Reimagining Early Childhood Education through Social Justice

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Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development
22nd Annual Summer Institute

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Canada
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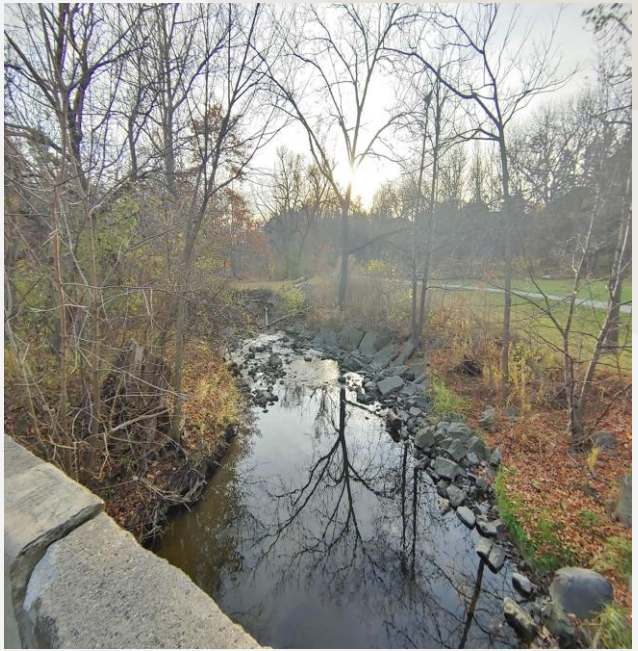
Land Acknowledgement

Tkaronto *also known as Toronto is in the 'Dish With One Spoon Territory'. The Dish With One Spoon is a treaty between the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas and Haudenosaunee that bound them to share the territory and protect the land. We are all treaty people who have a responsibility to maintain the spirit of the Dish with One Spoon covenant.*

I also acknowledge the many people of African descent whose ancestors were forcibly displaced as part of the transatlantic slave trade, brought against their will, and made to work on these lands.

Together as members of communities, we can work to challenge and dismantle such forms of ongoing oppression through small and large acts of change.



The Huron Wendat trail running along the Black Creek near my home where I go for walks, bike rides, and attempt runs.

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Agenda

1. Exploration activity
2. Context
3. Honouring Black Mothers
4. Honouring Black RECEs
5. Takeaways
6. Gratitude & contact

Exploration activity

Placed into an educational program without your family's knowing	Suspended or expelled from school/ECE setting	Fear of deportation when filling out school forms/documentation
Told to take a particular course because it "was easier"	Need to become an advocate for a sibling or family member.	Told by family you need to work twice as hard
Told you are too loud	Told your smart for a *(insert race)* person.	Asked for a 'pass'
Parents/caregivers had to advocate/intervene in school for you.	Asked where are you from	Was told "it's just a joke"

Educational experiences activity developed by J. Brady

Moving beyond bias

- Dr. Kerry-Ann Escayg has described the merits of an anti-bias curriculum
  - Fostering positive social identities
  - Valuing children from all racial groups
- However, Dr. Escayg challenges us in the field of **early childhood education and care (ECEC)** to move beyond acknowledging varying identities which:
  - Leaves power dynamics such as racism, white supremacy, and white privilege unchecked
  - Draws on surface-level understandings of children's social worlds rather than connections of racial injustice from the past to the present

(Escayg, 2024)

Think back to 2020

- When and how did you learn about the killing of Mr. George Floyd?
- What commitments did you make during the racial awakening of that time?
- What actions did you take? Where are we today?

'I can't breathe': why George Floyd's words reverberate around the world

Ben Okri

These few words should become the mantra of oppression – and spark the real change our world so desperately needs

'That police officer who pressed his knee on George Floyd's neck snuffed out one life, but lit a universal fire.' Protesters and mourners march with Terrence Floyd, George Floyd's brother, across Brooklyn Bridge, New York, on 4 June 2020. Photograph: Marie Le Ble/Zuma Wire/Rex/Shutterstock

Flash forward to 2026

- Where are we today in the field of ECEC?

- What changes have been made to address systemic anti-Black racism?

DEI Was Always Flawed, but the Backlash Is Truly Alarming

The right is latching onto the idea of "merit" as a cover for something darker

BY PACINTHE MATTAR

Updated 8:45, Mar. 26, 2025 | Published 6:30, Mar. 26, 2025

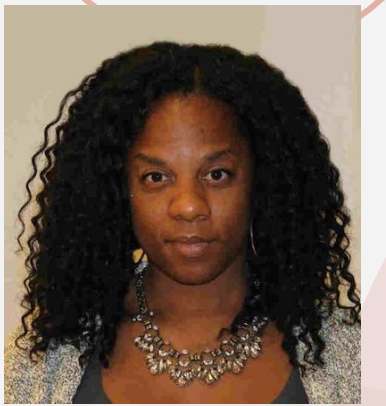
This article was published over a year ago. Some information may no longer be current.

iStock / Ana Luisa O. J.

Challenging anti-Black Racism in ECEC

- Scholars have pinpointed the prevalence of anti-Black racism in ECEC and right here in Canada (Kissi & Ewan, 2023; Nxumalo, 2021; Brady & Berman, 2025)

- Community leaders have also stood up to challenge the prevalence of anti-Black racism in the field (Royer, 2021)



Barriers to Social Justice

Road blocks

Waves and fleeting moments

Barriers to Social Justice in ECEC

"But they are too young"	*"African American children…"*	*"I don't see colour"*	*"We cover that in Black History Month"*
Childhood innocence	**Not being explicit: Say Black**	**Colour-blind approaches**	**Tokenism**

Barriers to Social Justice in ECEC

- **Childhood innocence:** assuming that children are too young to engage in their social worlds (Garlen, 2019)
- **Lack of explicit naming:** shying away from explicit naming, say Black! (Brady, 2022; Jean-Marie & Lopez, 2021)
- **Colour-blind approaches:** assumptions that avoiding race is the polite or fair approach (Berman et al., 2017)
- **Tokenism:** surface level celebratory approaches towards children's complex identities (MacNevin & Berman, 2017)

Backdrop: the state of the field of early childhood education (issues with hiring and retention of RECEs; funding issues; racial pay disparities within a women and gender-diverse dominant workforce) (L. Hu, personal communication, April 22, 2026; Toronto Children's Services, 2023; Akbari et al., 2024)

Beyond inclusion and diversity

- Systems approach that starts with the self
  - Socio-emotional competencies and anti-racist pedagogy (Escayg, 2024)

- Anti-racist approach to achieve social justice
  - Intersectionality is central must include Trans, queer, disabled, poor, living with precarious immigration status and all systemically oppressed people
  - Unpacks power rooted in systems
  - Moves beyond the individual level but requires individuals to act
  - Ongoing and deep work

Honouring Black Mothers

Centring Black mothers' knowledge-base

- Pro-Black approaches (Boutte & Compton-Lilly, 2022): honouring the brilliance of Blackness through liberatory approaches

> *"I try to bring them out to events most of the time, they (her children)...go to wild water Kingdom or like typical things that you do in Toronto, but I try to also bring them into cultural stuff, too, so they know who they are because I know there's not a lot of like representation about being Black or even me like wearing a headscarf. So I tried to let them know even though we're running around doing what everyone else is doing. We still have to like, know where we're from. "*
>
> ***Forgotten Voices Project, study participant, Muna***

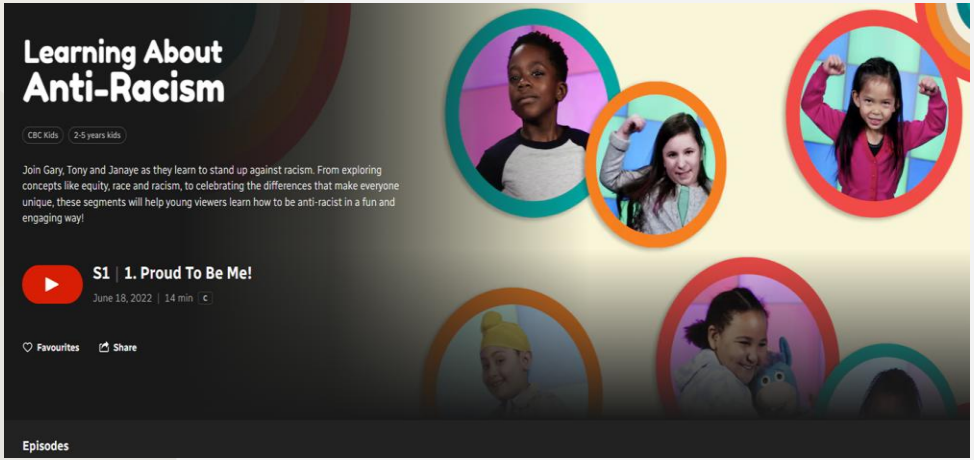
Honouring Black Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs)

- Refrain from saying ‘ECEs need to build an inclusive practice’ - not all ECEs are the same
- Many Black ECEs are actively challenging while experiencing systemic anti-Black racism (Brady et al., 2025; Pimentel et al., 2023)
  - Starting with the self
  - Not a one size fits all

“I just always looked after the Black kids because, like, I look out for all kids, but I realized that there was so much racism, that I just felt like it was my responsibility to show all kids that we all belong, but I just felt like over the 20 years like I'm the only one doing this and not the staff, so I just felt okay, then I'll just do it. I couldn't wait on anyone to do it. So I just did it…”

Honouring Black Refusals, study participant, Jarvine

Centring children, families, and communities



CBC Kids Special on Learning about Anti-Racism

Launch of a Black Childhoods in Canada course at TMU

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Takeaways

- Unique lives and entry points
- Social justice as ongoing commitments and work
- Humility and grounded approach
- Amplify Black voices in programming, policies, and practices

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Question & Answer

Asante Sana!

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Resources

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- CBC Kids Learning About Racism Special
- Fostering equitable care for Black children and families, College Talk, College of ECEs in conversation with Tonja Armstrong-MacInnis, Deirdra Joseph and Nicole Cummings-Morgan, co-leads of the Community of Black ECEs, an Association of Early Childhood Educators Community of Practice
- Parents of Black Children

Resources

- With Black Children in Mind: A Creative Reflection of Centering Pro-Blackness/Anti-Racism in Early Years Literacy by Dr. Kerry-Ann Escayg, 6(1), 42-54.

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