8

Decolonising Early Childhood Curricula: A Canadian Perspective

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Introduction

Within the early childhood education landscape, children are oftentimes portrayed as racially innocent and oblivious of racial differences among people. However, numerous studies suggest that young children are aware of cultural and visible differences between themselves and others, at as young as six months of age (Aboud, 1988; Byrd, 2012; Escayg et al., 2017; Robertson & Doyle-Jones, 2015; Xiao et al., 2017). Additionally, young children demonstrate positive and negative attitudes and dispositions towards their own racial communities as well as others. While Canada is often touted as a multicultural haven due to its diverse population and refugee settlement programmes, a 2019 United Way Report entitled: *Rebalancing the Opportunity Equation* demonstrates that Black, Indigenous and other non-white communities are being left behind their

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M. L. Moncrieffe (ed.), *Decolonising Curriculum Knowledge*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13623-8_8

white counterparts in terms of income, employment and housing. The Canadian context cannot be divorced from the settler-colonial landscape, which continues to drive policy and curricula from the early years to higher education. This chapter will focus on the Ontario context, Canada's largest and most diverse province and apply an anti-colonial theory to critique discourses of diversity in Canadian early childhood curricula by drawing on the 'discursive shift' from multiculturalism to equity and inclusion permeated by neoliberalism. Early learning policy and curricula is encountering a competing agenda between narratives of equity and inclusion as commodified diversity, and discourses of choice and accountability.

Access to Childcare and Racial Inequities

Inequities are prevalent across the Canadian early childhood education arena, as Canada is unique among its peers for lacking both a national education department, as well as a national early childhood education strategy (Friendly et al., 2016). Thus, high-quality care is often a privilege reserved for the wealthy, rather than a human right for all Canadians. Canada's early childhood education programmes, funding and structures are responsibilities designated to the provinces and territories without federal oversight. This fragmented approach is largely attributed to the division of powers between federal, provincial and territorial governments (Friendly et al., 2016). Due to the lack of a national childcare strategy, childcare operates within the framework of mixed market-based approaches that value neoliberal discourses of choice and equity (Eizadirad & Portelli, 2018). A report released by Oxfam Canada in 2019 titled *Who Cares? Why Canada Needs a Public Childcare System* noted that:

> … compared to its OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) peers, Canada comes in lowest in public spending at merely 0.3% of the GDP (Gross Domestic Product), which is well below the international benchmark of 1% of GDP. (p. 15)

As such, the provinces and territories have significantly different fee systems for childcare programmes, with Quebec having the lowest childcare costs and Ontario the highest (Eizadirad & Abawi, 2021). Median monthly fees for childcare are highest in Toronto, Ontario's capital and Canada's largest city, whereby daily fees are as follows: infants at $96.20 per day, toddlers at $89.95 and pre-school at $68.25 per day (City of Toronto, 2021). Under these circumstances, Black, Indigenous and racialised children and families are often barred access to high quality, affordable childcare as the deficit in wage gaps between Black, Indigenous and racialised people compared to white people in Ontario have not budged for over 35 years (United Way, 2019). Black, Indigenous and racialised Ontarians continue to be overrepresented in precarious labour, unemployment, underemployment, housing insecurity and health disparities (Colour of Poverty, 2019). These racial disparities in access to opportunities and services, such as education and childcare expose cracks in Canada's mythical narrative as a nation of equity, peace, tolerance and liberal multiculturalism (Abawi & Eizadirad, 2020; James & Turner, 2017; Shah, 2019). Access to services and these ensuing disparities are a result of ongoing colour-blind policies that perpetuate inequities between Black, Indigenous and racialised communities and white communities. As Canadian, and Ontario in particular, demographics become increasingly ethnically diverse, with 29% of Ontario's population self-identifying as racialised and Indigenous identity as the fastest growing demographic in the province (Statistics Canada, 2016), the push for equitable and accessible, high-quality childcare is at the forefront.

Settler Colonialism and Early Childhood Education

The imposition of Eurocentric education has long been a defining component of settler-colonial brutality on the part of the Canadian government against Indigenous people. In May 2021, a mass grave containing the bodies of 215 Indigenous children, from the age of three, was located at Canada's largest residential school in Kamloops, British

Columbia (Little, 2021). This uncovered for all to see the grotesque truth about the Canada's history, built upon a violent settler-colonial legacy and its intent on hiding this shame by seeking to erase from memory the genocide inflicted upon its Indigenous peoples. Moreover, Canada is plagued by an epidemic of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG), whereby a total of 1181 Indigenous women and girls remain missing and 1017 have been murdered, highlighting the disproportionate violence, brutality and racism Indigenous women and girls encounter (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2018). Indian Residential Schools (IRS) were established under Canada's first Prime Minister John A. Macdonald in 1883, with the intent of forced assimilation to Eurocentrism (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). It is estimated that between 1883 and 1996 more than 150,000 Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their homes and sent to IRS (Haig-Brown, 1988). The IRS were not schools, but rather forced labour camps of abuse, and where neglect and violence ran rampant. What is also evident from this enforced educational and cultural indoctrination is genocide. Thousands of Indigenous children were murdered or went missing while attending these schools (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). Blackstock (2007) argues that residential schools never really shut down but were rather morphed into the child welfare system as disproportionate numbers of Indigenous children are taken from their homes and placed in non-Indigenous foster care, ensuring continued racial trauma.

The IRS system was established under Canada's Federal Indian Act (1876), a legislation that continues in existence today. The Federal Indian Act allocates to the federal government full control over Indigenous lives, such as reserves, funding, blood quantum rules, mobility and policies. Tuck and Yang (2012, p. 5) differentiate between settler-colonialism and other forms of colonialism as follows: 'settler colonialism is different from other forms of colonialism in 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'.

This self-claimed sovereignty of European settler-colonialism dictates the writing of educational policies in Canada, segregating the

white (European heritage) Canadian beneficiaries from the disenfranchised Indigenous peoples, thus preventing and hindering their self-determination and resurgence. In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was released. This was a similar process to the post-apartheid South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission established in 1995. The Canadian process provided statements of IRS survivors as well as 94 *Calls to Action* (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). An entire segment of the TRC *Calls to Action* was dedicated to education, which called for 'culturally appropriate early childhood education'. The TRC calls on early learning programmes to embed Indigenous epistemologies and pedagogical practices that have been marginalised by settler-colonial, Eurocentric dominance. However, many of the TRC *Calls to Action* have yet to materialise and encounter ongoing resistance, predominantly on the part of white settler-Canadians (Thom, 2021) as the socialisation of Indigenous, as well as Black and racialised children into the 'white racial frame' (Feagin, 2009) in terms of teaching practices and interactions between educators, children and families continue to thrive.

Decolonising Early Childhood Education Curricula

Anti-colonialism is often dwarfed by the more mainstream post-colonial discourse, which essentially assumes that resistance to colonialism is a phenomenon of the past, rather than an ongoing struggle (Dei & Simmons, 2012). Settler-colonialism is a myriad structure based on the ongoing displacement and dispossession of Indigenous people and lands (Snelgrove et al., 2014). The Canadian nation state continues to impose an all-encompassing assault on Indigenous people, their lands; their ways of being and knowing with the intent of its full destruction (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Waziyatawin (2010) argued that anti-colonialism challenges settler power relations and advocates for Indigenous knowledge recovery and resurgence that dismantles the dominance and fallacy of Eurocentric and European hegemony.

Citizenship, belonging and identity are foundational constructs of settler-colonialism, especially when it comes to education. Eurocentric epistemic and pedagogical ways of knowing are conceptualised as the only legitimate forms of knowledge (Cherubini, 2010; Coulthard, 2014; Razack, 2015; Thobani, 2007). Ontario has witnessed an onslaught of equity and inclusive educational policies that have undergone what Segeren (2016) calls a 'discursive shift' from liberal multiculturalism to neoliberal discourses of equity, diversity and inclusion. Neoliberal equity, diversity and inclusion narratives effectively commodify difference and 'other' or exoticise difference, thus normalising whiteness and the socialisation of whiteness while also perpetuating commitments to equity and the need for choices to meet the diverse needs of students and families (Abawi & Berman, 2019).

Early childhood curricula in Ontario is largely based on Western psychological-developmentalist norms of children and childhood that privilege Eurocentric concepts of developmental trajectories (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Nxumalo, 2013; MacNaughton & Davis, 2009; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Nxumalo, 2013; Iannacci & Whitty, 2009). Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) is foundational to the psychological-developmentalist approach, which effectively pathologizes children and families that do not conform to rigid concepts of development (Abawi & Berman, 2019; MacNaughton & Davis, 2009; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2011). Coupled with developmentalist narratives and practices, much of Ontario's early childhood curriculum is rooted in the 1989 US-based Derman-Sparks *Anti-Bias Curriculum*. This curricular approach is premised upon positive views of diversity, or what Ahmed (2012) would term 'happy diversity' framed as a colour-blind narrative that fails to acknowledge race, whiteness or power relations.

Ontario's two main early childhood education policy documents *Early Learning for Every Child Today* (ELECT, 2007) and *How Does Learning Happen?* (2014), outline the importance of infusing diversity, equity and inclusion into early learning, however, they fail to decentre white privilege and developmentalist norms (Berman et al., 2017; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Taylor, 2015). Further, a competing policy agenda exists in Ontario's early childhood landscape, by which the dominant goal of high-quality programming is placed in conflict with equity, diversity and

inclusion (Abawi & Berman, 2019; Berman et al., 2017; Robertson & Doyle-Jones, 2015). In turn, notions of high-quality early learning, which continues to privilege Eurocentric psychological-developmentalist trajectories and milestones is prioritised, thereby marginalising Indigenous ways of knowing, as well as the lived realities and experiences of Black and other racialised children, families and communities.

(Race)ing Forward: Identity as Contested Space in Early Childhood

Race, identity and Indigeneity are often downplayed and unacknowledged in early childhood education due to the hegemony of psychological-developmentalist norms that depict young children as too young or innocent to notice race or racial injustices. Racial socialisation within the settler-colonial context is policed by socialising institutions, such as education (MacNaughton & Davis, 2009). Anti-Indigenous and anti-Black discourses of racism rooted in Canada's genocidal past continues to thrive in the present. Constructs of race and racialisation operate through developmentalist ideas of race, such as the view that race is innately biological, rather than a social construction (Di Tomasso, 2012). While there have been limited studies on Canadian children and race, extant research points to similarities between American and Canadian children's perspectives, most notably a pro-white bias among white as well as non-white children (Escayg et al., 2017; MacNevin & Berman, 2017). These correlations between American and Canadian children cannot be divorced from their shared settler-colonial contexts (Veracini, 2010). However, conversations and interactions concerning race and identity in the early years continue to be silenced by educators as taboo subjects (Tatum, 1997). Although young children are constantly engaging in meaning-making processes and constructing ideas about identity, these issues are pathologised as somehow deriving children from their innocence. Studies continue to point to a lack of educator training and skills to effectively engage in and respond to topics of race and identity in early learning (Berman et al., 2017).

While the TRC *Calls to Action* on education have failed to materialise, environmental and land-based pedagogies have garnered increasing traction, effectively appropriating Indigenous epistemic traditions in the name of settler-colonialism (Nxumalo & Cedillo, 2017). These outdoor initiatives, such as forest schools are commodified and marketed by early learning programmes that fail to even acknowledge, let alone disrupt settler-colonialism. The ongoing erasure of Indigenous place-based education, stories and land perpetuates settler-colonialism, such as the forced removal of Indigenous people from their lands in the name of land appropriation for recreational intents (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Educational policies and practices continue to be premised upon exclusionary practices and the socialisation into norms of whiteness and psychological-developmentalist norms.

Conclusion

The decolonisation of early childhood education must start with the formal termination of the Indian Act. This will provide Indigenous self-determination and resurgence, as well as solidarity and allyship with Black and other racialised people. Early childhood educational spaces must be reconceptualised as politicised spaces whereby neoliberal discourses of diversity, equity and inclusion are dismantled, as such narratives seek to divide Indigenous, Black and racialised bodies, rather than coalesce allyship and solidarity required to resist white privilege, whiteness and Eurocentric developmentalist discourses that marginalise non-white bodies. Early learning and educational policies are embued with generalisations about diversity, rather than implementing anti-racist and anti-colonial practices to interrogate settler-colonial norms of education and learning. Rather than acknowledging these settler-colonial power relations, educators often take on cultural competence training to deal with and respond to difference, approaches that maintain Canada's settler-colonial hegemony, while simultaneously promoting Canadian identity as one of peace and social cohesion. Equity, diversity and inclusion thus remain as superficial buzz words as competency training takes precedence over antiracism and anticolonialism. Education

must be a space where decolonisation is centred to resist psychological-developmental paradigms of children and childhoods, individualism over collectivity and ongoing oppressive structures that serve to segregate Black, Indigenous and racialised children, families and communities, rather than fostering dialogue, solidarity and allyship. At the very heart of the decolonisation of education, it must be acknowledged that children, educators and families reside within a settler-colonial context sustained on the continuing genocide and erasure of Indigeneity.

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