

# The Erasure of Blackness and Shortcomings Within the Early Learning and Care Sector in Canada: Recommendations for the Way Forward

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Résumé de l'article

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## The Erasure of Blackness and Shortcomings Within the Early Learning and Care Sector in Canada: Recommendations for the Way Forward

Evelyn Kissi and Anita Ewan

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*This article critically examines the domain of early learning and care (ELC) in Canada, often termed early childhood education or early childhood studies. We delve into the Canadian ELC landscape, focusing on identified gaps in antibias education, especially concerning African/Black families. Drawing from a comprehensive literature review, we highlight disparities faced by African/Black children and families compared to their white and other racialized peers in the Canadian child welfare system. We conclude with six actionable recommendations to bridge these gaps, emphasizing collaboration among all stakeholders.*

**Key words:** early childhood education; race; anti-Black racism; praxis

### Situating our positionality

As two African/Black women engaged in the field of early childhood education, we navigate multiple complex spaces and places while recognizing the significance of our work within Black communities and the academy. Our journey is centered on our Blackness, our womanhood as mothers, and the interlocking systems of oppression that shape our identities.

*Evelyn Kissi*

I am a tri-citizen African woman born in Lagos, Nigeria to a Ghanaian Canadian father and a Nigerian Ghanaian Canadian mother. With my tri-citizen identity, I have the privilege to navigate around the world, but it also creates boundaries that complicate my identity as a Black woman. Additionally, as defined by Nirmala Erevelles

(2011), I am sometimes disabled by the politics of the body that confine me within the spaces and places I occupy.

As an African/Black woman/mother, I draw my strengths and ways of being/knowing from my Creator Onyame and ancestors while also being rooted at the crossroads of African spirituality and Western religion.

My scholarship is grounded in critical pan-Africanism, anticolonial/Sankofa critical disability studies, and critical community development & adult education. Through my work, I explore how systemic oppression is supported by the construct of disablement. I use a pan-African and anticolonial framing to examine how European accounts have traditionally approached disability, child development, childhood, gender, health, and African spirituality. My research focuses on the ramifications of these approaches and their significant connection to Africans in the

continent and Africans/Blacks in the diaspora.

Through this research, I aim to reflect on and participate in more than just a single story by redefining and retracing Blackness.

*Anita Ewan*

I am a Black mother of six children, with over ten years of experience in the early learning and childcare sector. I am a registered early childhood educator in Ontario and a registered social worker in Alberta. My engagement with children and families began at a young age, when I looked after my younger siblings and volunteered to watch other children in my neighbourhood. Although this experience is all too familiar for many Black girls, it is often dismissed and devalued rather than recognized as a form of training that contributes to later career success.

Growing up in public housing and raising my family there inspired the trajectory of my scholarly journey. My broader areas of interest include race, gender, social policy (particularly housing), child welfare, and development. I explore these topics from a Black geographic framework (McKittrick, 2006), and my dissertation research encapsulated all these interests. It highlighted how Black children are marginalized, confined, and policed through public housing policies and procedures, as they are in other institutions.

## Introduction

With shared interests, we aim to support and uplift our community through research, awareness, and advocacy. We wrote this paper to inform practitioners in the early childhood education field about issues that affect Black children and families in Canada, as well as the gaps that need to be addressed. In addition to the theoretical frameworks discussed in this paper, our professional and lived experiences in early childhood education, African/Black feminism, social work, critical disability studies, and African studies foreground this paper.

Although many of the scholars we cite are Canadian, there are few Black scholars represented. We acknowledge the importance of representation, lived experiences, and authenticity, and firmly believe that Black scholars should be compensated for their work in their communities. However, we also note the lack of critical literature in the field of early childhood education in Canada overall.

This paper is organized as follows. The first section covers the theoretical frameworks that informed this paper. Subsequently, we present a literature review with four subsections that provide context for the gaps we alluded to in the paragraph above. These subsections include “A Brief History of the Impact of Colonialism on African Education, Children, and Families,” “Racial Socialization in Early Childhood,” “Antibias Services in Early Childhood Services,” and “Criticisms of Antibias Education and a Call for Antiracist Education.” The third section includes information about the overrepresentation of Black children in child welfare and other inequities for Black children and their families. This is followed by a section discussing the shortcomings of early childhood education services for Black families in Canada. In summary, we provide a way forward and suggest certain strategies and aims that practitioners in the field of early childhood studies and education can utilize to address the gaps we have identified. We end this paper with a brief conclusion encouraging collaborative efforts between all stakeholders and professionals who interact with Black families and children and who aim to create an equitable and supportive environment for all.

## Declaration

In this paper, we use the terms African and Black interchangeably to denote any discussion regarding people

of African descent. Roberta Timothy (2009) wrote in her dissertation specifically about resisting colonial white supremacist formalized gatekeeping, researching, and education; her thinking provides us with a space to write as an African/Black woman collective with intersecting generational experiences and shared ancestral history. African/Black is a term that we use to reflect the diversity of differently located people of African ancestry, including Black people from the Caribbean, Latin America, Europe, Asia, and North America. We are also writing as African/Black feminists with an understanding of womanism and feminisms from the perspectives of those who have resisted white supremacy, such as Ama Atta Aidoo, Patricia Hill Collins, Katherine McKittrick, Njoki Wane, Roberta Timothy, and others on whose backs we stand to contribute to the field of early childhood education, a field in which we have worked as frontline educators. We now move to the next section where we cover the theoretical frameworks that assists us in understanding the issues we discuss in this paper.

## Theoretical frameworks

### *Critical race theory*

Critical race theory (CRT) is an interdisciplinary approach to understanding and addressing racial inequality. It emerged in the late 1980s and seeks to challenge the traditional notion of racism as an individual prejudice by examining the ways in which social and legal structures perpetuate racial inequality (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). In this paper, we utilize CRT to foreground our argument that the early childhood education field in Canada is embedded in anti-Black racism. CRT applies critical theory, which looks at the power relations between different groups, to race and racism to create a more equitable society (Ladson-Billings, 2006). We aim to focus on the power relations between early childhood education practitioners and how this power influences how they teach and engage with Black children and their families. Additionally, CRT is an intersectional approach that considers the various forms of oppression that people of colour face, such as classism, racism, and sexism (Crenshaw, 1989). In this paper, we examine how anti-Black racism reinforces inequalities for Black children and their families in Canada, which in turn affects Canadian early childhood education systems. The goal of CRT is to change the existing power dynamics so that all people, regardless of race, can have access to the same opportunities and resources. We hope this examination will contribute to our goal of creating a field of early childhood education where all children have the same opportunities, resources, and overall treatment.

In Brown (2014), the use of CRT in the context of teacher preparation programs, especially for preservice teachers of colour, is explored. The study offers an in-depth overview of the literature on the experiences and challenges faced by preservice teachers of colour in the US. Brown examines how the entrenched norms of whiteness, white privilege, and white hegemony in current teacher education can act as significant barriers to the aim of nurturing educators (of colour) to teach in ways that are both critically relevant and humanizing as well as transformative on individual and societal levels. Brown concludes by suggesting ways in which teacher education programs can better address these challenges and more effectively serve the needs of preservice teachers of colour.

Kozleski and Proffitt (2019) explored the potential impact of CRT on child development and argued that CRT can help educators, researchers, and policy makers better understand how power, privilege, and positionality shape the experiences of children from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. The authors also discussed how CRT can inform interventions and policies that aim to reduce racial and ethnic disparities in child development outcomes. They concluded by calling for more research on how CRT can be applied in practice to promote more equitable outcomes for children.

Consequently, we draw from CRT to inform our understanding about the inequity Black children and their family face. We also use it as a framework to conceptualize approaches that educators, scholars, and practitioners in the

Canadian ECE field can facilitate to better support Black children and their families.

### *Systems theory*

Systems theory is a theoretical framework that emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of various components within a system (Miller, 1978). This theory views systems as dynamic, complex, and adaptive entities that are constantly interacting with their environment (von Bertalanffy, 1968). According to systems theory, changes in one part of a system can have ripple effects throughout the entire system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Therefore, systems theory argues that understanding the relationships between different components within a system is essential for understanding how the system functions (Lerner et al., 2013).

Since changes in one part of a system can have ripple effects throughout the entire system, any disparities or inequities within the ECE system can affect Black children and their families at multiple levels, including individual, family, community, and societal levels.

For instance, at the individual level, Black children may face discrimination and bias from educators or peers, which can impact their self-esteem and academic achievement (Hughes et al., 2006). At the family level, Black families may face barriers to accessing high-quality early childhood education, such as lack of transportation or difficulty navigating the enrollment process (Gadsden & Ray, 2013). At the community level, Black communities may have fewer resources and less access to high-quality ECE programs (Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005). And at the societal level, systemic racism and discrimination can perpetuate educational inequities for Black children and their families (Duncan & Murnane, 2011). The critical examination of systems and their various components through systems theory has led us to foreground it as a key point of analysis for discussing and understanding the issues highlighted in this paper.

## **Literature review**

### *A brief history of the impact of colonialism on African education, children, and families*

This section reviews the literature on the historical impact of colonialism on African education, children, and families. The literature highlights the characterization of education that uses a colonial framework (Kay & Nystrom, 1971), which is fundamental to today's education system and affects how Black children and their families are treated by educators and child welfare case workers of all races and ethnicities. These workers are often complacent in perpetuating the oppressive system operating within a colonial framework, as their roles require them to follow policies and procedures that maintain the status quo.

Kay and Nystrom's (1971) article identified two characteristics of a colonial framework: the official and unofficial colonial agent dictates the nature of education, and the African point of view is almost entirely ignored. Colonizers brought with them their assessment of "the dark continent" and its people as needing salvation (Kay & Nystrom, 1971), which led to the colonial idea that Black brains could not be educated (Bowdich, 1819; Nkrumah, 1963). This colonial ideology disregarded African ways of knowing and being, and the colonizer's narrative was carried to reinforce the master vs. slave ideology even outside the African continent.

Since then, African/Black childhood history has never been included in ECE curriculum/programming or been historically contextualized (Kissi, 2020), creating a 400-year deficit in the field that demonizes children who deviate from the methodically normalized Eurocentric ways of childhood (Kissi, 2020). The foundation of this methodical white supremacist education was established to educate and transform Native Africans to improve their moral and social conditions (Bowdich, 1819; Kissi, 2020). Early European intruders into Africa described African/Black



children as animal-like brutes running naked in nature without parental supervision (de Marees, 1602/1987; Kissi, 2020). This narrative, which characterizes African/Black children as animal-like, has influenced the way early childhood educators view them in their classrooms and early learning spaces. George Dei (Dei et al., 2017) argues that Africanness/Blackness has always been political and continues to be so today. This narrative also extended to African/Black parents, with men being portrayed as troublesome and having animalistic features and behaviour, while women were seen as subhuman for giving birth without Western medical anesthesia for pain management (Bosman, 1704/1907; de Marees, 1602/1987; Kissi, 2020). These forms of referencing African/Black children and families have resulted in education and health systems developing biases against them, implementing policies and constant policing of their bodies (Kissi, 2016, 2020), and creating current erasure/silence in curriculum/programming, as well as inequitable health barriers for African/Black children and parents in Canada (Ewan, 2020; Kissi, 2020; Timothy, 2018, 2019). A literature review provided in the next section will further explore the outcomes of the preeminence of Eurocentric structural foundations in Canada.

### *Racial socialization in (Canadian) early childhood*

Studies on race socialization have revealed that children begin to develop racial attitudes at early stages of development (Aboud, 1988, 2008). In studies by Frances Aboud on children's attitudes towards race in Canadian contexts, it was found that young white children between the ages of 3 and 5 tend to hold positive attitudes about the dominating white group (Aboud, 1987, 1988). Furthermore, Aboud (1988, 2008) found that white children under the age of 7 tend to hold negative attitudes towards races different from their own. The author argues that this occurrence is due to the child's limited age-based cognition, which causes them to misinterpret internal characteristics. Thus, within a child's early stages of development, they are prone to developing racial biases due to their limited mental processes.

Another explanation links social construction of whiteness to early childhood understandings of race and socialization (Cole & Verwayne, 2018). Young children are capable of interpreting racially codified information found in classroom materials, as well as the interactions seen between teachers and their students (Abawi, 2021). Children are socialized to interpret in-group and out-group biases of their own and other races (Escayg et al., 2017). Escayg, Berman, and Royer (2017) argue that the normalization of whiteness in early childhood contexts is particularly harmful because children become socialized to perceive racialized bodies as "the other(s)." Similarly, they discuss how positive white representation permeates everything from societal expectations to early childhood services, creating material effects for young Canadian nonwhite children ranging from social exclusion by white peers to the internalization of a harmful racial hierarchy (Escayg et al., 2017). For example, in a study of racial attitudes in kindergarten and third-grade Black Canadian children, Doyle and Aboud (1995) found that the kindergarten-aged children's perceptions of their own race were significantly lower in comparison to the third-grade students' pro-Black attitudes. Thus, younger children are prone to internalizing white racial dominance, resulting in a distorted understanding of their own racial identities.

### *Antibias education in early childhood services*

Early childhood services contribute to the formation of children's understandings of whiteness and racialization (Abawi, 2021; Escayg et al., 2017; Goldstein, 2001). An approach known as antibias curriculum is often used in ECE settings (Escayg, 2018). This approach aims to address "issues of prejudice, discrimination, critical thinking, and taking action from fairness with children" (Escayg et al., 2017, p. 20). At its core, antibias education acknowledges that young children can make both negative and positive meanings pertaining to social identities, including class, race, and gender (Escayg, 2018). Kerry-Ann Escayg (2019) cites Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2010), who explained that antibias education aims to promote four key tenets:

1. Each child will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities.
2. Each child will express comfort and joy with human diversity, accurate language for human differences, and deep, caring human connections.
3. Each child will increasingly recognize unfairness, have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.
4. Each child will demonstrate empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions. (p. 3)

Critical early childhood educators equip children with antibias strategies to address harmful constructions of race and whiteness that are often developed in early stages of development (Escayg, 2019). In their study of antibias education with white children, Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (2005) suggested creating opportunities for intentional conversations about race and whiteness. Furthermore, using materials like books and pictures can help to facilitate and engage conversations about prejudice and discrimination (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011). Additionally, Derman-Sparks and Ramsey suggest that early childhood educators consistently self-reflect to acknowledge and uncover personal prejudices, misconceptions, or privileges that they hold. Overall, the goal of antibias early childhood education is to address issues of ability, race, and class in ways that are consumable and understandable for young children (Escayg, 2018).

Antibias pedagogy aims to develop a curriculum of inclusion and equity, acknowledging that children have the right to freedom from any form of discrimination (Escayg et al., 2017). Antibias pedagogy has been praised for recognizing children's abilities to construct and engage in racist discourse (Escayg, 2019). Educators who employ the antibias approach celebrate diversity and recognize a range of identities (Escayg, 2019). This approach allows for educators to acknowledge differences in diversity, which is particularly useful in multicultural societies (Abawi, 2021).

Although the antibias approach to early childhood education was developed through an American lens, it has had a strong influence in Canadian contexts, including in Ontario's full-day kindergarten (FDK) curriculum (Abawi, 2021). Ontario's curricular document mentions race and diversity, emphasizing principles of inclusive education in kindergarten. For example, in section 3.1 "Equity and Inclusive Education in Kindergarten," the document states that all children, regardless of their background, should be welcomed, included, treated fairly, and respected (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016). This statement highlights the importance of celebrating diversity and respecting children's different identities. Educators are encouraged to appreciate and employ the ideas of equity, equality, and fairness (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016).

### *Criticisms of antibias education*

Despite its acknowledgment of diversity and difference, antibias pedagogy has faced criticism for its erasure of race and marginalized voices (Abawi, 2021). As Zuhra Abawi (2021) notes, the approach speaks over marginalized communities with diverse lived experiences and positionalities and fails to include them in the construction of its pedagogy, which is centered through a Eurocentric psychological-developmental perspective. The limited number of issues pertaining to racism and the failure to address social power relations created by racial differences have been criticized (Abawi, 2021).

An antibias approach to education has been criticized for its persistent theme of appreciating difference without addressing the mechanisms that enable white supremacy (Escayg, 2019). Ontario's kindergarten program, for

example, has been criticized for its failure to prioritize ethnocentric perspectives and for its colourblind approach to education (Abawi, 2021; Escayg, 2019; Escayg et al., 2017). Such an approach at the kindergarten level is especially dangerous because children begin to form their conceptions of race and whiteness at early stages of development (Aboud, 1988, 2008). By minimizing vital conversations about racialization using a colourblind approach, early childhood educators contribute to young children's social understandings of race (Escayg, 2019).

A study by Rachel Berman et al. (2017) showed that early childhood educators in Toronto tend to minimize and negate racial incidents. By upholding a white-European curriculum, Canadian early childhood educators are failing to support the diverse needs of their marginalized students. Berman and her colleagues also found that educators often failed to respond effectively to incidents of racism, did not address racial issues in the classroom, and did not consistently challenge stereotypes or biases. Furthermore, the study found that educators lacked training and support to address racial issues effectively in the classroom. These authors concluded that there is a need for antibias education that addresses racial issues in early childhood education and provides educators with the necessary skills and support to address these issues effectively. However, what we currently have, and primarily use, in our field of early childhood education to address issues of racial issues is the co-opted notion of culturally relevant pedagogy.

### *The co-option of culturally relevant pedagogy*

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) is an educational approach that seeks to improve academic outcomes for students of colour by using their cultural backgrounds and experiences as the basis for instruction (Ladson-Billings, 1995). However, some scholars have argued that the concept of CRP has been co-opted by mainstream educational institutions and diluted to the point where it is no longer effective in addressing the needs of marginalized students (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, 2012).

According to Gloria Ladson-Billings (2014), the original concept of CRP was centered around the ideas that students of colour needed to see themselves reflected in the curriculum and that their cultural experiences and knowledge should be valued and incorporated into instruction. However, over time, and like antibias education, the concept has been watered down to simply mean "cultural sensitivity" or "multiculturalism" without addressing the systemic barriers that prevent students of colour from succeeding academically. Ladson-Billings argues that CRP has been co-opted by mainstream educational institutions to absolve themselves of responsibility for addressing issues of systemic racism and inequality.

Similarly, Django Paris (2012) argues that the concept of CRP has been co-opted by mainstream educational institutions and turned into a "quick fix" for addressing the achievement gap without addressing the larger systemic issues that create and perpetuate the gap. He suggests that true CRP involves a radical transformation of the educational system, including changes to curriculum, pedagogy, and the power dynamics between teachers and students. In summary, the co-option of culturally relevant pedagogy has led to a diluted version of the original concept that fails to address the systemic barriers preventing marginalized students from succeeding academically. One way to address this concern is to focus instead on implementing a critical antiracist education.

### *A call for antiracist education*

It is no longer enough to simply acknowledge racial differences in society; children must learn about the ways in which institutions uphold white supremacy. The liberal approach of antibias education contradicts some of the fundamental elements of antiracist pedagogy because of how it fails to address the underlying issues of systemic racism and barriers (Husband, 2010). An antiracist pedagogical approach suggests ways to address the structures and institutions that uphold whiteness in society (Escayg et al., 2017). Antiracist education recognizes



the mechanisms of racialization by acknowledging society's colonial history (Escayg, 2019).

Escayg (2019) suggests practical ways to approach and teach antiracism and whiteness to young children. Instead of focusing on the individual aspects of identity and biases, antiracist education calls for a focus on how racial ideologies can contribute to institutional inequalities. An antiracist approach to early childhood education provides young children with the tools to address and critique white supremacy within societal contexts.

Furthermore, Escayg (2019) suggests a direct approach to discussing the intricacies of racial identity, privilege, and power by asking children questions about the life experiences of both white and racialized children. Questions such as "What is life like for a child who is white?" and "What is life like for a child who is Black?" help educators to gauge students' preexisting knowledge and understandings of racialization and whiteness. The antiracist approach allows for direct and honest conversations about race without erasing the diverse experiences of marginalized identities.

In addition, Escayg (2019) suggests other ways to employ an antiracist early childhood pedagogy. Using a visual chart that depicts different racial groups along with visual representations of specific occupations, the teacher can ask preliminary questions such as:

1. Who can be a \_\_\_\_\_?
2. Why \_\_\_\_\_?
3. Who can never be a \_\_\_\_\_?
4. Why?

By posing these questions, educators can discuss the formation of power and privilege and its link to racial identities in societal contexts.

Escayg (2019) discusses the importance of using an antiracist approach to teach both white children and marginalized children. As mentioned above, young children learn to form more positive attitudinal biases towards white bodies as opposed to other marginalized identities (Aboud 1998, 2008). An antiracist education can help to disrupt and challenge the pro-white biases that children may hold. Furthermore, antiracist pedagogy allows educators to empower children of colour by creating spaces for them to critique and interpret the structures that uphold white dominance.

Escayg et al. (2017) highlight how early childhood educators can use play-based approaches to discuss how racial power differentials are structured between white and nonwhite groups. Instead of relying on using materials that claim to support diversity, early childhood educators can use play materials (such as drawing materials with various skin tones) to facilitate active conversations about racism in their classroom. This antiracist praxis serves to address the areas that antibias education fails to discuss.

There are now implications for the ECE field that require educators to use a critical lens while implementing CRP and/or antiracist education. A critical lens includes considering the multilayered and systemic challenges Black children and families face in Canada and how they affect how children learn. We cover some of these challenges in the following section.

## Overrepresentation in child welfare and other inequities for Canadian Black children and families

### *Overrepresentation in child welfare*

Among children in the Ontario child welfare system, 41% are Black (Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, 2015). This is a very disconcerting statistic that reflects the racialization (Blackness) of this child welfare system. However, Black children are overrepresented within child welfare systems globally (Clarke et al., 2021). For instance, in several major U.S. cities, 60% of Black children have experienced interactions with child welfare officials although representing only 14% of the overall population (Roberts, 2022). Similarly, in Britain, although Black people make up only 4% of the population, Black children account for 13.6% of children involved in investigations or other forms of child welfare involvement (Berkman et al., 2022).

There are clear economic repercussions for this overrepresentation. According to Clarke, Pon and Phillips (2020), it costs approximately \$60,000 per child annually, or \$42 million altogether, for the Ontario child welfare system to support Black children in foster care. These costs reflect only one of five agencies and do not account for the Peel, York, Durham, and Catholic agencies. Nevertheless, this money could instead be allocated to providing preventative services to support Black children and families.

There are a variety of reasons why Black children end up in child welfare. Most of these reasons stem from anti-Black racism (Contenta et al., 2014). Contenta, Monsebraaten, and Rankin (2014) quoted Margaret Parsons, executive director of the African Canadian Legal Clinic, who said, "The gross overrepresentation of black kids in the [Children's Aid Society] is like a modern-day residential schools system" (para. 1). This quotation underscores the inequities and trauma Black children face at the hands of the Canadian child welfare system. Additionally, Contenta et al. assert that Black children are institutionalized within the child welfare system and torn away from their families due to cultural misunderstandings and stressors emanating from poverty. In other words, because society has a negative perception of Black culture and due to systemic barriers, Black children and families continue to suffer and face the risk of being ripped apart through their children being removed from their homes and taken into foster care.

There is a vicious cycle that occurs when Black families are scrutinized by child welfare workers. What often happens is that Black families are reported due to negative preconceptions or stereotypes (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2017). They are then required to be evaluated by a child welfare worker who assesses them through colonial and anti-Black perceptions (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2017). This results in Black parents being mandated to interact with an anti-Black child welfare system (Clarke et al., 2021) or risk having their children taken away. One of the things Black parents have been unfairly evaluated for is their living conditions, which at times are a result of the financial and spatial inequities driven by racist and discriminatory practices (Ewan, 2020). Poor living conditions also have negative repercussions on the learning experiences of Black children, which was a common theme denoted in Ewan's (2020) study that included a focus on public housing policy and race. However, housing is only one factor that contributes to children's learning experience. For example, Likhar et al. (2022) emphasize that both the developmental stage of a child and broader social determinants of health, such as economic conditions and early life experiences, critically influence their cognitive, emotional, and educational trajectories. These factors, combined with policy interventions and socioeconomic background, shape children's learning outcomes, especially in the formative first 1,000 days.

### *Systemic barriers of learning for Canadian Black children and their families*

A systemic challenge Black children in Canada face is the overrepresentation of Black children in special education

programs. Research has shown that Black students are more likely to be identified as having a learning disability or ADHD, even when controlling for factors such as socioeconomic status and academic achievement (Dei et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2017). This overrepresentation can be attributed to systemic biases and racism within the education system, which can lead to Black children being misdiagnosed or unfairly labeled as having a disability.

Another challenge Black children face in Canada is the lack of representation and inclusion in the curriculum. The experiences and contributions of Black people in Canada are often marginalized or erased from the curriculum, which can lead to feelings of invisibility and disengagement among Black students (Dei et al., 2017). This lack of representation can also perpetuate harmful stereotypes and biases about Black people. Similarly, a lack of representation also exists in the teachers who teach Black children. Carl James and Tana Turner (2017) highlight the lack of representation of Black teachers in Canadian schools and the impact this has on Black students. They note that Black teachers can serve as role models for Black students, provide critical culturally relevant pedagogy, and challenge systemic biases and racism within the education system. However, Black teachers are severely underrepresented in Canadian schools, particularly in leadership positions. James and Turner argue that the lack of representation of Black teachers can contribute to feelings of isolation and marginalization among Black students, particularly in predominantly white schools. They also note that the lack of representation can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and biases about Black people, as the curriculum and school culture are often shaped by white perspectives. To address the lack of representation of Black teachers, James and Turner suggest that schools need to implement policies and practices that promote diversity and inclusion. This includes actively recruiting and hiring Black teachers, providing professional development on antiracism and culturally responsive pedagogy, and creating a school culture that celebrates diversity and promotes inclusion. We argue that a similar phenomenon occurs at the postsecondary level, where there is also a severe underrepresentation of Black professors in early childhood education programs. Instead, these programs are predominantly taught by white women, who perpetuate Western, hegemonic, and developmental psychology perspectives and discourse.

A third challenge that Black children face in Canada is the school-to-prison pipeline. Black students are disproportionately suspended and expelled from school, which can lead to involvement in the criminal justice system (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Noble, 2018). This pipeline is fuelled by systemic biases and racism within the education system, which can result in Black students being punished more harshly for the same behaviours as their non-Black peers. The school-to-prison pipeline can have lifelong consequences for Black children, including limiting their opportunities for education and employment.

Black families in Canada face systemic challenges that can affect their children's learning, including poverty, discrimination, and lack of access to resources. Research has shown that Black families in Canada are more likely to live in poverty than their non-Black counterparts, and that poverty can result in inadequate housing, food insecurity, and limited access to educational resources (Dei et al., 2017; Noble, 2018). Discrimination and racism can also affect Black families' access to employment, education, and healthcare, which can limit their opportunities and resources (Dei et al., 2017). Additionally, Black families may face language barriers or cultural differences that can make it difficult to navigate the education system or to advocate for their children's needs. These systemic challenges can contribute to feelings of marginalization, disengagement, and lack of trust in the education system, which can negatively impact Black children's learning outcomes. Systemic challenges are evidently overlooked and disregarded in many classrooms and curriculums that include Black children. Given this reality, we highlight shortcomings we believe need improvement to create more equitable spaces for Black children and their families in Canada.

*Early childhood education service shortcomings for Black families in Canada*

Despite Canada's global reputation for cultural diversity and equal opportunity, its early childhood services do not reflect these values. Racism continues to be perpetuated within Canadian ECE programming and the field, as children develop their conceptions of otherness and whiteness through a curriculum that does not engage in political discussions about race (Kissi, 2016; see also Escayg et al., 2017). As a result, African/Black families have encountered difficulties in accessing culturally relevant ECE services in Canada (Kissi, 2016; Turner et al., 2020). For the purpose of this paper, we define ECE services in Canada as programs and services that support the learning and development of children from birth to age 5. These services can include centre-based care, home-based care, preschool programs, and parent education and support (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010).

A study by Stirling-Cameron et al. (2023) underscores that Canadian early learning settings have systemic issues, with many primary schools sidelining Black perspectives and African Canadian history in their curricula. This finding calls for the urgent integration of culturally relevant curricula and programming to ensure inclusive and safe learning environments for Black children. Furthermore, barriers in creating CRP programming include "a lack of resources, training, and support, as well as resistance to change" (p. 9). Moreover, in an assessment of Ontario's Black Youth Action Plan (BYAP), it was found that there are very few culturally responsive programs that meet the specific needs of Black parents (Turner et al., 2020). The primary goal of the BYAP was to reduce disparities for Black children, youth, and families through funding opportunities for the Black community. However, the assessment found that although many of the mainstream agencies in Ontario had a higher number of Black parents, there was a lack of adaptation to create culturally relevant programming for Black families (Turner et al., 2020). Of those culturally specific programs, few are in the BYAP communities. Turner, Boyce, and Butler (2020) highlight that all three of the programs that aim to support Black fathers are located only in Toronto.

Additionally, there are few Black-focused programs that address the needs of Black families (Turner et al., 2020). For example, few programs help newcomer and refugee populations. Stewart et al. (2014) noted various challenges for African newcomer parents in accessing early childhood services. They also found that Black families face a range of challenges when accessing early childhood services in Ontario. One major barrier is a lack of information about available services; many families are not aware of the services available to them and struggle to navigate the complex system of service providers. Language barriers also present challenges, as many families have limited English proficiency and struggle to communicate with service providers or access information about services. Cultural differences can also be a hurdle, as some families find it difficult to navigate Canadian cultural norms around parenting and child-rearing that differ from their own cultural practices. Finally, financial barriers can make it difficult for families to access early childhood services, such as the cost of transportation or childcare.

In addition to these challenges, Turner, Boyce, and Butler (2020) found that current ECE services in Ontario do not adequately support the needs of all age groups. Most programs in the province serve children aged 0–5 years old, and few programs meet the specific needs of Black families, including parents of Black 2SLGBTQI+ children, Black 2SLGBTQI+ parents, Black parents who have experienced trauma, and incarcerated parents.

Overall, the current antibias approach in early childhood education is insufficient without a critical examination of systemic barriers that enable white dominance. Educators must facilitate conversations surrounding racialization and whiteness to help children understand racial power dynamics in society. Moreover, current early childhood services in Canada are not culturally relevant or supportive of the specific needs of Black families. The early childhood system needs to be reformed in Canada to support the needs of Black families rather than placing children in the child welfare system.

In conclusion, Black children and families in Canada face significant inequities in the child welfare system and early childhood education services. Addressing these issues requires a commitment to antiracism and culturally responsive programming that is accessible to all Black families, regardless of their location or background.

## A way forward

This literature review highlights the gaps faced by African/Black families in Ontario and Canada as a whole. It shows that the current ECE curriculum and programming need to be reviewed to reflect the needs of African/Black families in educational spaces, the healthcare system, and the child welfare system. The review also highlights that more work needs to be done in our current antibias curriculum in early childhood programming to address the growing anti-Black racist practices in the ECE field. Moving forward, we suggest the following recommendations:

1. Historicize Black childhood/families beyond transatlantic slavery and incorporate these histories into the ECE curriculum. This will help inform future ECEs about the systematic/methodical barriers that have continuously oppressed African/Black folks. More research projects should be funded to do this work.
2. The Canadian early childhood studies curriculum should require a course that historicizes African/Black childhood beyond transatlantic slave trading and civil rights movements. A *critical* antiracist approach that can support the needs of Black families should be embedded in the preservice training, and there should be professional development for educators who are already in the field. This strategy allows for every child to be included in the curriculum while also creating accountability for practitioners in the field. It will also address how culturally inclusive and responsive programming has been co-opted and rendered ineffective.
3. Create organizations that support Black RECEs in the field, such as the Black Professional Early Childhood Education Association.
4. Connect with organizations that serve Black parents and families to build rapport, establish relationships, and develop co-teachers.
5. Allocate funding to open a Black early childhood education centre that focuses specifically on Black families and provides professional development training for early childhood educators. This centre should have interdisciplinary African/Black professionals such as early childhood educators, social workers, psychotherapists, psychologists, speech pathologists, elders, and spiritualists. Additionally, this centre would also be a hub for researchers to conduct work that aims to find solutions for challenges African/Black families face, which have been listed throughout this paper.
6. Hire more African/Black tenure-track/full-time professors in both university and college ECE / child development programs, as many of them are currently working precariously, resulting in social and financial insecurity and leading to a detriment of health. Also, hire more African/Black professionals in management and policy positions.

## Conclusion

These recommendations are being presented to individuals and institutions that work with African/Black families. We are particularly calling on the College of Early Childhood Education and the Canadian child welfare systems to take the lead on addressing the long-standing failures that have affected Black children and families, contributing to the disproportionate rate of Black children in care. It's time to move beyond just "getting our feet wet" and dive right into decolonizing the field of early childhood education. Our children's futures and lives depend on it.



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