion

Research has illuminated the importance of early experiences and their effects on children's overall development,

health, and behaviour (Center on the Developing Child, 2007). Racism has profound impacts on early childhood development and well-being, with research indicating that there is a critical need to understand the impact of early exposure to racism (Berry et al., 2021), yet there remains a paucity of research that explores this in a Canadian context. This study is the first to explore the perceptions of ECEs and Black families in relation to anti-Black racism in ELCC programs in NS. Given the recent government commitments toward inclusive, high-quality, and culturally responsive child care, this study highlights the diverse experiences of families, children, and ECEs and demonstrates a continuing gap in culturally responsive ELCC programs and the critical need to address this gap as the Canada-wide child care agreements are rolled out, to create enriched ELCC environments that will allow Black children to thrive (Ladson-Billings, 2013). In particular, our research provides voice to the need for adequate resources, supports, and education to counter anti-Black racism that is perpetuated within ELCC environments. Our results are timely to inform the renewed attention on ELCC programs across Canada to achieve equitable, inclusive, and culturally safe programs for Black children and families through an emphasis on culturally responsive practices, social justice, and promoting positive racial identity.

This study's findings reveal a high prevalence of Eurocentric norms, which perpetuate anti-Black racism and violence in ELCC programs. Many participants described the resulting absence of celebration of Black identity and cultural safety because of the mainstream approach to programming. This finding is consistent with previous research that has highlighted the settler colonial values and conceptions of the education system that further oppress Black children (Bernard & Smith, 2018; Brady, 2017). Consistent with Bryan and Boutte (2019), anti-Black violence is perpetuated in ELCC environments in the curricular and pedagogical choices of educators who uphold Eurocentric notions of being in the world (Cridland-Hughes & King, 2015, as cited by Bryan & Boutte, 2019), such as through the lack of supports that promote healthy physical development, which was evident when educators restricted a Black child from running by putting up a gate.

In contrast to the current reality, parents in our study explicitly stated that they wanted their children to feel a sense of belonging and inclusion in early childhood programs. Africentric curriculum approaches can foster cultural pride and encourage young Black children to express themselves in ways that align with their cultural ways of being and knowing (Dei & Kempf, 2013; Escayg, 2021, p. 173). For example, one study concluded a positive academic influence for Black youth through Africentric programming and approaches, such as the use of Nguzo Saba principles (Baker, 2021). Sturdivant and Alanís (2019) suggest that early learning environments that validate and affirm young children's identity are essential to fostering culturally responsive environments that in turn promote learning. Little is known about the impacts of embedded Africentric curriculum in early childhood settings; however, for future researchers, this could be a promising area to explore to enhance cultural identity and safety among Black children, families, and educators.

Critical race theory, the theoretical lens underpinning this work, centers a commitment to social justice and advocacy. Educators have the opportunity to challenge dominant ideology and intentionally teach social justice to all children (Agarwal-Rangnath, 2021). Our findings also suggest that ELCC programs and ECEs are often not equipped with the knowledge or skills to appropriately respond to acts of racism or integrate principles of social justice and equity into their practice. Our findings corroborate earlier research that refers to common strategies used in ELCC programs, such as the use of materials that reflect diversity (e.g., books, pictures, artefacts) to achieve cultural diversity. However, while that strategy is a preliminary step in promoting diversity, alone it is not sufficient to counter anti-Black racism in ELCC settings (MacNevin & Berman, 2017). Participants in our study discussed the celebration of cultural holidays in an attempt to promote diversity, but participants, and especially parents of Black children, expressed concern for the tokenistic approach to these celebrations. MacNevin and Berman (2017) suggest a more meaningful approach to environments that cultivate race-related dialogue with children, inviting

and providing children with the opportunity to discuss race, racism, and social justice.

One actionable step to counter tokenistic approaches to embracing diversity in ELCC environments is adopting antiracist frameworks. Prior research suggests that the adoption of an antiracist framework provides a critical opportunity to advance racial and social justice and acknowledge and validate the cultural and racialized identities of racialized students (Escayg, 2021). Within an antiracist framework, ECEs, especially non-Black ECEs, would be required to critically think and question their understandings of race and anti-Black racism and then apply a rigorous plan that addresses antiracist practices, even if doing so may cause discomfort and uncertainty (Allen et al., 2021; Escayg, 2021). However, it was clear in this study that sometimes educators, especially white educators, did not feel prepared to address complex issues such as race and racism with young children. As Agarwal-Rangnath (2021) points out, by applying a critical lens in practices and pedagogies, ECEs can support early learning environments that foster children's capacity to develop critical perspectives and engage in open conversations about what they understand to be unfair and unjust. Furthermore, educators must intentionally dismantle and reset educational objectives that defy the widespread colonial white normativity (Ritchie, 2015, pp. 147–148).

Scope and limitations of the study

Using a qualitative approach, we provided insights into how ECEs and parents of Black children view and experience anti-Black racism in ELCC environments. Our study was a nuanced exploration of anti-Black racism in ELCC settings across two different role perspectives. As researchers, we acknowledge our role in the production of the findings, as they represent our collective interpretation of the meaning of the experiences shared by participants (Braun et al., 2019). We feel that our reflexive data analysis process conducted by our diverse research team enabled a rigorous and trustworthy exploration of this topic through an iterative coding process that enabled meaning making using the lenses of CRT and BlackCrit. Our team spent significant time discussing the implications of our decisions related to data collection, including the recruitment of participants, and especially throughout the data analysis process (Tracy, 2010). However, the focus on ANS families and ECEs did limit our scope of understanding the first-voice perspectives of children. Further, we acknowledge that the Black experience is not homogeneous; therefore, Black-identifying individuals' experiences may depend on additional factors, such as immigration status in Canada and whether they are located in urban or rural areas, to name just two. Future research could include children's and broader experiences of those who identify as Black to further explore the multiplicity of experiences. Additional examination of antiracist and antioppressive approaches in ELCC curriculum frameworks is also needed to directly inform changes needed in early learning and childcare policies.

Conclusions

Liberatory education futures should be participatory and inclusive for Black children and ECEs. This requires intentional reflection and action to improve the lived experiences of both Black children and families. In addition to enabling a diverse workforce that supports Black ECEs to build thriving and diverse programs, there is an urgent need to implement comprehensive and widespread professional development and preservice education to equip all ECEs with the knowledge and skills to deliver antiracist frameworks through Africentric and culturally responsive programs. We also need to address stereotyping, the lack of infrastructure, and racism to improve cultural safety and empower Black children and Black ECEs through dismantling the Eurocentric norms in early childhood frameworks that lead to inequities and opportunity gaps among Black families and children.

Lopez and Jean-Marie (2021) suggest a framework for action to challenge anti-Black racism in school environments that includes four tenets—name, own, frame, and sustain (NOFS)—to disrupt anti-Black racism and violence in

education environments. They note that “system change is achieved through collective efforts” (p. 57); therefore, educators must enact agency in creating a paradigm shift in the ways that education, curriculum, and pedagogies are currently thought of and how anti-Blackness is perpetuated in ELCC spaces. Their framework is promising as it provides educators and decision makers with meaningful and actionable steps to promote and sustain equity in ELCC programs.

Ginetta Sagan asserts, “Silence in the face of injustice is complicity with the oppressor” (as cited in McCarthy, 1996); therefore, decision makers who play key roles in shaping the lives of young children have an obligation to challenge and ensure that changes promised in the Canada-wide early learning and child care system are not implemented through another colonial system that empowers some and oppresses others.

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