Critical Race Theory as a Lens Developed in Preservice Early Childhood Education Teacher Training Programs

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There is a pervasive false belief that young children are colour-blind and "racially innocent" and exist in "race neutral" spaces. A long-held belief in a universal model of child development underestimates children's ability to engage with complex topics, and racialized students' lived experiences are dismissed. Failing to engage in these discussions, educators could unknowingly neglect the needs of their students and fail to help children develop their cultural competencies. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the ways in which critical race theory can offer a lens through which to challenge the dominant ideology and sustained inequity in early childhood education and educational systems.

Key words: *early childhood education, early childhood teacher education, critical race theory, antiracism*

Critical race moments

Since December 2019, the COVID-19 health crisis has illuminated a significant number of critical race moments in a short amount of time. While this health crisis confirmed the health inequity among the world's nations, it also confirmed a more disturbing inequity among citizens within the same nation. Communities of Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC) in Canada and the US were disproportionately affected by the physical, mental, and economic consequences of the pandemic. Not too long into this health crisis, another ongoing crisis resurfaced, namely, the violence against BIPOC communities at the hands of police. The murder of George Floyd sparked the world's attention when videos of his death were released and shared worldwide. This injustice ignited the largest human rights protests since the civil rights movement of the 1960s (Silverstein, 2021). The violence against young Black citizens enflamed marginalized communities, leaders, and scholars to speak out against white supremacy and racism, bringing to attention the intersections of race, gender, and poverty within our society. In Canada, the conversation turned to reflect on the police violence suffered by Black Canadians and Indigenous people in our own communities. In recently obtained data acquired through a freedom-of-information request (Harrison, 2023), it was revealed that from 2016 to 2021, Black and Indigenous people across Canada had disproportionately high numbers of police calls made against them, in addition to having more charges recommended against them (Kulkarni, 2023). This has led to ongoing efforts in the US to malign and outlaw critical race theory and diversity and inclusion efforts in educational institutions, efforts that have picked up support in neighbouring Canada (Johnson, 2022; Ray & Gibbons, 2021; Schwartz, 2024).

Meanwhile, Canada, upholding its reputation as an inclusive, "non-racist," and welcoming nation, nonetheless continues to grapple with issues of race and racism. In May of 2021, ground-penetrating radar detected the remains of 215 young victims in an unmarked mass gravesite of a former residential school in Kamloops, BC (Coletta & Miller, 2021; Nardi, 2021). Shortly after, Tk'emlups te Secwepemc Chief Rosanne Casimir (2021) issued a press release confirming "an unthinkable loss that was spoken about but never documented by the Kamloops Indian Residential School" (p. 1). In the following months, countless Indigenous communities across Canada confirmed more lives lost, a few of many examples of Canada's racist, genocidal history and discriminatory policies. It is important to note that these systemic injustices are not only connected to a genocidal history but to a history of refusal to acknowledge and respect Indigenous sovereignty in Canada. Despite the initial story from Kamloops' Tk'emlups te Secwépemc First Nation and the subsequent radar detections confirming similar undocumented and unmarked graves near former residential schools by the Cowessess First Nation in Saskatchewan, Lower Kootenay Band, and Penelakut Tribes of BC, to name very few, which garnered worldwide attention and a rising toll of victims, Canadians have long evaded any serious discussion into Canada's colonial past of racism and discrimination. This, even after the tragic murder of the Salman family in London, Ontario, in June 2021 was revealed to be a hate crime motivated by Islamophobia. This violence was met with swift condemnation across Canada, labelled, like similar acts, as a one-time violent individual attack. Thus, the discussion of race and racism in Canada was again quickly extinguished. Canadians have yet to engage in nationwide, in-depth conversations that genuinely address and result in action against systemic and institutionalized oppression that endures to this day due to our steadfast belief in being an inclusive and welcoming society (Kubota, 2015).

Most significantly, we must acknowledge that, with social media and widely accessible technologies, systemic injustices such as George Floyd's murder, the discovery of mass unmarked and undocumented gravesites on former residential school grounds (Coletta & Miller, 2021), and the continued police violence used against Black Canadians and Indigenous people (Cole, 2020) continue to be laid bare for even our youngest children to witness. Through the use of ever-accessible technologies, our youngest citizens now see and hear the larger national conversations, messages, and images that reveal a troubled present and history (Kabali et al., 2015; Sachdeva & Adair, 2019). Moreover, the United States and Canada, as settler colonial states with very closely linked cultural and political contexts, share a brutal history of European colonization (Abawi, 2022; Escayg et al., 2017). Not only are racist systems embedded into the cultural fabric of these societies, but they are intensely connected to our educational institutions due to their colonial history (Abawi & Berman, 2019). In sharing this past, they also share a future in which both Canadian and American societies will continue to experience critical race moments.

It thus becomes our responsibility as educators to provide the tools and spaces for even our youngest citizens to engage with important topics of systemic discrimination and racism, as well as their rights as inhabitants of these nations. Often, early childhood classrooms are children's first encounters outside of the home; children may receive their first messages about the meaning of race and encounter racism for the first time (Farago et al., 2015). However, children's capability to understand and engage with complex topics has been underestimated, and our larger society has yet to let go of colour-blind perspectives that prevail within our educational systems (Boutte et al., 2011; Davidson et al., 2021; Farago et al., 2015; Houston, 2018; Sleeter, 2017). This can leave early childhood educators (ECEs) both unprepared and unwilling to engage in difficult topics (Farago et al, 2015; Husband, 2017; Kubly, 2022).

In the context of early childhood educational institutions, one way we can support young children to make sense of these events and the complex issues they highlight is to engage with critical race theory (CRT). CRT must become a lens of analysis that ECEs start to develop in their preservice training to understand critical race moments and systemic oppression, and then use in classroom practice to ultimately transform our society, its laws, and its

schools (Cook, 2015; Daniel & Escayg, 2019; Davidson et al., 2021; Lynn & Dixson, 2021; Sleeter, 2017). More specifically, future ECEs need to develop an understanding of how they can use the tenets of CRT as a tool to deconstruct whiteness, colourblindness, and racism in early childhood education settings (Davidson et al., 2021; Sleeter, 2017) and to evaluate the existing and proposed curricula they will be asked to teach.

In this article we discuss the ways in which developmentalist paradigms, notions of race neutrality, and fear can reduce the discussion of race and racism in early childhood education (ECE) to explicit acts of harm while undermining children's ability to conceptualize and understand race and identity. Then, we address the continued overrepresentation of white-identifying educators in ECE and its influence on pervasive colourblind and passive approaches to difference and diversity. Before moving onto our final discussion, we address the growing critiques of antibias curriculum that informs pedological practice in ECE. Finally, we consider the ways in which developing a CRT lens in preservice teacher education can expand the current goals of antibias education to take more active antiracist approaches in challenging and interrogating racism in young classrooms and broader educational systems.

Our positionality

It is important to begin by situating ourselves as the authors of this article. Negar Khodarahmi is a cis-gender disabled woman of colour and a fifth-year doctoral candidate in the intersecting fields of education, psychology, and human development. Her specific area of study is early childhood education and development. As a first-generation child immigrant and uninvited settler to Canada, Negar experienced the schooling system in Canada from the age of 8 years old into her postsecondary education. This influenced not only her worldview but her perspectives on education, learning, and research. Negar's research, teaching, and work throughout her career has included the topics of trauma-informed practice, antiracism/antibias education, disability advocacy, sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI), and nonprofit work with child immigrants and their families. She holds progressive views on childhood learning, development, and the need for social and financial equity in education. This can pose a potential bias in these contexts, but she strives to professionally contribute to the progression of the ECE field as well as all the other spaces she inhabits during her studies and work at one university in western Canada. Lastly, she has the privilege of knowing that her positionality will change with time and reflection, and she acknowledges that what she and her coauthor have written here may change in the future.

Dr. Laurie Ford is a cis-gender, white female who has worked in the fields of child development, education, and psychology for over 30 years as an educator and psychologist. She grew up as an uninvited settler in rural Kansas and Oklahoma, where she began her work with children and youth with diverse learning needs and their families, striving for more inclusive education practices. She is a second-generation immigrant to the US and the first generation of her family to attend university. She recognizes the privilege the support of her family in her pursuit of education provided despite economic and health challenges within her family of origin while growing up. An immigrant to Canada, she has had the honour and privilege to work with and learn from graduate students from diverse backgrounds from all over the world throughout her academic career, which has helped her to diversify her own teaching and learning.

Critical race theory

While its origins are rooted in a critical response to legal discourses and laws during the advances of the civil rights era, critical race theory (CRT) has since expanded beyond this discipline, having been more recently employed to examine race and racism in education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Ladson-Billings,

1998; Solorzano, 1997; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Yosso, 2002). Though heavily built on the existing ideas of two movements—critical legal studies (CLS) and radical feminism—CRT added an "activist dimension" that was lacking in CLS. Specifically, CRT exposed "the limited ability of traditional legal scholarship to adequately reveal how integral racism and racial subordination are in the everyday lives of people of colour" (Brown & Jackson, 2021, p. 17). CRT scholars agree that its key tenets can offer conceptual tools, a framework, and an analytical lens to interrogate how race and racism are institutionalized and maintained (Brown & Jackson, 2021; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Sleeter, 2017). Moreover, CRT can work toward the broader goal of dismantling all forms of oppression (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). Though there is no uniform agreement on CRT's key tenets, the following are the most frequently recurring in the literature and are the most relevant to this paper and its scope:

1) acknowledging racism as ordinary, permanent, and pervasive (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012)
2) recognizing whiteness as property (Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1998)
3) recognizing interest convergence (Bell, 1989)
4) challenging colourblindness, neutrality, and objectivity (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005)
5) acknowledging intersectionality and resisting essentialism (Crenshaw, 2017)
6) amplifying experiential knowledge through, for example, storytelling and counter-narratives (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

While some may define racism as beliefs and behaviours regarding the inferiority of people of another race, CRT theorists view racism as the normal, natural order—as ordinary (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). In 1977, David Wellman defined racism as "culturally sanctioned beliefs which, regardless of the intentions involved, defend the advantages [w]hites have because of the subordinated positions of racial minorities" (quote in Ladson-Billings & Tate, p. 55). Researchers have since deepened their analysis of oppression to include the intersections of race, racism, sexism, and classism, arguing that one cannot look at education from the CRT perspective without acknowledging the intersections of all forms of subordination (Crenshaw, 2017; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Yosso, 2002).

Furthermore, although it might appear that policies have been implemented to address these inequities, CRT theorists frame such policies as exemplifying *interest convergence*, a term coined by researcher Derrick Bell (1987), who argued that the Supreme Court decision hailed as the great triumph of civil rights—Brown v. Board of Education—may have resulted more from the self-interest of elite whites than a desire to help Black people. An additional tenet of CRT is that it challenges the "dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colourblindness, and meritocracy" (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005, p. 9) that disguise "the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 472). CRT holds that race and races are products of social thought. They are not fixed, objective, or biological; they simply serve to maintain white privilege (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). Thus, we must counter the notions of neutral and colourblind positions that work to diminish the acknowledgement of systemic and institutional racism and spread the messages of deficit discourses (Delk, 2006). To better understand the impacts of this privilege and its intersections with race, sexual orientation, and class, CRT theorists Kimberlé Crenshaw (2017) and Angela Harris (1993) introduced the notions of intersectionality and antiessentialism. Crenshaw (2017) argued that identity is made up of many significant parts of self, and the intersections of these parts must be viewed in their entirety. Even though North American society is organized along binaries, we must resist the essentialism of an individual's identity and group behaviours, recognizing that a person is not one single, easily identifiable, unitary identity (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). The final tenet of CRT presented here highlights

the most agreed-upon notion among all CRT scholars, which is the importance of experiential knowledge of people of colour and their unique voices (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2013; Sleeter, 2017). Stories provide a lens and point of view by which to understand and chronicle experiences of race and racism. CRT scholars use storytelling and counter-narratives as a critical tool in their deconstruction of majority narratives, dominant ideologies, and history as it is presented in our schools. Therefore, the notion of voice provides a form of communication for the oppressed to express their lived realities and to acknowledge and address racism.

Race and racism in early childhood education

Children are often seen as hypothetical future citizens rather than current and active citizens of our society, and their understanding and experiences of race, power, and privilege are minimized and silenced by a belief that they are immune to the impacts of oppressive systems. We choose to use the word *citizen* here to recognize children as equal rights-holders under Canada's charter of rights and freedoms. However, we continue to acknowledge that all non-Indigenous populations, including children, remain uninvited settlers in the settler colonial state of Canada. This is an important distinction that must be made because Indigenous children continue to experience an oppressive system that does not fully recognize Indigenous peoples' unique status as the Original Peoples within what we call Canada.

Moreover, developmentalist paradigms conceptualize childhood development as a universal experience and privilege trajectories based on established developmental milestones defined by the dominant Western conceptions of childhood. However, Abawi and Berman (2019) argue that developmentalism so meticulously tracks child development and insists on linear paths of development that it often serves to marginalize those children and families who do not meet these Western conceptions of childhood and human development. Thus, under the dominant developmentalist discourse of childhood and child development that ignores alternative discourses, it is unsurprising that children's experiences of race are ignored or deemed developmentally inappropriate. Developmentalist views reinforce the belief that children are innocent and unaware of oppressions.

Boutte (2008) argues that "the residual effects of living in a racially stratified society do not escape children's detection" (p. 167), and children are subject to the process of racialization as soon as they enter our social world (Houston, 2018). In fact, overwhelming research has confirmed that children of very young ages are aware of the cultural and physical differences that exist between groups as they begin to navigate this social world (Abawi & Berman, 2019; Daniel & Escayg, 2019; Falkner, 2019; Park, 2011). Not only do children begin to form their racial self-identity as early as 2 years old (Escayg, 2019b; Escayg et al., 2017; White & Wanless, 2019), children reproduce and perpetuate the racial discourses they gather (Boutte et al., 2011; Falkner, 2019), discriminate on the basis of race (Davidson et al., 2021; Farago et al., 2015), and show preference for their own group (Escayg, 2019a; Escayg et al., 2017; Park, 2011). Children of all races have also been observed as having pro-white biases that are reinforced through colourblind approaches (Abawi, 2021; Boutte, 2008).

Further, although the lay public may perceive early childhood classrooms as "race neutral" spaces, children have been observed to have extensive and nuanced conversations about race in the classroom (Falkner, 2019; Park, 2011), as well as experience microaggressions, a form of bias that can inflict injury on one's sense of self and identity (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020; Houston, 2018; Sachdeva & Adair, 2019). Moreover, scholarship has increasingly confirmed that the development of a positive racial identity is vital in buffering the harmful effects of racism and discrimination (Davidson et al., 2021) and developing positive self-esteem (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020; Escayg, 2018; White & Wanless, 2019).

One barrier in normalizing and engaging in these complex conversations is one of the most influential concepts that

affects ECE teaching practice: developmentally appropriate practice. The concept of developmentally appropriate practice is rooted in developmentalism and colourblind approaches that encourage only superficial discourse and analysis of race in early childhood due to a fear that engaging in complex and troubling topics too early will harm students. Developmentally appropriate practice is often cited as to why schools and educators fail to engage more deeply with the issues of racism and discrimination (Abawi & Berman, 2019; Boutte et al., 2011; Davidson et al., 2021; Escayg, 2018, 2020, 2021; Farago et al., 2015). Further, although today's teacher education programs commonly declare their commitment to social justice, culturally responsive teaching, and the incorporation of Indigenous ways of knowing and learning into their curriculum, preservice teachers remain predominantly white middle-class women (Abawi, 2021; Escayg, 2019a, 2019b; Farago et al., 2015; Leonardo & Boas, 2021). As Sleeter (2017) explains:

> In general, teacher education programs attempt to prepare their predominantly [w]hite cohorts to teach racially and ethnically diverse students through a course or two (often a foundation course) on multicultural education, culturally responsive pedagogy, teaching English language learners, or social justice teaching. (p. 156)

This preparation, however, does not significantly confront the power and effects of whiteness in teacher education and does little to alter the negative effects of the deficit lens formed when evaluating education outcomes of non-white students (Aikman et al., 2016; Pitzer, 2014).

Bearing in mind that educators, particularly in early childhood, are likely to spend more time with children during the school year than any other adult figures, it is safe to assume that educators may implicitly or explicitly send messages about the meanings of race and racism to children, and that children then internalize these messages in the process of socialization (Daniel & Escayg, 2019; Davidson et al., 2021; Farago et al., 2015). Moreover, as Farago et al. (2015) point out, the act of silencing racial topics is in itself a form of socialization, communicating to students that the topics of race and racism are to be avoided. To meet the needs of increasingly diverse classrooms, ECEs must develop their own racial and cultural competence in order to support the development of their students in doing the same (Farago et al., 2015). Janmohamed (2005) further argues that unless ECEs are explicitly "taught to recognize the dominant relationships inherent in racism, homophobia and class issues, they will be stuck in the notion that early childhood work is charitable, rather than becoming agents of change" (p. 163). We must remind ourselves that the ultimate goal in education is to build the foundations to transform and move our society forward. However, unless we equip all young children with the tools and moral imperative to recognize, disrupt, and actively challenge racism (Escayg et al., 2017), we will fail to prepare them for the critical race moments of the future.

Demographics of ECE teachers and whiteness

By sheer amount of time spent in school during the formative years, educators become some of the primary agents of socialization for children outside their families (Boutte, 2008; Boutte et al., 2011; Daniel & Escayg, 2019; Davidson et al., 2021; Derman-Sparks et al., 2020; Farago et al., 2015). In 2016, 96% of both ECEs/assistants and home childcare providers in Canada identified as women. Moreover, 76% of ECEs and assistants identify as white (Uppal & Savage, 2021). This is important to note, as our student populations continue to become more diverse but preschool, primary, and secondary school educators, as a whole, remain predominantly white, middle-class women (Abawi, 2021; Escayg, 2019a, 2019b, 2020; Farago et al., 2015; Leonardo & Boas, 2021; Sleeter, 2017).

The latest figures from 2019 reveal that three out of four childcare workers in Canada work full time and four out of five have permanent positions, suggesting that ECEs are likely to spend more time with their students during

the school year than any other adult (Uppal & Savage, 2021). Moreover, ECEs encounter children at a critical stage in development, during which children learn largely from listening and watching adults. Teacher education in Canada, despite claims of fostering diversity, often becomes a site for social reproduction (Marom, 2023). For this reason, Leonardo and Boas (2021) argue that in a field dominated by white women, we need to pay attention to how white women perpetuate racism, even though they constitute an oppressed gender group.

Farago et al. (2015) believe that ECEs can inadvertently or advertently, through verbal or nonverbal, implicit or explicit instruction and behaviours, send messages about the meaning of race and racism to their students. This cannot go unacknowledged, particularly when educators have been found to defer all talk of race and racism to parents (Daniel & Escayg, 2019; Farago et al., 2015), choosing to keep their classrooms "unbiased" and "free from racial topics." In fact, Evan-Winters and Hoff (2011) describe instances of outright resistance from white preservice teachers to learn about and deconstruct structures of oppression, blaming institutional complacency in teacher education programs. In their study with preservice teachers, Buchanan (2015) found that white preservice teachers often seem unaware of the function of their own whiteness, even in conversations focused on whiteness. However, Sleeter (2017) argues that addressing racism in teacher education and professional learning programs is not only possible but "a process of systemic cultural change, rather than a short term 'fixing' of a problem" (p. 164). Houston (2018) agrees that "it is the responsibility of those who benefit from whiteness to question personal perspectives as well as how practices and procedures in social, education and economic arenas can disadvantage some through racialized hierarchies" (p. 24). Most importantly, using central tenets of CRT to look deeper into the ways in which teacher recruitment, education, and training maintains whiteness and white interests, what continues to uphold the current domination of whiteness in the education field (Sleeter, 2017) and why, despite student populations becoming more diverse, have teacher candidate cohorts remained largely the same in Canada?

The flaws of the colour-blind perspective and developmentally appropriate practice

Sadly, despite new approaches and frameworks mentioned thus far that urge engagement with diversity and topics of race and inequity, colour-blind perspectives and approaches are nowhere more apparent and persistent than in ECE, our children's foundational education. Under an assumption that young children are too young or "racially innocent" to engage in activities that address racism and discrimination (Abawi, 2021; Abawi & Berman, 2019; Boutte et al., 2011; Daniel & Escayg, 2019; Davidson et al., 2021; Derman-Sparks et al., 2020; Farago et al., 2015; Houston, 2018), colour-blind approaches persist in ECE practice (Abawi & Berman, 2019; Boutte et al., 2011b; Davidson et al., 2021; Escayg et al., 2018; Escayg, 2019a, 2019b, 2020; Farago et al., 2015; Houston, 2018; Janmohamed, 2005). Further there is a pervasive belief that the youngest students live and operate in "race neutral" spaces, which dismisses the process of racialization that occurs for all children in North American society (Escayg et al., 2017; Falkner, 2019; Park, 2011). However, children are not isolated from the effects of racialization, and despite popular beliefs of lack of racial awareness, children do recognize racial difference, power, and privilege from the messages and cues they receive around them (Abawi, 2021; Daniel & Escayg, 2019; Escayg, 2019b; Escayg & Daniel, 2019; Falkner, 2019; Houston, 2018; Janmohamed, 2005; Park, 2011; White & Wanless, 2019). Houston (2018) also warns that racialization is not simply perpetuated through personal interactions but through institutional practices. The CRT lens reminds us that race and racism are embedded in our institutional systems and that when we engage this critical lens, we must challenge the pervasive misunderstanding that racism is perpetuated through individual actions rather than being a systemic, persistent actuality (Abawi, 2021).

Despite the many flaws of colour-blindness discussed here, these perspectives persist. In fact, they are bolstered by a long-held belief in a universal model of child development (Abawi & Berman, 2019; Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997; Derman-Sparks et al., 2020; Escayg, 2018, 2020; Farago et al., 2015; Houston, 2018; Janmohamed,

2005). This model of development, often termed developmentally appropriate practice, is dictated by a Western, Eurocentric perspective that all children develop in stages and it is our responsibility as adults to support children in moving through these stages at the appropriate time, with the goal of reaching their full potential of development. Developmentally appropriate practice perpetuates a belief that children are too limited in their ability to engage with complex topics at young ages, and racialized students' lived experiences of racism and discrimination have been dismissed (Boutte et al., 2011; Davidson et al., 2021; Escayg, 2020). Moreover, this model mistakenly asserts a standardized "norm" in human development that was initially based on white children's patterns of development (Abawi & Berman, 2019; Derman-Sparks et al., 2020). As Vygotsky argued, development and learning in of themselves, are historical, social, and cultural; in his view, human development is a result of the tools, concepts, and systems of cultural knowledge gathered over generations and communicated through informal instruction (as cited in Vadenboncouer, 2017). Thus, a universal, one-size-fits-all approach to child development is unlikely to be beneficial for student learning and growth in our schools.

The antibias education curriculum

In opposition to colour-blind perspectives, education scholars began a long journey of advocacy for more robust curricula and policies that addressed and embraced difference. In fact, many ECE equity and inclusion policies today have origins in the American-based Derman-Sparks Anti-Bias Curriculum introduced in 1989 in collaboration with the ABC Task Force and the NAEYC. In its first iterations, the antibias education (ABE) approach launched a push for "positive views of difference and diversity as a means to facilitate stronger social cohesion in diverse societies" (Abawi & Berman, 2019, p. 8). In this framework, teachers were encouraged to create a classroom environment that set the stage for children to have conversations about topics such as skin colour and racism with their teachers and peers. It called for spontaneous activities as well as planned learning opportunities to teach children to actively counteract harmful ideas of discrimination and stereotyping (Derman-Sparks, 1989; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010).

The ABE approach includes four goals for children:

1) Demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities

2) Express comfort and joy with human diversity, accurate language for human differences, and deep, caring human connections

3) Increasingly recognize unfairness, have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts

4) Demonstrate empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010).

Through their practice, educators are asked to integrate these core goals in "developmentally appropriate ways," as active participants, not simply neutral observers. In its latest edition published in 2020, Derman-Sparks' book on the ABE curriculum builds on the previous two editions. Its mission remains the same—"to support children's full development in our world of great human diversity and to give them the tools to stand up to prejudice, stereotyping, bias, and eventually to institutional isms" (p. 10)—and the newest edition attempts to update the language and concepts with new understandings and research over the years.

Critiques of the ABE approach problematize the ways in which ABE curriculum mirrors Canada's multicultural education initiatives by framing difference and diversity from a Eurocentric development lens. Derman-Sparks

and Edwards (2020) continue to urge teachers to work within developmentally appropriate practice, thus inadvertently limiting both the image of the child as a fully formed citizen and their cognitive and emotional capacities once again. Though the newest version of the antibias curriculum acknowledges that development is not linear, nor are the stages universal in experience, and it recognizes that the foundations of development are based on white children's development (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020), it fails to encourage educators to speak to the power relations that bolstered and continue to bolster these understandings of universal development. Moreover, the ABE approach spans myriad identities, addressing a diverse range of identities beyond race, such as disability, gender, economic class, and culture, without engaging with an intersectional approach (Escayg, 2018) and only briefly acknowledging the intersections of race and class. By not centering race, antibias teaching strategies can risk reaffirming difference, prejudice, and stereotypes because they fail to consider how systemic racism, whiteness, and power relations shape children's understandings and racial identities (Abawi & Berman, 2019; Escayg, 2018, 2019b). Therefore, it is crucial to train preservice teachers to use their own critical lens to evaluate approaches and curricula regarding race and racism in ECE.

Critical race theory as a lens developed in preservice ECE training

Critical race theory's tenets have long provided a framework for scholars to interrogate, question, and analyze the systems in which we live and how they harm marginalized groups (Chapman, 2011; Cook, 2015; Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2018; Houston, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1998, 1999; Lynn & Dixson, 2021). The central tenets of CRT—that recognize racism as ordinary, the power of whiteness, the necessary challenging of colour-blindness, the acknowledgement of intersectionality, and the importance of experiential knowledge—have allowed us to critique and question the ways in which our youngest students experience school and schooling (Ladson-Billings, 1998, 1999; Lynn & Dixson, 2021). That is, CRT has allowed for a more robust analysis of the social, cultural, and historical practice of racism in classrooms and our education systems (Houston, 2018) . It has allowed us to interrogate Western, Eurocentric perspectives that influenced our ideas of childhood and development, ideas we have embedded in our educational systems and which continue to dominate our curriculum and practice (Abawi et al., 2021; Abawi & Berman, 2019; Escayg, 2020; Fleer & van Oers, 2017; Sleeter, 2017). Most importantly, the CRT lens has allowed us to achieve the above when looking at early childhood settings, a place where these ideas were previously dismissed, silenced, and discouraged due to misguided ideas about children's development and understanding (Abawi & Berman, 2019; Daniel & Escayg, 2019; Davidson et al., 2021; Escayg, 2020; Falkner, 2019; Farago et al., 2015; Houston, 2018).

Therefore, preservice teacher education programs must support their future ECEs in developing the CRT lens as a part of their professional training programs. Introducing the central tenets of CRT to preservice teachers and helping them to ground their practice from this framework can greatly benefit ECE spaces. Teacher education programs can begin to reframe early learning settings as critical social environments for learning about racial identity (Abawi, 2021; Abawi & Berman, 2019) in which they are aware that they are active agents of socialization (Daniel & Escayg, 2019; Davidson et al., 2021; Escayg, 2020; Farago et al., 2015; Janmohamed, 2005).

CRT as a lens can be used to challenge and discuss racism in ECE classrooms and reject racial innocence, colour-blind perspectives, and false notions of neutrality and objectivity (Daniel & Escayg, 2019). Additionally, CRT can aid educators to deepen their practice in their contexts to reflect their own communities and spaces. For example, educators can use their own CRT lens when working with frameworks such as BC's Early Learning Framework in the context of working and teaching in BC. Additionally, in acknowledgment that ECE centres are far different than K–12 schools that have a set required curriculum, and that in BC, if they meet the licensing requirements, preservice ECEs can go on to open, operate, and manage their own ECE centres, we must reflect on how preservice

programs prepare ECEs to select, evaluate, and implement their centre's curriculum.

Thus, ECE teacher education programs must adopt an approach to their curriculum and training that encourages their ECE preservice students to foster and employ a CRT lens. This can be achieved through substantive discussions and interrogations of the systemic factors that lead to inequity in ECE (Daniel & Escayg, 2019), as well as ensuring that preservice teachers not only have a comprehensive understanding of systemic racism (Escayg, 2021) but are prepared to confront their own biases and beliefs through continuous self-reflection on their practice, the experiences of their students, their understandings of race in early childhood, white power and privilege, and the cultural norms of their context (Buchanan, 2015; Davidson et al., 2021; Escayg, 2019a). Lastly, they must be provided with ample opportunity to apply their knowledge in supporting the development of racial identity and awareness in both school and practicum work (Davidson et al., 2021).

Escayg (2020) cautions that "modern racism" is associated with beliefs about colour-blindness, denies the saliency of race, and sanctions racial inequities by overlooking systemic and institutionalized oppression. Put bluntly, the colour-blind perspective is tethered to white supremacy; it does not address the lack of racial representation, the Eurocentric curriculum, nor implicit teacher bias (Escayg, 2020; Husband, 2017; Janmohamed, 2005). Moreover, it actively works to silence the lived experiences of disadvantaged students (Dei, 1996).

Failing to equip children to understand and learn about topics such as systemic racism and its continued effects on their lives and broader communities is a further form of oppression. In fact, it is a teacher's moral imperative to discuss racial identity to support students in understanding their oppression and privilege. Further, addressing and understanding issues of identity, discrimination, and potential harm to the self are within the rights of children as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; United Nations, 1989). Articles 2, 8, 15, and 19 of the UNCRC address the rights of a child to live free from discrimination and unfair treatment, to be supported in developing their own identity, to be protected from harmful influences, and to participate in society. Moreover, Articles 17, 28, and 29 outline the ways in which children must be able to access information, education, and opportunities to develop their personalities, talents, and abilities. The realization, protection, and education of these rights are the responsibility of many stakeholders within Canada as a signatory nation (United Nations, 1989). However, our educational institutions and educators are two such stakeholders that must take the lead in shouldering this weight alongside parents and governing bodies. It is imperative that the image of the child as a rights-bearing full participant of society is recognized in confronting racism in ECE classrooms.

Challenging racism in ECE

Some scholars argue that educators' resistance to speaking to issues of race, colour, and racism stems from fear due to the workforce being predominantly white (Buchanan, 2015; Farago et al., 2015). Others believe that educators' reluctance stems from unfamiliarity and lack of resources (Boutte et al., 2011). A qualitative study done in the Canadian context revealed that all these notions were in fact contributors to ECE educator resistance. Daniel and Escayg (2019) identified four themes regarding race and racism in ECE classrooms: (1) educators' denial of racism, (2) speaking to racism only when the topic is brought up, (3) shifting the responsibility of teaching about racism onto the parents, and (4) the limited teacher education training on these topics. The authors argued that the identified behaviours served to perpetuate and legitimize whiteness as the norm. Further, they believed their participants' responses were consistent with the multiculturalism discourses of Canadian society as "welcoming, inclusive, and non-racist" (p. 22), despite research and lived experiences of racialized individuals indicating otherwise.

Confronting race in ECE requires confronting the many reasons ECEs may avoid discussing race and racism in

their classrooms. This requires the adequate preparation of preservice ECEs to feel confident and supported to discuss race and racism, whiteness, and the influence of Eurocentric views on classroom practices. Once again, it requires programs to encourage preservice educators to build and use their own critical lens when adopting the newest approaches or curricula in their practice. This can be achieved by allowing for multiple opportunities throughout their coursework and practicum work to reflect on and examine race and then discuss race with peers (Buchanan, 2015).

Discussing race in ECE

As discussed above, developmentalist paradigms such as developmentally appropriate practice continue to dominate the discourses of ECE preparation classrooms in Canada. Developmentally appropriate practice can cause educators to silence or minimize the abilities of children to engage with race and racial identity (Abawi & Berman, 2019; Boutte et al., 2011; Davidson et al., 2021; Escayg, 2018, 2020, 2021; Farago et al., 2015). Moreover, developmentally appropriate practice can undermine critical conversations and communicate to young children that discussions of race and racism are unwelcome, offensive, and uncomfortable (Boutte et al., 2011; Buchanan, 2015; Daniel & Escayg, 2019; Davidson et al., 2021; Farago et al., 2015; Michael Luna, 2016; Sleeter, 2017). Racism can be misinterpreted as one-time individual acts of discrimination rather than an endemic and systemic problem that must be continuously challenged and countered (Abawi & Berman, 2019; Davidson et al., 2021; Escayg, 2021; Farago et al., 2015; Houston, 2018).

Rather than fearing and silencing critical race moments in ECE settings, ECE classrooms should be viewed as ideal places for children to engage in reflexive praxis and interrogation of complex social events. The discussion of race in ECE is coupled with an already existing goal of ECE: to aid children in developing their own critical thinking about the literature, media, and social information they consume (Boutte, 2008; Boutte et al., 2011). And ECEs are responsible for increasing the complexity of children's schemas as they form ideas and concepts in their education (Farago et al., 2015). Thus, ECEs must be equipped to support children in reflecting on identity construction, race and racism, and whiteness when confronted with these concepts.

Learning about racism and its impacts can minimize experiences of microaggressions in the classroom and help to avoid stereotyping. Further, as participating citizens of Canada, children must begin to build a foundation of tolerance and respect for all Canadian citizens (Farago et al., 2015). Moreover, children must be educated in understanding and maintaining their own human rights and protections as citizens of a UNCRC signatory nation.

In order to confront race and move beyond simplistic engagement with issues of racism and inequity, Boutte (2008) argues that classroom practices must be (1) based on experiential knowledge; (2) critical; (3) antiracist and proactive; (4) participatory and experiential; (5) hopeful, joyful, kind, and visionary; (6) activist; (7) academically rigorous; and (8) culturally sensitive. Thus, educators must be brave in their practice and interactions in the classroom. They must be reflexive regarding their biases and encourage their students to do the same. Most of all, they must actively and continuously employ the CRT lens in their daily practice to question and recognize the ways in which power, privilege, and whiteness impact teaching and learning (Escayg, 2019b, 2020, 2021; Escayg et al., 2017).

When given the opportunity, children draw on their own experiences and cultural wealth in the classroom when developing their racial literacy and understanding (Davidson et al., 2021; Falkner, 2019; Houston, 2018; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Thus, it is important to remember that ECE students' experiential knowledge must be actively centered in discussions of race and racism. Conversations will be most effective if they are grounded in being present and amplifying child voice (White & Wanless, 2019). This requires that educators build a collective sense

of community, safety, and agency in the classroom to set the stage for racial conversations (Sachdeva & Adair, 2019). Moreover, it requires that preservice ECEs be confident in their own use of a CRT lens in ensuring the use of appropriate children's literature, learning materials, and resources to prompt conversation in their classrooms. In her study of first graders, Falkner (2019) observed students using their classroom community as a "pedagogical homeplace" (hooks, 1990, as cited in Falkner, p. 43) to consider concepts of oppression and power and inequity. The children's racial identities were often affirmed, and they demonstrated the ability to move beyond celebrating difference to engage with an antiracist approach.

Acknowledging whiteness and white power systems

A critical race theory analysis by Daniel and Escayg (2019) in their study of Canadian ECE programs reveals how the tenet of whiteness as property affects students' schooling experiences and influences educational spaces. Daniel and Escayg explain: "The power to determine what type of curricula is included in the program, and whose knowledges and perspectives are centered, all illustrate the discursive manifestations of property rights as tethered to whiteness" (p. 23). Moreover, whiteness, as viewed in CRT, is a socially constructed identity used to maintain the status quo and center itself as the norm. Since whiteness is perceived as the norm, educators and their students, drawing on their experiences in our shared social world, could create and maintain classrooms that reflect only white "image and likeness" (p. 6), rendering race and racial identity invisible (Escayg, 2020). In this way, whiteness dominates schools and marginalizes those who are not seen as being white despite their existence in these spaces. This "white racial frame," as Feagin (2010, p. ii) referred to it, serves to conserve the power and privilege of white people in our society (Escayg, 2019a; Houston, 2018). Whiteness can bring with it the normalization of microaggressions and an unintentional deficit lens through which all non-white students are viewed. Scholars have noted how this can manifest in both harsher disciplinary actions against non-white students (Falkner, 2019) and deficit theorizing when these students exhibit poor educational outcomes (Aikman et al., 2016; Sleeter, 2017).

In their observations of two first-grade classrooms, Sachdeva and Adair (2019) revealed how whiteness invades children's conversations about race, racism, and racial violence. They warned that even in highly skilled teachers' classrooms, whiteness can manifest in children's conversations, particularly when teachers are absent. When whiteness enters these conversations and is not properly challenged, it can bolster ideas of white privilege, power, and supremacy (Davidson et al., 2021; Escayg, 2019b; Farago et al., 2015; White & Wanless, 2019).

For this reason, we join many other education scholars in insisting that ECEs, particularly white ECEs, acknowledge white privilege and reflect on their own white racial identity and internalized biases, and how whiteness may impact their interactions with racialized children and their families, their decision making in the classroom, and their teaching practice in general (Abawi & Berman, 2019; Annamma, 2015; Davidson et al., 2021; Escayg, 2021; Houston, 2018). One effective approach is to utilize preservice ECEs' coursework with their practicum. For example, course instructors could position a reflective journalling component of their course in conjunction with a child case study or observations in the field. Through more purposeful blending of practicum and coursework, recurring opportunities for discussions and reflection related to race, whiteness, and colour-blindness can encourage preservice teachers to unpack their own positionalities (Buchanan, 2015).

The antiracist approach

As Cook (2015) has noted, even preservice teachers who acknowledge the importance of teaching about equity in their classrooms struggle regarding how to do this in the age of accountability, assessment, and standardized testing. CRT lends itself as a good framework and critical lens through which to understand and question race

and racism in the educational context, yet it is not a curriculum or set of strategies to employ in practice. However, one example of a curriculum that was founded on the CRT tenets is antiracism education. In contrast to antibias education, which is rooted in a developmentalist lens, antiracism was born of the CRT lens. While antibias curriculum typically focuses on addressing a diverse range of identities, antiracist education centers race in relation to other social identities. Antiracist teaching practices go beyond an appreciation of difference, focusing instead on institutional and individual mechanisms that oppress people of colour within education systems (Escayg, 2018, 2019a, 2020). Antiracist educators advance racial justice through activism and confrontation of racial power and privilege. Self-reflection is a significant component of being an antiracist educator and requires a comprehensive understanding of racism and the tenets of CRT.

The antiracism education approach is briefly outlined here as one example of using the CRT lens to challenge existing and pervasive approaches such as colour-blindness, racial neutrality, and antibias curriculum in transforming ECE. Other examples of approaches include culturally relevant/responsive teaching (Gay, 2002; Wlodkowski & Ginsburg, 1995), social-justice-oriented education (Oyler, 2011), and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997; Schnitzler, 2020). It is hoped that using antiracism as an example here demonstrates the process of continuous reflection and evolution required in our understandings of ECE, childhood, and the image of the child as we uncover more nuanced understandings of our educational systems and larger social environment. Antiracist education demonstrates from its foundations in CRT how we can address critical race moments in an ECE classroom by calling for courageous conversations about systemic and historical racism and resisting Western, Eurocentric perspectives and white supremacy.

Recognizing Eurocentric perspectives

As a settler colonial nation, Canada has a long history of weaponizing Eurocentric education against its Indigenous peoples. This violent history is often dismissed as a phenomenon of the past, but in truth, Canada continues to reinforce Eurocentric epistemic and pedagogical ways of knowing as the only legitimate forms of knowledge. While diversity, difference, equity, and inclusion are often raised in Canadian ECE policies and frameworks, the policies fail to decenter whiteness and developmentalist norms influenced by developmentally appropriate practice (Berman et al., 2017; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Taylor, 2015).

Further, without proper reflection and acknowledgement of the Western, Eurocentric perspective that dominates teaching and learning in our schools under the guise of equality and neutrality of assessment and curriculum, we risk viewing students through a deficit lens (Sleeter, 2017). Moreover, racialized young children risk harming their identity development by forming a double-consciousness and "white mask" (Houston, 2018). These psychological strategies, Houston (2018) argues, are the result of the unchallenged norms of whiteness within schools. Double consciousness, as Delgado and Stefancic (2000) define it, is the propensity of Othered people to see the world in terms of two perspectives at the same time: that of the majority race, which marginalizes, devalues, and demoralizes them, and their own world, in which they are normal. A lack of representation of non-white identities in the classroom can contribute to the acceptance of white as the norm. Being confronted with whiteness, children then hide their racialized identity behind a white mask to conform to expectations of the classroom. Houston (2018) warns of the harm and alienation this process can have on racialized children as they step into classrooms that do not reflect their everyday life in their own homes and communities.

Therefore, it is necessary to decolonize ECE curricula (Abawi, 2022). This process must not fall on ECEs alone; however, in the context of Canadian ECE and lack of federal oversight, it often does. Though the BC Ministry of Education and Child Care provides many resources on decolonizing education, it is once again imperative that

preservice training programs prepare future ECEs to confidently undertake and confront Eurocentric perspectives in their own capacities. This is something they can only achieve through a well built and frequently employed CRT lens.

Concluding thoughts

Without proper preparation and training, we do a disservice to preservice educators who will eventually come face to face with the issues of racial identity, power, discrimination, and racism in their increasingly diverse ECE classrooms (Boutte, 2008). Critical race theory has been underutilized in the teacher education field. In its least effective form, a CRT lens could aid teachers in confronting the causes and contexts of unequal and inequitable education outcomes. At its most effective, it can help teachers center race in their ongoing practice to actively counter its cumulative negative effects on ECE. As the CRT framework has aided education scholars in interrogating and confronting race, racism, colour-blindness, whiteness, and Eurocentric views of education, it can aid ECEs to do the same in their training and practice. It can encourage the bravery needed to confront discussions of race, whiteness, and power in the ECE classroom. And this begins by developing a CRT lens early in their preservice programs. By gaining a comprehensive understanding of racial issues and CRT tenets and using a CRT lens, ECEs can better support their young students in learning about, understanding, and connecting racial injustices of the past and present. As Cook and Bryan (2024) argue, "critical race theory can serve as an important pedagogical intervention to help children envision a world not yet realized" (p. 3). Lastly, CRT encourages a structural approach to transforming teacher education. It asks for changes, from the institutional to the personal level, involving all parts of the ECE community, from course directors to recruitment and retainment strategists at the institutional level. This work remains a vital part of recognizing children as rights-bearing citizens and full participants in society.

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