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Politicizing Early Childhood Education and Care in Ontario: Race, Identity and Belonging

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POLITICIZING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN ONTARIO: RACE, IDENTITY AND BELONGING

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Abstract: *The Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) landscape, much like the K-12 education system in Ontario, is largely encompassed by bias-free, neutral and colourblind narratives of identity and social location (Abawi, 2018). These discursive practices, which portray young children and early learning settings as raceless and equal spaces that engage children in interactions and discussions of race and identity, are inappropriate. Education in Ontario and Canada as an entity is marked by myth of the Canadian nation-state (Thobani, 2007) through celebratory, themed, recognition-based initiatives that mark differences, while leaving the status quo of whiteness unchallenged and intact (DiAngelo, 2018). The objective of this paper is to challenge discursive norms that perpetuate the dominant norm that young children do not see or notice race and are insulated from processes of racial socialization, through a reconceptualist framework. The paper does this by centering the socialization of race and identity in Ontario, Canada's most diverse province and one of the most ethno-racially diverse regions in the world. This paper not only disputes the common misconception that ECEC sites are neutral spaces, but also re-centers these spaces as political as well as potential sites of resistance.*

Various studies suggest that children are aware of cultural and visible differences among and between people as young as two years of age (Aboud, 1988; Byrd, 2012; Connelly, 2007; Escayg, Berman & Royer, 2017; Friendly & Prabhu, 2010; Husband, 2012; Robertson & Doyle-Jones, 2015; Skattebol, 2003; Todd, 2009). Psycho-developmental paradigms dominate the discursive landscape of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), and privilege trajectories of measuring and assessing child learning outcomes largely based on Western conceptions of childhood and human development. Developmentalist theories widely provide a reductionary perspective of childhood, assuming that children are too young to engage with encounters of race and identity (Brown, Soutto-Manning, & Laman, 2010; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Berikoff, 2008; Roland, Cameron, Milne, & McGeorge, 2005). The Western developmentalist paradigm meticulously tracks children and families through surveillance, and prescribed linear paths of developmental milestones, which often have devastating implications for racialized, Indigenous and immigrant children and families (Dei, 2007; Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2012). Thus, childhood is conceptualized as a universal and known phenomenon that disregards alternative discourses of childhood, such as Indigenous conceptions of childhood (Balliste, 2002; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Prochner, 2013; Pacini-Ketchabaw, Nxumalo, Kocher, Elliot, & Sanchez, 2010).

Reconceptualist ECEC scholarship that employs CRT disputes this view and posits that early learning settings are ideal sites for young children to explore race, identity and negotiate a positive sense of self (Escayg, Berman, & Royer, 2017; Holmes, Garcia & Keys Adair, 2018; MacNaughton & Davis, 2009; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Nxumalo, 2010; Taylor, 2011). This paper is concerned with understanding how conceptions and socializations of race and ethnicity transpire in Ontario, Canada's most ethno-racially diverse province. Ontario, and more specifically the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), holds one of the most diverse populations in the world. The largest share of immigrants, migrants and refugees in Canada call Ontario home. More than one quarter of Ontario's population is racialized and this trend is increasing, with Indigenous people as the fastest growing demographic in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2016). In the GTA (Greater Toronto Area), the proportion of racialized people is significantly higher; in Markham for example, 72% of the population identified as racialized, followed by 66% in Brampton, 54% in Mississauga and just over 50% in the Toronto core (Statistics Canada, 2016; Turner, 2015). ECEC settings in Ontario as social institutions are ideal spaces for Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) and children to engage in reflexive praxis and thoughts concerning identity construction, racialization and whiteness. Early

learning settings, therefore, should be reframed as critical social environments for learning about race and identity. When re-thinking ECEC we are discussing teacher pedagogical approaches, policy-making processes and their conceptions of diversity, equity and inclusion, as well as curricular documents that shall be discussed.

The early learning workforce varies extensively across Ontario and is composed of educators who range from those with no formal training to those with Post-Secondary education and certification with the Ontario College of Early Childhood Educators. Early learning settings can range from Full Day Kindergarten programs offered at all publicly-funded elementary schools in the province, to licensed and unlicensed childcare and home daycare centres, as well as Live-In-Care programs. We refer to early learning settings as those in publicly-funded, spaces such as elementary schools and licensed childcare centres.

This paper is grounded in a Critical Race theoretical framework and offers a reconceptualization of the ECEC landscape in Ontario, as a site of possibility and resistance for politicizing and re-imagining race, identity and belonging in early childhood pedagogies. It is divided into the following sections: reconceptualist approaches to ECEC, CRT, race and identity in young children, discourses of diversity in ECEC policy, and suggestions for practice.

Reconceptualizing and Re-Thinking Early Childhood

The international reconceptualist movement in ECEC emerged in the late 1980s and offered a paradigm shift that veered from traditional developmentalist-based theories that dominated, and continue to dominate, conceptions of children and childhood. In short, the reconceptualist lens provides a multidisciplinary framework to re-thinking early childhood and how adults interact with children (Bloch, 2014; Curry & Cannella, 2013). Reconceptualist theorists posit that dominant narratives about childhood and educating young children have been framed through Western norms and values of childhood development that are colourblind, neutral, ahistorical and (supposedly) apolitical (Iannacci & Whitty, 2009; Lubeck, 1994; MacNaughton & Davis, 2009; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Nxumalo, 2013; Silin, 1995; Taylor, 2007). These developmentalist discourses have been normalized and are based overwhelmingly on research conducted by and on white, cis-gendered, able-bodied researchers and children. They have greatly impacted ways of thinking about children and childhood, as well as educating young children, and so-called “best-pedagogical practices.”

Reconceptualists center the multifaceted lived experiences, perspectives, and ways of knowing about children, childhood, learning, teaching, and care to counter dominant perspectives. A common discursive norm reconceptualists have problematized is the concept of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), championed by the American organization of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Reconceptualist scholars critique DAP by arguing that it “others” those bodies who do not conform to its standardized categories of ‘normal’ human development, in the sense that it marginalizes social location (Berman & Abawi, 2019; Bernhard et al., 1998; Brown, Souto-Manning, & Tropp Laman, 2010; Lubeck, 1994, 1998; MacNaughton & Davis, 2009; Pacini-Ketchabaw, Nxumalo, & Rowan, 2011). Moreover, reconceptualists dismantle harmful norms of children as passive and, rather, seek to learn collaboratively with children (Diaz Soto & Swadener, 2005; Scheffel, 2009). Reconceptualist approaches encourage the consideration of power relations, and whose bodies, identities, and beings are privileged and whose are pushed to the margins in the developmentalist discourse narrative. This lens allows us to re-center the real world lived experiences of Black, Indigenous, refugee and migrant children in order to dismantle the assumption that there is only one proper way to grow, learn and be, especially in settler-colonial spaces such as Ontario.

Critical Race Theory

Taking up Critical Race Theory (CRT) in order to interrogate race and racialization in the context of early learning settings is in keeping with a reconceptualist approach, but has not been widely done. CRT (Crenshaw, 2011; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Matias, Vieska, Garrison-Wade, Madhavi, & Galindo, 2014; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2012; Sleeter, 2017) interrogates often-subtle power relations embedded in neoliberal equity and inclusion politics, notably, colourblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). This concept of neutrality claims that we live in a post-racial society, whereby meritocracy, the idea that both society and opportunity are equal and that hard work is rewarded with privilege. CRT is centred on the idea that racism is entrenched in society to the point that it is unacknowledged and normalized as the status quo. As DiAngelo (2018) writes:

Racism is deeply embedded in the fabric of our society. It is not limited to a single act or person. Nor does it move back and forth, one day benefiting whites and another day (or even era) benefiting people of colour. The direction of power between white people and people of colour is historic, traditional, and normalized in ideology. Racism differs from individual racial prejudice and racial discrimination in the historical accumulation and ongoing use of institutional power and authority to support the prejudice and to systematically enforce discriminatory behaviours with far-reaching effects. (p. 22)

Scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings (1999) indicated the four concepts of CRT as follows: (1) attention to the normalization of racism in society; (2) storytelling as a counter-narrative to white dominance; (3) the critique of liberalism where systems of racism and racialization are silenced; and (4) the emphasis on race realism. CRT disrupts racism and processes of racialization by challenging them. While CRT is often concerned with racialization in K-12 and Post-Secondary education processes, such as educational outcomes, streaming, expulsion and demographics of tenured and tenure-track faculty, it is an important lens to reconceptualise race in early childhood contexts (Berman et al. 2017; Bryan, 2018; MacNevin & Berman, 2017; Nash, 2013) and to reconceptualize refugee experiences in ECEC via RefugeeCrit (Strekalova-Hughes, Nash, & Erdemir, 2017). Central to CRT is the empowering of silenced voices by recentering them through story telling. Delgado & Stefancic (2001) contend:

Stories also serve as a powerful psychic function for minority communities. Many victims of racial discrimination suffer in silence, or blame themselves for their predicament. Stories can give them voice and reveal that others have similar experiences. Stories can name a type of discrimination; once named it can be combated. (p. 43)

Stories provide ownership to racialized and Indigenous communities in providing narratives and experiences of racialization. Ladson-Billings (1998) described the importance of counter narratives a means to dismantle white experiences as status quo. The personal narrative is critical and a transformational practice as “the naming of one’s own reality with stories can affect the oppressor” (p. 14). The importance of CRT to this paper is its focus on the problematization of the institution, ECEC, as neutral, bias-free and objective (Sleeter, 2017).

Under the dominant developmentalist discourse of childhood and child development, race is ignored or dismissed as irrelevant for young children. Children learn from a young age that one should not talk about race, and that people should pretend to not notice differences among people, especially those differences that deviate from social norms (DiAngelo, 2018). The common assumption that children do not see or pay attention to race is grounded in the reductionary Western belief that they are too young to understand and engage with race and identity (di Tomasso, 2012). These developmentalist beliefs of children as helpless beings that do not notice race is highlighted in various studies that suggest that many pre-service teachers and ECEs do not see race or racism as issues in their classroom, and thus adopt a colour-blind approach to children and their families by treating everyone the same (Berman et al., 2017; Han, 2013; MacNaughton and Hughes, 2007).

CRT is a relevant lens to employ in the Canadian educational context due to both its cultural and political proximity to the United States, as well as the two countries’ status as settler-colonial states. Both Canada and the United States share a history of brutal European colonization and appropriation of Indigenous lands and peoples. Thus racism is embedded in Canadian society and institutions, one of the most potent being the education system. Education has been a defining point of xenophobic genocide policies against Indigenous peoples, most notably through residential schools that forced Indigenous children from their homes and into church-run schools sanctioned by the Indian Act of 1867 (Blackstock, 2007; Cherubini, 2010; Comeau, 2005; Coutlthard, 2014). Furthermore, Canada shares a violent history of slavery and anti-Black racism with the United States. While Canada has often been imagined as a haven for fleeing enslaved African in contrast to the United States, slavery in fact flourished for over 200 years (Bakan, 2009; Tupper, 2011). Additionally, Black Canadians have been subjected to an onslaught of anti-Black racism including, but not limited to: educational and housing segregation, restrictive immigration policies, the exclusion of Black Canadians from attending post-secondary education, and exclusion from owning property (Bakan, 2009; Henry & Tator, 2009; Tupper, 2011; Turner, 2015).

Socialization of Race and Identity in Young Children

When theorizing the socialization of race and identity as well as processes of racialization on and with young children, it is important to do so in the context of settler-colonialism within which Ontario is situated. Settler-colonialism is a multifaceted structure premised on the continuous eradication and dispossession of Indigenous lands and communities with the goal of erasure as a means to justify the settler-colonial nation state, in this case, Canada (Snelgrove et al., 2014). Settler-colonialism is distinguished from colonialism by Tuck and Yang (2012). The difference is that “settlers come with the intention of making a new home on the land, a homemaking that insists on settler sovereignty over all things in their new domain” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 5). Thus racial socialization processes within settler-colonial societies are regulated and normalized by socializing institutions, including ECEC (MacNaughton & Davis, 2009). Embedded racism against Indigenous people and anti-Black racism are violent processes that are intertwined with white supremacy as status quo. Anti-Black racism in Ontario has amounted to disproportionate expulsion, push out and suspension rates of African-Canadians, in addition to the pushing of Black bodies, particularly Black male bodies, into the prison system (Dei, 2007; James, 2012; Kovalenko, 2012; Madan, 2016). Settler colonialism and CRT converge to challenge the ongoing displacement, appropriation and genocide of Indigenous peoples and land and the normativity of white hegemony that underpins structural and institutional racism in Canada.

In the Report: *Toward Race Equity in Education: the Schooling of Black Students in the GTA* (James & Turner, 2017), the authors draw attention to processes and practices of racialization in the GTA educational context that disrupt the common narrative of Canada as a ‘multicultural’ and peaceful nation. Racial hierarchies are socially constructed to designate resources, power and privilege to dominant social groups (Hogarth & Fletcher, 2018; Galabuzi, 2006; Leonardo & Zemblyas, 2013). Race has thus been a defining factor of settler-colonial Canadian statehood from xenophobic immigration policies, and access to resources such as housing, employment and education. Racialization plays out through categories such as “visible minority” that stratify the state hierarchy by socially excluding those who fit outside the norm of white settler-colonial identity (Galabuzi, 2006; White & Cooper, 2015). Galabuzi (2006) described racialization as follows:

Minorities are socially constructed entities in societies, and the label implies the imposition of an inferior status. They are often set apart by the majority group as incompetent, abnormal, or dangerous because of differences pertaining to race, gender, class and religion. Majority or dominant groups use these differences to distance themselves from minorities for the purpose of acquiring or maintaining privilege and power. (p. 31)

Processes of racialization are informed by developmentalist understandings of race, notably, the view that race is not a social construct, but rather a biological marker informed by visible phenotypical differences (di Tomasso, 2012). There has been limited study on young children’s conceptions of race, identity and socialization of race in Ontario and Canada in general. The existing studies find strong correlations between American and Canadian children’s perspectives, most importantly a pro-white bias (MacNevin & Berman, 2017; Escayg, Berman, & Royer, 2017; Pacini-Ketchabaw, Nxumalo, & Rowan, 2011). Most of these similarities are associated with their shared settler-colonial nationhood and their ongoing project of land appropriation and settler sovereignty (Veracini, 2010).

The idea that dialogue and critical conversations about race ought to be brushed off or silenced by adults and educators serves to minimize the impact of race in society, by shutting down the conversation with responses that pertain to only “good” or “bad” individuals being the perpetrators of racism, and contextualizes racism as individual actions, rather than complex social and institutional systems (Hagerman, 2019; Winkler, 2015). Children are constantly engaging with and constructing ideas and concepts about race and identity and the common developmentalist approach, which dismisses discussions about race as taking away from childhood innocence, reinforces the idea that discussions about race and racism are social taboos (Tatum, 2017). It also ignores the explicit racial socialization that takes place in many Black families (Dei, 2007; James, 2017).

A notable study carried out in the 1940s by Kenneth and Mamie Clark (1947) found that both Black and white children demonstrated a preference for white dolls when provided a choice between two dolls (a study that has been repeated many times with similar findings). A more recent study by MacNevin and Berman (2017) demonstrated parallel results. The study examined racial performativity in play in a Toronto childcare centre. The authors examined the interactions between two racialized girls engaged in play with dolls in the house centre. The girls demonstrated preference for white baby dolls and discarded the black baby doll they first initially picked up. Moreover, the children affiliated darker featured dolls with undesirable traits, such as “mean,” “scary,” and resembling a “witch” (MacNevin & Berman, 2017, p. 832). According to Escayg, Berman and Royer (2017), racialized children aged 3 to 5 already exhibit a pro-white bias. This is especially conspicuous in the settler-colonial Canadian context as with the advent of multiculturalism, many assume that Canada has materialized into a post-

racial society (Berman, Daniel, Butler, MacNevin, & Royer, 2017; Escayg, Berman, & Royer, 2017; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Reconceptualist work that utilizes Critical Race Theory (along with anti-racist approaches and/or post-structuralist approaches) demonstrates that rather than being unaware of race and identity, children are constantly engaged in meaning-making processes and are able to actively interact with the complexities of power relations to develop positive conceptions about race as well as difference (Berman et al., 2017; Boutte, 2008; Boutte, Lopez-Roberston, & Powers, 2011; Copenhaver-Johnson, 2006; MacNaughton & Davis, 2009; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Berikoff, 2008; Skattebol, 2003). By resisting the idea of early learning and early childhood spaces as racialized spaces and looking at children only through the lens of developmentalism, many ECEs find themselves unprepared to work in environments with children and other staff who are different from themselves; this finding will be further discussed in the next section (Berman et al., 2017).

Discourses of Diversity in Early Learning Policy

Discourses of diversity in the Ontario arena have undergone a fundamental discursive shift from multiculturalism, to equity and inclusion (Segeren, 2016). Equity and inclusion as discourse, while sounding more social justice oriented, are deeply informed by neoliberalism. As Veracini (2010) argues:

The politics of recognition embedded in the diversity and inclusion discourses of settler-colonial societies, not only assimilate/appropriate Indigenous ways of knowing, but strengthens the force of the highly individualistic Western assemblage by foregrounding the liberal rhetoric of freedom and equality. (p. 22)

Neoliberalism has effectively commodified diversity discourses by reframing them as representations of diversity, such as themed celebratory activities and events, for example school boards' Black History Month and Asian Heritage Month, or what DiAngelo calls "colour-based celebrations" (p. 26). These events and celebrations are those that occur outside of the daily Eurocentric curriculum and socialization of Eurocentrism and white privilege. Reconceptualist and CRT paradigms view race as fluid, as contextual, and as socially, politically, and historically constructed. Escayg, Berman, and Royer (2017) posited that Euro-centric societies such as Canada engage in the normalization and socialization of whiteness while simultaneously reinforcing commitments to equity, inclusion, diversity and childcare choices for diverse needs and family structures. The national myths (Thobani, 2007) of multiculturalism and the celebration of diversity Ontario so greatly prides itself on, fundamentally fail to take into consideration the very power relations that privilege whiteness as the social norm (Abu El-Haj, 2006; Berman et al., 2017). This colourblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2006) omits and shifts the onus of racism onto individual actors rather than a collective body politic.

ECEC equity and inclusion policies have origins in the American based Derman-Sparks (1989) *Anti-Bias Curriculum*. The Anti-Bias Curriculum approach encouraged positive views of difference and diversity as a means to facilitate stronger social cohesion in diverse societies. However, the *Anti-Bias Curriculum* mirrored Canada's additive multicultural educational initiatives by framing difference and diversity from a Eurocentric developmentalist lens, while at the same time omitting any discussion on how power relations inform social constructs of identity and race (Escayg, Berman, & Royer, 2017; Friendly, 2008; Vandenbroeck, 2010). While contemporary ECEC policies in Ontario, such as the *Early Learning for Every Child Today* (ELECT) and *How Does Learning Happen?* documents indicate the importance of equity, diversity and inclusion in ECE, these policies are insufficient for decentering white privilege and developmentalist norms entrenched in early childhood epistemological norms and practices (Berman, et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Pacini-Ketchabaw, Nxumalo, Elliot, & Sanchez, 2015).

Education is a responsibility delegated to the provinces in Canada and thus there is no federal oversight to ensure coherence between the provinces and territories (Robertson & Doyle-Jones, 2015; Simpson, James, & Mack, 2011). The omission of a cohesive federal ECEC policy framework is also staunchly evident (James, 2001; Waitoller & Kozleski, 2015). Thus it falls to the provinces to establish their own policy priorities; however, as it stands, Ontario, as Canada's most diverse province (Ballingall, 2017; Whalen, 2016) lacks an ECEC policy to ensure the proposed commitments of equity, inclusion and social justice translate into pedagogical action rather than diversity 'happy talk' (Ahmed, 2012). As Robertson and Doyle-Jones (2015) point out, there is a competing policy agenda enveloping early childhood learning in Ontario. The competing policy agenda places the dominant initiative of high quality programming and safety in conflict with policies of equity and inclusion whereby high quality

programming, with its focus on child development milestones, takes precedence. Berman, et al. (2017) contended that ECEs in the Anglo sphere might perpetuate racism and processes of racialization through colourblind interactions and practices (Bonilla-Silva, 2009).

Berman and colleagues' (2017) study is indicative that ECEs in the Toronto area are poorly equipped to engage children with issues of race, identity and incidents of in the classroom. Furthermore, MacNaughton and Davis (2009) highlighted the necessity of pre-service ECE programs and professional development training that focuses on race and antiracism education. The policy definitions of equity and inclusion are constructed in such a manner that they shall never transpire into more than mere 'laminated equity' (Lopez, 2013) as there is an omission of a focused and coherent naming of race and racism. MacNevin and Berman (2017) lamented the disconnect between early childhood equity and diversity policies and actual ECE praxis. For example, the most recent 2014 ECEC policy document entitled: *How Does Learning Happen?* fails to name race and racism, but rather takes a gentle self-reflexive approach that offers no accountability (Escayg, Berman, & Royer, 2017; MacNevin & Berman, 2017; Robinson & Doyle-Jones, 2015). The extant Canadian literature points to the calls for implementing antiracism education in both pre-service and professional development programs such as those provided through the College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE), the profession's regulatory body for the province of Ontario. The aforementioned scholarship suggests that ECEs lack the skills and training to engage in and respond to incidents of racism in early learning spaces, let alone engage in discussions about race with children or colleagues (Berman et al., 2017).

Suggestions for Practice

As we have discussed, young children encounter ideas, norms and concepts about race and racial socialization. Early childhood teachers often believe that not talking about race will minimize or eradicate racism in young children (Winkler, 2009). Educators thus cannot be in tune with young children's socialization of race and identity without asking them critical questions and engaging with them in this important dialogue. Psycho-developmental trajectories and norms of childhood development that dominate the Western childhood terrain discourage conversations about race as being developmentally inappropriate (Berman & Abawi, 2019). Colour-blind pedagogical practices are devastating to both white and racialized children by normalizing and perpetuating racial oppression. While colourblind pedagogies appear on the surface as neutral, they in fact exacerbate racial inequities by ignoring the experiences and lived realities of racialized and Indigenous bodies (Husband, 2012).

A reconceptualist paradigm demonstrates that young children are constantly engaged in meaning-making processes about the world around them and from the messages they receive from their world construct their own beliefs and ideas (Patterson & Bigler, 2006). These meaning-making processes cannot be understood in an isolationist vacuum but are influenced by the wider societal norms around them, one which is based on settler-colonialism and white privilege (DiAngelo, 2018). As Escayg et al. (2017) noted, children gravitate toward peers that look like them in play contexts. The authors contend that it is crucial for ECEs to actively monitor the conversations and play, as well as decisions made in these contexts, such as centres, reinforcing that social exposure to race and racism cannot be omitted or ignored, but rather must be engaged in. Escayg and colleagues' (2017) argument is also aligned with Patterson and Bigler's (2006) research that argued that young children develop favouritism and bias toward socially privileged groups, or pro-white bias. ECEC spaces are embedded in the wider social context from which they operate; they are thus microcosms of Ontario's settler-colonial society. As mentioned, children are constantly involved in meaning-making processes of racial socialization; if these encounters are never interrogated or situated, racialized socialization based on tenets of white supremacy continue to be transmitted through curriculum, media, family and peers and the wider community (Husband, 2012). Furthermore, colourblind approaches prevent children from accumulating the social tools necessary to challenge and deconstruct racism so they do not think that white privilege is a normal or natural state of society (Dei, 2007; Husband, 2012).

A study conducted by Holmes, Garcia and Keys Adair (2018) again dismantled the myth that young children are too young and innocent to talk about and engage with race. The authors argued that counter-stories as a method of CRT, which centre the lived experiences of racialized communities, can be written or oral storytelling (Bell, 1987; Delgado, 1995; Crenshaw, 1995). By centering counterstories as a challenge to Eurocentric norms and white hegemony, discourses about the 'other' are unpacked. The authors divide the counterstory pedagogical approach into three processes: the first is diversity, where children talk about their individual differences, such as likes and dislikes, favourite colours, gender identity and so forth. The second element is normalization where the 'colonial gaze' and discursive practices that portray racialized and Indigenous communities as exotic is dismantled

as the daily lived experiences of marginalized communities such as grocery shopping, community activities and other day-to-day experiences are normalized and polarization is diminished. These first two elements provide context for the final process, the historical connections, by setting a critical context of the inequities and injustices faced and currently faced by racialized and Indigenous communities. The authors posit that it is important not to victimize the communities discussed, but to demonstrate allyship and similarities between struggles across time and space. For example, the pain and trauma of residential schools is directly correlated to the 60's scoop and again to the current context of high proportions of Indigenous children in white foster care (Blackstock, 2007). The importance of context in setting the stage to discuss race and identity is critical. Schools cannot merely 'celebrate' Black History Month without contextual factors, nor can they teach about Black history as a homogenous account that only emerged at the onset of colonization. Indigenous histories cannot be examined from colonization as the only history that is studied, while ignoring generations of rich histories and epistemologies. One of the conclusions Holmes et al. (2018) came to during their study is the importance of teacher training and administrative support. The grade one teacher in this case was willing to discuss race and identity with her students because during her pre-service program, equity and inclusive anti-racist praxis was encouraged through 'courageous conversations' (Singleton, 2005). Furthermore, her administrative team was supportive of critical pedagogical praxis and encouraged their teachers to talk to children about race and identity.

Because children are constantly engaging in meaning-making processes about race and identity that are socially constructed and informed, ECEs must be mindful of their learning spaces, their own values, biases and beliefs, and how they speak to young children about race and identity. Furthermore, faculties must embed antiracism pedagogical praxis into their pre-service programs, as many continue to operate through only the developmentalist lens. As Ontario is becoming increasingly diverse, faculties and educators must become more effective in working with and meeting the demands of diverse populations; a way to do this is through the critical interrogation of their own social location as reconceptualist praxis. In order to do so, ECEs, and not only white ECEs, but all educators, as it is important to not assume that Indigenous and racialized educators will automatically implement critical pedagogies, must self-interrogate their own myriad identities and how their identities impact their encounters with children as well as programming. White educators in particular must effectively "own the emotional burden of race" (Matias & Mackey, 2016, p. 48). In doing so, whiteness as a social construct and racial identity must be acknowledged and with it the benefits and privileges it accrues. As Vinnik (n.d) articulates in relation to K-12 teachers (but the same is true for ECEs):

White teachers must be charged to explore the power of this history and its inherent assumptions. This includes an in depth inquiry of their own racial and cultural identities, which often generates considerable fear and discomfort, largely derived from fear of their own racism. (p. 4)

Conclusion

ECEs, as professionals who work closely with the public, ought to be cognizant of the complexities of their own positionalities as well as those of children and communities with whom they work. Early childhood spaces must be reimagined as spaces where social transmissions of race based on norms of white privilege are deconstructed so that children are prepared to counter racial injustices (Husband, 2012). Identities and social location are not neutral, but constructed through power relations in relation to white-settler normalcy, whereby concepts of citizenship, identity and belonging are also intimately implicated (Abawi, 2018; Lopez, 2013). Dei (2003) outlined the importance of educators understanding the complexity of identity, indicating "a key tenet is that educators must begin to understand their students through the lens of race as a salient part of their myriad identities" (2003, p. 3). The well-meaning tendency of colour-blindness and neutrality to identity and race perpetuate whiteness as the norm and deviations from whiteness as abnormalities (Gay, 2010). As Ontario's ethno-racial demography continues to flourish, ECEC in Ontario can be reconceptualised as an important and much needed space for the field to divorce itself from developmentalist norms to become political sites where race, identity and belonging are collaboratively explored and engaged in.

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