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## Investigating the Perspectives of Early Years Professionals' Anti-Racist Practices

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Education

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# Abstract

This qualitative case study explored the perspectives and experiences of early years professionals engaging in anti-racist practices in Ontario licensed child care settings. Critical race theory and whiteness studies were the guiding theoretical frameworks for the study. The qualitative case study draws from semi-structured interviews with four early years professionals working in licensed child care settings. Based on the experiences of the early years professionals, there seemed to be an overall lack of in-depth continuous anti-racist practices among the participants. The findings highlight that the participants engage in anti-racist work using play materials, videos, and discussion-based learning with children. Some participants noted a lack of deep understanding of anti-racism and, therefore, a lack of engagement in anti-racist practices. The themes that emerged from participants' experiences helped to serve as recommendations for future directions of research and practice in early childhood education and care.

## Keywords

Anti-racism, anti-racist education, early childhood education and care, early years

## Summary for Lay Audience

Anti-racism is becoming a more frequently discussed topic in early childhood education and care (ECEC). Going beyond theoretical understanding, it is also important to consider how early years professionals enact anti-racism in their practice. The purpose of this study was to investigate how early years professionals engage in anti-racist practices with children in Ontario's licensed child care settings. While participants shared their experiences with anti-racist practices and their successes and challenges in doing so, findings showed a lack of deep understanding of anti-racist practices. Amongst all participants, there were barriers to engaging in anti-racist practices due to either a lack of knowledge, funding, time, or support. This thesis thus provides recommendations regarding sufficient pre-service and in-service training on anti-racism, redesigning curriculum, and policy documents to include anti-racism within the early years, and increased government support for educators to engage in anti-racist practices.

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## Chapter One: Introduction, Context, and Theoretical Frameworks

This research examined how anti-racist work is brought into early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings, how early years professionals engage in anti-racist practices, and how whiteness can influence early years professionals' practice. This study gathered early years professionals' perspectives on the issues, challenges, and successes they face through their involvement with anti-racist practices in ECEC settings. This research contributes to a growing conversation surrounding anti-racist education in ECEC and helps advocate for the importance of using anti-racist pedagogy with children in ECEC settings. Guided by the theoretical frameworks of critical race theory and whiteness studies, this research also considered how whiteness impacts early years professionals' engagement in anti-racist practices. Finally, this research advocates for the reconceptualization of ECEC settings to be viewed as naturally political spaces, where children are perceived as capable of understanding and discussing concepts of race and racism with their educators and peers.

### Research Questions

This research investigated the experiences of early years professionals and the anti-racist work they engage in within ECEC settings. This research explored educators' experiences with implementing anti-racist practices within their workplaces and how whiteness, privilege and power play a role in discussions about anti-racism in ECEC settings.

Since this research utilizes the theoretical frameworks of critical race theory and whiteness studies, there are two guiding research questions:

- 1) How do early years professionals engage in anti-racist practices in early years settings?
- 2) How does whiteness influence early years professionals' practice in early years settings?

## Context of the Study

The ECEC workforce fluctuates across Canada and Ontario, as early years professionals do not have a minimum level of mandatory training to hold to be able to work in the field of ECEC. Some early years professionals can have varying levels of post-secondary education and are often Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECE)/Early Childhood Educators (ECE) within the Ontario College of Early Childhood Educators (CECEs). However, some early years professionals may not have post-secondary credentials or be registered with the CECE (Abawi & Berman, 2019). ECEC settings can vary, but they are typically programs for children aged 0-6. These ECEC settings can be either non-profit or for-profit child care, licensed, unlicensed or home-based child care, family resource centres, before and after school programs, day/overnight camp settings, or full day kindergarten programs within elementary schools. However, this research focused primarily on non-profit, licensed child care settings.

Early years professionals can have various position titles, but the most common title is Registered Early Childhood Educator (RECE), who work in varying early years programs. However, they can also be referred to as early childhood educators (ECEs), early years educators, educators, child care teachers, etc. There are multiple titles for professionals who

work with young children, but this study refers to them as early years professionals, the title of RECE/ECE or educators. Early years professionals have an essential role, as they help to educate and care for children in their most formative years. In ECEC, early years professionals serve children and families in their care that are from various racial and ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, it is vital that early years professionals feel equipped to assist all families in their care. In Ontario, several government curriculum documents guide early years professionals' practice, such as *Early Learning for Every Child Today* (ELECT) (2007), *How Does Learning Happen?* (HDLH) (2014) and *The Kindergarten Program* (2016). Abawi and Berman (2019) argue that these provincial curriculum documents “do acknowledge the importance of equity and diversity in ECEC [but these documents do not explicitly mention the need for] decentring White privilege and developmentalist norms entrenched in early childhood norms and practices” (p.8). Furthermore, there is a disconnect between anti-racist curriculum documents, policies, and practices in ECEC. There is a lack of acknowledgement in these documents of race and racism, and often take “more of a self-reflective approach regarding diversity, which does not provide accountability to ensure that these are being taught to and with children” (Abawi & Berman, 2019, p.9).

It is important to note that Canada's provinces and territories are vastly different regarding the governance of ECEC. This research focused on Ontario's perspective, Canada's largest and most diverse province. In Ontario, there are systems that monitor and assess the standards of ECEC programs, the service providers, and the service users. The CECEs is the overarching governing organization that regulates and governs RECEs. Ontario's ECEC system is unique, as it is the only provincial jurisdiction in the country with an organization that governs

its workers. The CECE has several purposes, such as setting the standard for professionalism in the field. While these professionalism standards include ensuring RECEs meet registration requirements, they also enforce ethical and professional standards for RECEs, ensuring RECEs engage in continuous professional learning (CPL) and meet accountability measures for any misconduct (College of Early Childhood Educators, n.d.). CPL is a vital aspect to note as it is an opportunity that RECEs utilize to learn about a breadth of ECEC topics, which can include anti-racism or equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). A document that guides RECEs daily practice is the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice (2017). The document's purpose is "to establish and enforce professional standards and ethical standards that apply to members of the College, and that demonstrate a respect for diversity and a sensitivity to the multicultural character of the Province" (ECE Act, 2007, as cited by College of Early Childhood Educators, 2017, p. 5). The document notes how there are responsibilities to children (specifically those who are Indigenous) and to families (who are unique and diverse) and that there is a responsibility to account for the cultural and linguistic diversity of those children and families that they work with (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2017). This shows that the CECE notes that educators are responsible for engaging in this type of diversity work.

## Overview of the Problem

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there were uprisings for racial justice in the wake of George Floyd's death in the summer of 2020. George Floyd was a Black man living in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in the United States who lost his life to "police brutality, racial injustice, and white supremacy" (Black Lives Matter, 2020). In turn, this brought forward an

influx of activism that brought awareness to the struggle for racial equality, specifically for Black, Indigenous, and Asian peoples in North America. One of the most prominent movements, Black Lives Matter, self-defined itself as a “global organization in the U.S., U.K., and Canada, whose mission is to eradicate White supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes” (Black Lives Matter, 2021, para. 1). The acknowledgement and support of the Black Lives Matter movement had been amplified due to George Floyd’s passing and the online videos surfacing of his death. Which sparked one of the largest protests in the history of the United States (Au et al., 2021). In addition to the U.S. protests, there were also protests in Canada to show solidarity and acknowledgement of the racist history and current racial issues present within the country. The magnification of the Black Lives Matter movement and the pandemic highlighted the reality of systemic racial and class inequities, leading many people to educate themselves and acknowledge the presence of racial issues in their countries. This movement led to various communities worldwide encouraging individuals, companies, organizations, and more specifically, governments and institutions to take accountability for their part in upholding White supremacy. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted everyone’s lives, it has had disproportionate and adverse effects on racialized communities, specifically Black and Indigenous communities (The Department of Finance Canada, 2021; The Public Health Agency of Canada, 2021). Specifically, it was noted that racialized communities’ experiences are historical and “have existed within Canadian systems and institutions over many generations” (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2021, para. 5).

Indigenous peoples are subject to ongoing inequities in Canada due to historical implications regarding the impact of colonization, residential schools, the 60s scoop, the forced removal of Indigenous peoples from their traditional lands, disproportionate apprehension of children through child welfare systems, present-day colonialism, among many others (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2021). Black communities are also subjected to similar challenges due to colonization, slavery, and the various domains of segregation and racial stereotypes, among many others (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2021). It is not uncommon for these acts of violence against Black and Indigenous communities to be ignored as historical events. However, these events have had a lasting impact, and the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed to the public that these issues are still current and significant challenges need to be addressed.

The *Early Childhood Education Report (2020)* provides an in-depth evaluation of the quality of ECEC programs and services in all provinces and territories across Canada. The *Early Childhood Education Report (2020)* addressed the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the Black Lives Matter movement; noting that the pandemic has disproportionately harmed Black and Indigenous communities. The report provides several suggestions, one that calls on governments to ensure that all children, regardless of “economic status, indigeneity, parent employment, race and ethnicity,” have equal opportunities, which are backed by equity focused ECEC policies (Price, as cited by Akbari et al., 2021, p.6). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic and the prevalence of the Black Lives Matter movement have brought increasing attention to systemic and institutional racism that permeates Canadian society and, more specifically, its educational institutions. Consequently, many educators have begun learning more about White supremacy, the larger struggle for racial equity, and how they can integrate racial justice into their

curriculum to assist in disrupting racial oppression (Au et al., 2021). The motivation surrounding the purpose of this study is whether early years professionals are engaged in more learning about anti-racist education due to its prominence in education. If so, what motivates or discourages educators from engaging in anti-racist practices? How does the influence of whiteness, privilege, and power play a role in how educators engage in anti-racist practices?

## Rationale of the Research

Previously, early years professionals have been trained solely through work experience or college diploma programs. As a result, the field of ECEC has typically been rooted in practice rather than academia, theory, research, or policy. Recently, progress has been made regarding the status of the field of ECEC as essential, professional, and backed by research (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2017). Furthermore, as stated in the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* (2017) document, early years professionals are required to engage in ongoing professional learning. Therefore, they must engage in learning opportunities to stay current on the best pedagogical practices necessary to support children and families in their care (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2017).

This research adds to the growing body of literature in ECEC related explicitly to anti-racism. As such, this study sought to understand how early years professionals can move away from only learning about anti-racism and step towards implementing anti-racist practices into their pedagogy and curricular experiences. This research sought to unite the theoretical understanding of anti-racism with the practical aspect of implementing anti-racism. Ultimately, the study intends to provide better insight on how early years professionals can engage in anti-

racist praxis in their classrooms with children. By having early years professionals understand how they can engage in an anti-racist approach, they provide children with the opportunity to learn and discuss concepts of race, racism, whiteness, privilege, and power from an early age. It also allows early years professionals to view themselves as capable of implementing anti-racist approaches in their practice. Providing educators with a practical understanding of anti-racism empowers them to become advocates for the field of ECEC and changemakers in their communities to help move towards racial equity.

## Significance of Anti-Racism and ECEC

With the pandemic and the influence of the Black Lives Matter movement, individuals are becoming increasingly more interested in learning about anti-racism. This research focused on ECEC settings and the importance of educators engaging in anti-racist practices within these spaces. To assist in creating a more equitable society, the current education system must be critically analyzed. To do so, we need to find ways to disrupt the current systems that obstruct the struggle for equity. When challenging educational systems, ECEC settings should be included. Unfortunately, ECEC settings are often neglected when discussing equity work or anti-racism. Nonetheless, this process of disruption and critique needs to include ECEC settings as we need to begin to have conversations about race and racism with young children to engage in this knowledge production. Having these discussions with children in their early years and throughout their lifespan better prepares them to learn how to navigate these complex topics and fight against discrimination and racism.



Discussions around the significance of anti-racism are emerging in ECEC, specifically among early years professionals. Anti-racism is an active, engaging process of working to disrupt current discourses that promote racism, racial intolerance, and racial divides (Abawi & Berman, 2019). Although anti-racist work has been utilized in education settings for some time, it has begun to be used more extensively in education and care settings, such as child care, health care, and social work. Anti-racist work in these care settings is especially relevant and necessary since these institutions have a deep history of colonialism, systemic injustice, and racism. Canada has perpetuated institutional and informal racism towards people of colour and Indigenous peoples (Abawi, Eizadirad, & Berman, 2021). Some examples that have had long-lasting effects on these racialized groups include residential schools, slavery, prevention of access to education, and legal authority to discriminate based on race (Abawi, Eizadirad, & Berman, 2021). The lack of acknowledgement of the “national sins,” which is the “...cumulative impact of institutionalized and racialized subjugation,” is referred to as a form of “collective amnesia” (Abawi, Eizadirad, & Berman, 2021, p. 107). By acknowledging and working through this understanding, anti-racist practices are valuable. Educators who engage in anti-racist practices should also have an anti-racist identity that is reflective and critical of the education system’s role in racial inequality (Abawi, Eizadirad, & Berman, 2021). Children could be participating in early years environments as soon as they are born. Early social environments significantly impact children’s worldviews as they often provide spaces that validate White experiences through its pedagogies and curriculums, which can harm racialized children’s wellbeing, sense of belonging, and overall development (Abawi, Eizadirad, & Berman, 2021). Conversely, creating an environment where racialized students feel appreciated and represented

can diminish those harmful consequences and foster further success for students (Abawi, Eizadirad, & Berman, 2021).

## Researcher's Personal Experience and Social Positionality

As a researcher, it is necessary to address my social positionality. My social positionality has shaped the lens through which I see our world. My positionality shapes how I engage in practice in the field of ECEC and it ultimately informs this research study. My social identity is a White, cisgender female who speaks English as her first language and comes from a low-income/working-class family. Given the intersections of my identity, my lived experiences are made of privileges and disadvantages. While I am disadvantaged by my gender and socioeconomic status, I am privileged by my race. However, I am cognizant of how my experiences of oppression at the intersections of race and gender will differ from low-income, racialized women, who experience the added burden of racism and, subsequently, racialized sexism informed by oppressive and intersecting racist, sexist, and classist narratives and undertones. For an individual also belongs to a marginalized racial group, this will add barriers due to oppression from the presence of White supremacy (Crenshaw, 1990). Although we may experience similar overarching oppression from classist and sexist structures, I will not experience the added layer of racial oppression.

I attended elementary and secondary schools that resided within low to middle-income neighbourhoods that were racially and ethnically diverse. I also engaged in equity and social justice education in the latter half of my elementary school years. Later in life, I realized that discussing these topics was uncommon for most of my peers. When I moved away to attend

post-secondary education, I noticed that the city I moved to was not as racially or ethnically diverse as my hometown. I met many classmates and friends who explained that they were from primarily White, homogenous, rural towns and had never been close to many racialized individuals before. Conversations with many current or aspiring early years professionals in my ECEC courses demonstrated that many students did not feel equipped with the necessary skills to work directly with racialized families, given their minimal interactions with non-White individuals. Many students also felt uncomfortable facilitating discussions in our coursework surrounding race and racism. Many of my White classmates mentioned that they had never experienced racism and noted that they did not know much about the subject, which meant that it was not their role to engage with it.

As I moved further along my educational journey, I began to explore the concept of whiteness in more detail. I began to understand how many White people, like myself, view whiteness as neutral and base their understanding of themselves as not racist, as there are intentions to treat all children the same (Delpit, 2006). Those with the most power and privilege are usually less aware of its existence and are less willing to challenge it. In contrast, those with less power and privilege are usually most aware of the disparities in its distribution (Delpit, 2006). Many White people become uncomfortable and defensive when it comes to hearing and valuing the experiences of racialized individuals, specifically when it relates to how their people have played a role in those hardships (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, Delpit, 2006, Ahmed, 2004). As Delpit (2006) suggests, White educators must be able to “see yourself in the unflattering light of another’s angry gaze” (p.46-47). It is crucial to be vulnerable enough to question your beliefs and learn ideas to create space for racialized individuals’ experiences to be heard and valued.

Early years professionals have a perfect opportunity to challenge existing power dynamics, which ultimately guided this research study.

This research explored how early years professionals engage in anti-racist practices in their work settings and how whiteness impacts their ability to do so. I am an educator in a field that has historically played a role in upholding colonialism and White supremacy while marginalizing racialized groups through systemic and institutionalized racism (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012; Du Bois, 1970). These oppressive and racist ideologies are taught through social institutions such as schools, governments, and the media (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). Since I am a part of the dominant racial group and participate in and work for these systems and institutions (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012), I am responsible for disrupting and challenging oppressive racial structures and practices through anti-racism. ECEC settings are an opportunity to help contribute to a more inclusive and just future for all children and youth. The ability to act rests on our ability to step out of our dreams of an equal society. Rather, we should view change as an attainable outcome we can achieve “as a real and critical force for emancipatory action” (Brown & Grigg, 2017, p.342). Thus, there is a vital need to investigate the use of anti-racist practices in early years settings.

## Theoretical Frameworks

This study draws on the theoretical frameworks of critical race theory and whiteness studies, which informs the main research questions of this study:

- 1) How do early years professionals engage in anti-racist practices in early years settings?

2) How does whiteness influence practice in early years settings?

### Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Critical race theory (CRT) originated in the field of legal studies by notable scholars such as Derrick Bell, Kimberle Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, and Mari Matsuda (Yosso, 2012). CRT was explicitly created as a more inclusive approach than critical legal studies to address and analyze racial injustice in the legal field during the Civil Rights movement (Yosso, 2012). CRT looked specifically at systemic racism rooted in law, policies, and institutions. It has now expanded to include the experiences of Black individuals since there is a similar experience regarding racial oppression shared by many colonized and marginalized racial and ethnic groups (Yosso, 2012). CRT is not often used as the primary form of pedagogy or practical lens within education, specifically in ECEC settings. Abawi and Berman (2019) hold the position that CRT helps uncover the covert power relations and disrupt the concepts of neutrality and colour blindness related to discussions about race and racialization. Utilizing these concepts ignores how racism is deeply ingrained into all aspects of our lives while remaining hidden from those who benefit from it. Abawi and Berman (2019) explain that the “...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” (p. 5).

CRT is not a novel concept and has modified itself to be properly implemented in education. Currently, CRT is affiliated with the illumination of systemic and institutional racism. CRT is defined by Yosso (2012) as a framework that works to dismantle the way that racism is ingrained into various structures, processes, and discourses. When CRT is used in education, it

can also be referred to as critical race curriculum (CRC). The presence of CRT in education is defined as “a pedagogy, curriculum, and research agenda that accounts for the role of racism” in educational systems and works towards eradicating all oppression in the education system (Solorzano, 1997, p.7, as cited by Yosso, 2012, p.95). CRT shapes CRC as it questions the traditional curriculum in our education systems and deconstructs the meaning of the curriculum’s purpose (Yosso, 2012). There are five main aspects of CRT included in education outlined by Yosso (2012) include: “(1) The intersectionality of race and racism with gender, class, and sexuality; (2) The challenge to dominant ideology; (3) The commitment to social justice; (4) The centrality of experiential knowledge; and (5) The utilization of interdisciplinary approaches” (p. 95). CRC helps determine what voices are often left unheard and how to go about incorporating those voices into the curriculum and learning environment. Traditional forms of curriculum actively work to perpetuate racism and nurture White privilege and typically only validate the experiences of those with privilege (Yosso, 2012).

CRT is justified in its use concerning the research study, as it connects to anti-racism. Chadderton (2013) explains that CRT helps to consider the ways that White supremacy is “maintained and enacted in education” (p.45). CRT helps deconstruct how meritocracy is upheld in education and works to hold institutions and actors accountable for how they shift responsibility away from themselves and onto the individual, their family, or their wider community (Chadderton, 2013, p.45). Berman and Abawi (2019) state that “anti-racism, as CRT, challenges multicultural understandings of race and identity that tout equality without regard for the unique identities and experiences of various collective identities” (p.170).

## Whiteness Studies

Whiteness is defined as “an ethnicity, made up of cultural and linguistic dimensions, as well as physical appearance” (Frankenburg, 1993, p.228-229 as cited by Clarke & Watson, 2014). With ECEC, early years professionals play a role in either propelling whiteness or dismantling it through everyday practices. In this research, whiteness is a crucial perspective, as the field of ECEC is made up of mostly women and particularly White women. Whiteness studies is a form of CRT, as it is also referred to as critical whiteness studies and discusses whiteness as a racial discourse. Some notable transformative scholars have contributed to this sector, such as Du Bois, Allen, and Frankenberg, among many others. Nonetheless, whiteness studies are like CRT. Whiteness studies also aim to include White people in equality and diversity work to prevent the struggle against inequality and racism from being placed solely on racialized groups and shift it to be considered a shared responsibility (Ahmed, 2004).

Lund and Carr (2015) discuss the notion of collective guilt of whiteness and define it as a “group-based emotion experienced when people categorize themselves as members of a group that has committed unjustified harm to another group” (p. 90). Collective guilt is a powerful feeling that can motivate individuals to work towards change to make amends for their group’s mistakes (Lund & Carr, 2015). Likewise, there is also the absence of guilt, which is associated with denial, disassociation, distancing, or victim blaming (Lund & Carr, 2015). Lund and Carr (2015) discuss how White Canadians have, overall, low levels of White guilt; possibly because they do not feel responsible for the historical events of racism that have been perpetuated by White colonizers in the past. However, it is noted that most mainstream White Canadians benefit

from those events and are still unaware of this advantaged position of privilege that they hold (Lund & Carr, 2015). Canadian society is entrenched in whiteness, meritocracy, and individualism, which creates the illusion of equal opportunity that everyone must work towards (Lund & Carr, 2015). However, this illusion fails to recognize or eliminate the barriers that are posed for racialized groups. There is a lack of acknowledgement of the uneven playing field for racialized individuals who face disadvantages and inequality regardless of how much they work to break out of the oppression they face (Lund & Carr, 2015).

Ahmed (2004) explains how “white bodies extend into spaces that have already taken their shape, spaces in which black bodies stand out, stand apart unless they pass, which means passing through space by passing as White” (Ahmed, 2004, p.1). In other words, whiteness is the norm in our world, and all other races are expected to assimilate to become as close to the standard of whiteness as possible (Clarke & Watson, 2014). Children acting outside of the White standard are seen as deviating from the social norm. When children do not meet the expectations of educators, it is seen as something that needs to be corrected so they will not be unsuccessful. Students are expected to adhere to specific standards of behaving, acting, speaking, and dressing, which are ultimately forms of whiteness.

Ahmed (2004) describes how whiteness studies are essential when studying anti-racism. The notion of whiteness is something that is typically noted as “invisible, as the unseen or the unmarked, as a non-colour, the absent presence or hidden referent, against which all other colours are measured as forms of deviance (Frankenberg 1993; Dyer 1997, as cited by Ahmed, 2004, para. 1). Ahmed (2004) defines six declarations of whiteness and how acknowledging



whiteness can be conducted within various environments, such as academia, policy, and the greater society. The six declarations of whiteness are (Ahmed, 2004, p.5-14):

“Declaration 1: I/we must be seen to be White

Declaration 2: I am/we are racist

Declaration 3: I am/we are ashamed by my/our racism

Declaration 4: I am/we are happy (and racist people are sad)

Declaration 5: I/we have studied whiteness (and racist people are ignorant)

Declaration 6: I am/we are coloured (too)”.

Using these declarations is to be non-performative. According to Ahmed, non-performativity means that those individuals or institutions who declare these statements believe that they do not engage in what they claim to be ‘bad behaviour’ (Ahmed, 2004). Essentially, this allows institutions to say they are engaging in anti-racist work but not actively doing the work (Ahmed, 2004). These declarations produce White privilege in ways that are unseen by those who are privileged by whiteness. Ahmed (2004) argues that individuals utilizing these statements do not challenge White privilege but rather exercise their own White privilege. While Ahmed (2004) argues that whiteness is not invisible to everyone, those who benefit from it are less likely to be aware of it. Whiteness depends on its ability to be unrecognized and unchallenged to continue to exist within that space.

Ahmed (2012) mentions how whiteness holds such power in an institution that it changes the goal of diversity work to change the perceptions of whiteness rather than the whiteness of organizations. Ahmed (2004) explains how White bodies are allowed to flow in and out of different spaces, as they already fit within them. Black bodies, however, stand out in Eurocentric

spaces, as they were not designed to be in them. Ahmed (2004) points out that she is hesitant to discuss whiteness studies as a critical thought process as it may take away from the voices of racialized individuals, but notes that discussing whiteness brings attention to it for White people who do not typically recognize its presence. Ahmed (2004) advocates for the importance of looking to Black scholars, specifically Black feminists, who discuss whiteness and its impacts on racialized communities. Ahmed (2004) explains that when we discuss whiteness, it is less about the White experience and more about how Black scholars critique whiteness as a form of racial privilege and how whiteness affects Black experiences. Whiteness studies work to bring the ‘invisible, visible’ for White people and non-White people; it shows what is already visible from a different perspective (Ahmed, 2004).

Audre Lorde’s (1984) work entitled *Sister Outsider* discusses the concept of whiteness. Lorde (1984) used the phrase “for the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (p.120). This phrase means that by following the rules of a system that oppresses people, we are upholding that very same system rather than challenging it (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). In turn, expecting Black and other racialized communities to assimilate into White supremacist ideologies will never enact true change regarding equity. To create genuine changes in our world, we must look from a different approach and reconceptualize how to address racism. Lorde (1984) advocates that only the tolerance of others’ differences has not promoted equity. Tolerance creates a notion of institutionalized rejection of difference, as we are programmed within our societies to resist others’ differences and often respond to differences by either ignoring, copying, or destroying those differences (Lorde, 1984). Thus, not always do people’s differences create separation, but rather our resistance to recognizing and accepting differences.

DiAngelo's (2018) work on whiteness, particularly her notion of "White fragility" is essential here. Explaining how White people often struggle to acknowledge that they have White privilege; they misunderstand their complicity and complacency in structures of oppression. As a result, White people use several defence mechanisms to avoid responsibility if they do not take any active action against racism on their part. DiAngelo (2018) points out that by saying "...if and when an educational program does directly address racism and the privileging of Whites, common White responses include anger, withdrawal, emotional incapacitation, guilt, argumentation, and cognitive dissonance (all of which reinforce the pressure on facilitators to avoid directly addressing racism)" (p.231). When looking at issues of racism and oppression within education, we must move away from the idea that the problem is due to individual people. Instead, we must do better at acknowledging our socialization and the role of institutions in the oppression of racialized groups (Ahmed, 2004; Delpit, 2006). DiAngelo (2018) mentions how White liberals who believe in equal rights and do not believe that they participate in or benefit from racism are a barrier to progress for racial equality. This collective of White liberals creates challenges as they are unwilling to unlearn their socialization and do not believe they benefit from their White privilege (DiAngelo, 2018). These challenges also connect to early years professionals, who view all children as the same. This plays into the idea of colourblindness, where educators claim not to recognize the racial differences among their students. Moreover, holding these ideologies prevents White early years professionals from engaging in critical reflection to challenge the dominant discourses, truths, or practices in their work with children (Brown & Grigg, 2017).

Educators bring their cultural perspectives, values, hopes, and dreams to the classroom, which comes along with prejudice, stereotypes, and unconscious biases (Banks, 2016). Educators must have the appropriate time and space to unlearn harmful thinking patterns and learn about anti-racist practices to help empower their students to do the same (Banks, 2016). Otherwise, we run the risk of further perpetuating Eurocentric ways of thinking. We want to look after racialized students, as racial discrimination puts their overall development at risk, specifically for disproportionate levels of discipline (Banks, 2016). For example, when children are not pronouncing things correctly in English, there is a presumption that they are developmentally delayed based on the assumption that all children should adhere to the norms posed on us from whiteness (Banks, 2016). However, when taking a more reflective, culturally responsive approach to teaching, those children are developing language skills effectively in their native language and using it as a strength to continue learning English (Clarke & Watson, 2014). It is essential to recognize and appreciate the experiences of racialized and ethnically diverse children and families and utilize their experiences to better their educational practice (Ali & Awad, 2016; Delpit, 2006). Racialized children's ability to be successful relies on the cultural relationships they establish with the education system, which does not usually have all children's interests in mind due to its Eurocentrism (Ali & Awad, 2016). Whiteness studies offer further insight into how whiteness is an oppressive structure that draws power and privilege to White children while simultaneously 'othering' racialized children's experiences. This research creates and furthers conversations about race in ECEC spaces and calls for the action of all educators to engage in anti-racist praxis, which requires critical consideration of whiteness in ECEC.

## Summary of Chapter One

This chapter discussed the research topic, the study's context, and the research questions. An overview of the research problem, the rationale for the research, the researcher's personal experience and social positionality were provided. Lastly, the theoretical frameworks of CRT and whiteness studies were described and explained how they guide the research. This research examined how anti-racist work is brought into ECEC settings, how educators engage in these practices, and how whiteness shows up in practice. The study investigated how early years professionals engage in anti-racist practices, their perceptions of anti-racism in early years settings, and their ability and interest in engaging in anti-racist practices. The research contributes to an existing conversation surrounding anti-racism in early years settings and further advocates for the need for anti-racism to be included in early years settings on both a policy and practical level.

The next chapter reviews the literature surrounding anti-racism and ECEC. Specifically, it sets the context of Ontario's current reality regarding the research topic. The chapter also explores the policies that guide the field of ECEC and compares other global policy documents around anti-racism and ECEC. Finally, it connects to a practical element of how educators implement anti-racist practices in their work settings. Chapter three explores the chosen methodology for the scope of this research. Chapter four shares the findings from the results of the study, and finally, chapter five discusses the findings more in detail, as well as outline recommendations for future research in the field of ECEC.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter focuses on a review of relevant literature surrounding anti-racist work in ECEC settings. The literature primarily focuses on anti-racist work in the context of Ontario and Canada, and it reviews policies from various countries such as Ireland, Australia, and the United States. The literature review is organized around the following themes: multiculturalism and anti-racist education in Canada, race and intersectionality, anti-racist policies, global perspectives of anti-racism and ECEC, reconceptualizing ECEC spaces, and putting anti-racism into practice.

### Multiculturalism and Anti-Racist Education in Canada

In the 1970s, Canada introduced multiculturalism as a policy strategy to manage the increasing racial diversity of the country (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). Multiculturalism (sometimes referred to as a “mosaic”) is unlike the “melting pot” approach to diversity that is utilized in the United States. The melting pot ideology is that all racial and ethnic identities should assimilate to a singular identity under the nation (i.e., American). Since two dominant nations reside in Canada (the French and the English), it would be incredibly challenging to absorb one of these cultures into the other (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). This challenge led to the federal government passing the Canadian Multiculturalism Act in 1985. Canada began to denote itself as a “tolerant, pluralistic, and multicultural society” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p.100), with laws to protect these communities from discrimination and give them equal opportunities. Canada engages in “racialized discourse by normalizing and socializing whiteness whilst simultaneously touting commitments to equity, inclusion, multiculturalism, and quality child

care” (Berman & Abawi, 2019, p.169). Still, it does not always mean that these individuals feel safe, accepted, or protected by those same laws and commitments. These multicultural approaches to policy creates a culture where racial issues are silenced since there is an appearance of attempts being made to strive for equality. Subsequently, this multiculturalism policy initiated the multicultural approach in Canadian education systems.

There are several reasons for the purpose of multicultural education. Some of these reasons were to educate culturally diverse groups and promote cultural understanding, acceptance, and recognition (Rezai-Rashti, 1995), as well as to provide all students with the skills they need to succeed in society and to foster a community that could work together to achieve the collective goal of a more equal world (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). Multicultural education has now become more simplified and has lost its original meaning. The current method of multicultural education is fixated on celebrating diversity. Multicultural education is now typically superficial by only focusing on differences in cultural practices such as dances, clothes, dialect, or food (Lee, in Au., 2014). Dei (2010) notes that these simplistic forms of examining diversity are tokenistic and are exploitative of racialized students. Dei (2010) explains how this tokenistic approach allows educational institutions to profit from their racialized students’ differences in the form of economic, cultural, and/or social capital. Multicultural education provides simple ways to demonstrate how people differ and why diversity is beneficial. While acknowledging this is necessary, it cannot be done in isolation. The examination of cultural values, power relations, discrimination, or how other groups of people have advantages or advantages taken away from them in society must also be discussed (Lee, as

cited by Au., 2014). By failing to address broader issues about marginalization, our actions promote unequal power relations among racialized communities (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012).

Multiculturalism is defined broadly as the overarching acceptance of everyone. The multicultural approach does not attempt to explain the deeper meaning behind institutional racism or how we are socialized in a racist culture, which ultimately adds to the problem (Rezai-Rashti, 1995). According to Rezai-Rashti (1995), there are five different approaches to multicultural education: education of culturally different groups, promotion of understanding of cultural differences, recognition of cultural pluralism, bicultural education, and cultural/intercultural education (Rezai-Rashti, 1995). However, multiculturalism has become a problematized approach, as it appears to be more concerned with social control than real social change (Rezai-Rashti, 1995). Therefore, implementing multicultural approaches becomes an apathetic attempt at social justice education. Educators and children should not read between the lines regarding anti-racism but rather have anti-racist education be explicitly named and embedded in curriculum documents and educational policies. Vague mentions of diversity, equity, or inclusion are problematic as it creates the illusion of diversity work being done within the institution and establishes non-performativity (Ahmed, 2004). Connecting theory and practice highlights how important it is for academics and practitioners to work together to create a practical anti-racist approach (Rezai-Rashti, 1995; Dei, 2010). This notion of theory and practice coming together to create a more helpful approach is ultimately the aim of this research.

A more comprehensive approach is needed to give students, parents, and educators the skills to work towards a more equitable society that struggles against racism and ethnic discrimination. Anti-racist education is a critically reflexive approach that seeks to comprehend



the dominant ideologies and pedagogical practices that govern and operate the educational system (Dei, 2010; Rezai-Rashti, 1995). Another commonly used term in addition to multiculturalism and anti-racism is Equity, Diversity, Inclusion (EDI). EDI is an umbrella term which is not just exclusive to race and ethnicity but also includes issues around gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion, etc. Although this research focuses on the term *anti-racism*, EDI can often be used interchangeably with anti-racism within institutional policies while it can also refer to anti-racist work.

Anti-racism, unlike multiculturalism, aims to problematize the neutrality of whiteness and illuminate the presence of institutional whiteness. The anti-racist education approach looks at the issues facing our world, specifically the impacts of White supremacy and eurocentrism, and how it is heavily embedded into everything we do. It creates a place for different racialized groups to be heard and appreciated and have their struggles in society recognized and challenged. Dei (2010) describes anti-racist pedagogy as something that "...questions privilege, attempts to create a critical and powerful voice for students, and develops their sense of critical judgement, while at the same time attempting to provide an openness to teaching that is non-universalizing" (p.21). By utilizing a more comprehensive approach, anti-racist education helps challenge the idea of a monocultural classroom (Lee, in Au., 2014) and moves away from only focusing on one dominant culture, race, or language in teaching. Lee, as cited by Au (2014) states that "if you don't take...anti-racist education seriously, you are promoting a monocultural or racist education. There is no neutral ground on this issue" (p.10). Active anti-racist practice includes "working to identify internalized racial dominance if you are White, working to identify internalized racial oppression if you are a person of Colour" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p.161).

Passive anti-racism does not have any examples, as it is mainly defined from the lack of action taken, as anti-racism cannot afford to be passive (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) explain how the inclusion of anti-racist approaches is a lifelong commitment to an ongoing process that will likely be uncomfortable, unfamiliar, and challenging. The passive approach to anti-racism is applicable to this research study, as it shows the current approach that is being utilized within classrooms and how we need to partake in changes in how issues with race and racism are discussed in the classroom.

## Race and Intersectionality

Anti-racist approaches are also notably connected with intersectionality. Like gender, class, or disability, race is a socially constructed. However, some believe that race is biological, meaning that there are innate distinctions between racial groups which impact who those people are and what they are capable of (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). This ideology of race as biological is harmful as it can create a culture of acceptance regarding the racial divisions in our society (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). However, the theory of intersectionality was constructed in the late 1980s by Kimberle Crenshaw. Crenshaw (1990) suggests that social categories such as race, class, gender, and others intersect and overlap and are not experienced in isolation. This means that the inequality faced by these multiple forms of social identities creates a multi-dimensional experience when an individual belongs to several social groups that are oppressed (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1995, as cited by Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). This creates complex circumstances since our world is heavily influenced and structured by power relations of social categories, such as race, gender, class, etc. (Dei, 2010).

Dei (2010) adds that “individuals do not simply and solely fit into one specified category as an oppressor or the oppressed. One can be the oppressed and an oppressor at the same time and at different times” (p.10). Regarding the research and researcher's positionality, it is crucial to acknowledge as it shows the multi-dimensions of identity experienced by the researcher. As mentioned previously, I identify as a cisgender female, who is White, straight, speaks English as her first language, and comes from a low-income/working-class family. Although I can be oppressed due to my gender and socio-economic status, I am also privileged by other sides of my social identity, such as my race and ethnicity. These axes of oppression and privilege that I experience are the lens through which I view the world. Early years professionals come from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, and their experience within these systems will present themselves differently. To authentically capture the voices of early years professionals' experiences, I must acknowledge this as the researcher. To truly understand people, we must recognize that their identity is multi-dimensional and cannot be viewed by a single category of identity (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). Intersectionality is important to address with this research, as the field of ECEC is a highly feminized line of work. According to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (2017), women are the primary base of child care consumers, and over 95% of child care workers are women (The Department of Finance Canada, 2021). Although many of the workers in the field of ECEC are making low wages, it is noted that there are a disproportionate amount of racialized and immigrant women that fill most of the low-earning care positions (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2017). Lorde (1984) notes how there is a concern with feminist discourse leaving out women of colour. Lorde (1984) explains “as women, we have been taught either to ignore our differences or to

view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change” (p.120).

Although intersectionality is vital to mention, it is not the primary framework guiding this research. The lenses of intersectionality and critical education have an interconnected relationship since they both aim toward creating an equal society by engaging in critical inquiry and praxis (Collins & Bilge, 2018).

Intersectionality is the fundamental part of engaging in diversity work, and critical education creates space for conversations that critique how our system works, much like anti-racist education (Collins & Bilge, 2018; Dei, 2010). The current approach to diversity in education systems often overlooks the institutional, structural, and societal challenges that lead to the oppression of various minoritized groups. Rather than assimilating minoritized groups into the current education system, anti-racist education is an approach that helps all students critically examine the education system and how it works to reinforce hegemonic norms in society (Collins & Bilge, 2018). Anti-racism addresses how intersections of identity influence our daily experiences and how anti-racism is often entangled with gender (Dei, 2010). Regarding this research, intersections of race and gender are important to consider, as the field of ECEC is a feminized workforce. Considering how gender and race interact helps to understand how belonging to various social positionalities can create a different, multi-layered experience. This connects to the methodological approach of this study, specifically when looking at the sampling procedure of participants.

## Anti-Racist Policies

There is no current national early years policy framework in Canada other than the *Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework* (2018). Without a formal national policy framework, it leads to a disconnected approach to policy, resulting in early years leaders referencing a patchwork of policies to set the standard for our field (Bourbonnais-MacDonald et al., 2021; Abawi & Berman, 2019). The presence of a policy document will not be sufficient in and of itself to achieve ECEC programs that are anti-racist, as there will still be challenges faced regarding implementing those policies (Rezai-Rashti, 1995). Nonetheless, the enactment of anti-racist approaches included in a national ECEC policy would be substantial, as it would help set a standard for policy actors (Bourbonnais-MacDonald et al., 2021). Without the standard set for policy actors, such as educators, children, and parents, anti-racist work in ECEC is left up to the interpretations of each actor. These interpretations often lead to inadequate anti-racist work implemented, which causes a disconnect between research, policy, and practice. This study gathered the experiences of educators working in the field of ECEC engaging in anti-racist practices in their workplace. Since there is not a policy document that could guide them through their experience, the research gathered information about how early years professionals are implementing anti-racist practices.

Fortunately, the Canadian federal government has recently recognized the need to invest in a more comprehensive and nationwide ECEC system due to the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Department of Finance Canada (2021) released the *Budget 2021*, which is the federal government of Canada's plan to recover from the financial impacts on the country from

COVID-19 and stimulate the economy moving forward. The *Budget 2021* outlined by the federal government also included the *Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Plan*. However, conceptualizing this system requires all provinces and territories to work together to determine what they desire for the field of ECEC for economic and social reasons. Accessible, affordable, high-quality, and responsive ECEC programs are essential to increasing social equity (Department of Finance Canada, 2021). The investment in ECEC programs supports women's ability to enter and stay within the workforce, as it provides women with the opportunity to work or study. Affordable ECEC programs have also been shown to help lift vulnerable populations out of poverty, particularly low-income and racialized families (Department of Finance Canada, 2021; Akbari et al., 2021). The accessibility of high-quality ECEC programs provides the broader population with many favourable long-term outcomes. Some positive long-term outcomes include reducing reliance on government support programs, increasing tax revenues, and providing children with a space to learn, grow, play, and support in all areas of development (Department of Finance Canada, 2021). Quality ECEC programs are also linked to higher long-term outcomes related to graduation and employment (Akbari et al., 2021). Including ECEC programs in the federal budget signifies a monumental point in the field of ECEC, as there is more recognition for the field as a profession with qualified educators. ECEC is beginning to be viewed as an essential service for families and an opportunity to help children progress in all developmental domains. However, ECEC programs are often left out of anti-racist discourse and policies. So, this shift in perspective could eventually translate into including ECEC programs in anti-racist education, which is part of the aim of this research.

Education, specifically ECEC settings, falls under the provincial jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, which then chooses how to govern these settings. Currently, it comprises a patchwork of policies between the provinces and territories (Bourbonnais-MacDonald et al., 2021). Ontario does have its policy framework for ECEC, *Ontario's Renewed Early Years and Child Care Policy Framework* (2017). However, there is a lack of federal oversight regarding the standards for ECEC in Canada. More specifically, no anti-racist education policy includes the field of ECEC. When considering ECEC policies, the service user and service provider should be considered (Bourbonnais-MacDonald et al., 2021). The policies that are created to shape early years environments should have an approach that incorporates all the diverse groups that will be using the programs and services. In addition to the lack of a policy framework or inclusion of ECEC in anti-racist policies, there is a lack of mandatory pre-service training in anti-racism for early childhood education programs. As a result, although all educators will be working with various families of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, there is no formal training or education for them to feel equipped to best support children and their families. This lack of education standards for ECEs leaves a gap in their practice due to this inadequate understanding and has implications for minoritized children and families.

The *Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework (2018)* was co-constructed with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. This framework was created as a transformative approach to equally represent the various perspectives and cultures of Indigenous children across Canada. The framework serves as a vision for all Indigenous children to access high-quality, culturally rooted ECEC programs. Nine principles are shaping the framework, but one principle relates specifically to anti-racist approaches: the need to include Indigenous knowledges,

languages, and cultures. Various mentions of culturally appropriate programs, services, and support for families healing from previous and current trauma are made. However, there are no specific mentions of anti-racism or equity and social justice work.

When constructing the framework for *Ontario's Anti-Racism Strategic Plan (2017)*, various government ministries sought to collaborate with (Government of Ontario, 2017):

- Child welfare (Ministry of Children and Youth)
- Justice (Ministry of the Attorney General and Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services, Ministry of Children and Youth Services)
- Education kindergarten to grade 12 (Ministry of Education)
- Health and mental health (Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care)

Policy co-design, an approach where service users are included in the policymaking process by sharing their experiences (Bourbonnais-MacDonald et al., 2021), is becoming a more commonly used approach among governments. This approach is helpful as it allows all stakeholders to become involved and heard within the policymaking process. For example, although the Ontario government consulted the Ministry of Education, which includes some early years programs such as full-day kindergarten, there is no mention of child care being consulted regarding it. Furthermore, although the Ministry of Education is the overarching governing body for child care and early learning programs in Ontario, the government specifies that it talks about education from kindergarten to grade 12. The exclusion of early learning environments shows a gap in anti-racist education policies, as they are not considering young children below school age.



*Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework* (2017) addresses the vision for early years settings throughout the country, guided by principles of quality, accessibility, affordability, flexibility, and inclusion. Throughout this framework, there were no direct mentions of anti-racism, equity, equality, or race. One mention of diversity was an attempt to acknowledge that the early years' systems must respect and value diversity, including vulnerable children, families, and children with disabilities (Government of Canada, 2017). However, this unspoken distinction between racialized children and families does not ensure that they are being properly supported, and there is a lack of accountability for the early years systems in which they participate.

*Ontario's Renewed Early Years and Child Care Policy Framework* (2017) is a document created with several different groups of early years stakeholders to address what is and is not working in those environments and how Ontario's government can assist in tackling these challenges. This document considers topics related to anti-racist education more than other documents but does not address anti-racism directly. The Ontario framework mostly speaks about diversity and inclusion, creating culturally responsive early years environments and experiences, explicitly mentions Indigenous, Francophone and multi-ethnic programming, and the need for ongoing professional learning opportunities for educators to achieve these goals (Government of Ontario, 2017).

This lack of explicit mention of anti-racism in policy documents is unfavourable, as it does not create a standard that should be enacted by early years professionals. This implicit notion of anti-racism leaves anti-racist work to each individual actor rather than having accountability at an institutional level. This lack of accountability shows a gap between policies

and practices, which is explored with participants' experiences as the research sought to understand how early years professionals are engaging in anti-racist practices.

## Global Perspectives of Anti-Racism and ECEC

The Irish policy document “*Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education*” (2016) is a framework that helps early years practitioners feel supported and empowered to engage in inclusive practices with children and families to make an impact at a larger national scale. The document has two sections: 1) The National Inclusion Charter and 2) The Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion Guidelines (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2016). These sections should be used as a guide through implementing these policies in their specific contexts in Ireland. This document is extensive and explicitly mentions concepts such as race, racism, prejudice, discrimination, and anti-bias approaches. The document also connects to various other forms of social identity such as disability, gender/gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and traveler/Roma communities. This document is particularly unique as it provides their mission, goals, and recommendations for implementing this policy practically, not only with adults but also with children. This document is an excellent example of how there are many vital actors when it comes to implementing anti-racist approaches in the early years. Additionally, this document shows that we should view children as equal participants and capable of engaging in topics about anti-racism alongside adults.

Australia has a Statement of Intent titled “*Supporting Young Children’s Rights (2015-2018)*” (2015). The document’s primary purpose is to identify the main principles of what they

believe are the rights of young children. This document also intends to assist early years professionals in supporting children in their care and the ability to advocate for the children they are working with. Although it does not discuss race or racism throughout the document, there are mentions of equity and social justice, human rights, and discrimination. The document was written in conjunction with The Australian Human Rights Commission and Early Childhood Australia. Those organizations' purpose is to ensure that children's human rights are being upheld, advocate for the field of ECEC, and ensure equity issues regarding children are being addressed. The document connects itself to the human rights treaty, the "*United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*". This treaty outlines that all children have fundamental human rights, one of which is to be free from discrimination.

There have been several discourses surrounding children's abilities to understand topics surrounding equity and social justice issues. In the U.S., there have even been laws surrounding children's ability to learn about these topics in the classroom. U.S. lawmakers in over 20 states have passed (or are in the process of passing) legislation to ban the teachings of CRT and mention both institutional and systemic racism in the U.S. (Au et al., 2021). These rulings are partisan and are constructed by a specific political agenda. The reasoning for passing these legislations is entrenched in the misunderstanding of what critical race theory is and its purpose. These laws are created as they believe CRT is a discriminatory and divisive tactic that further creates racism. However, this is not the case; CRT is used in the curriculum to foster children's abilities to criticize racial injustice and make meaning of themselves in the world (Abawi & Berman, 2019) so that they can make an impact in the world (Au et al., 2021). Prohibiting children from learning about the history and current reality of the U.S. regarding racism is an

attack on education, democracy, and a child's right to knowledge (Au et al., 2021). Denying a child's right to know and understand these topics prevents them from participating in activism to challenge the current way things are structured. It also helps to breed further ignorance in children, making them comply with such norms (Au et al., 2021). Banning anti-racist education prevents students from mobilizing what they learn to create change in the world. In turn, this upholds the current state of affairs favouring the socially privileged and allows those without privileges to face difficulties. CRT guides this research as a theoretical framework. Canada's education system relates to the United States' educational context, as they are not only close in physical proximity but also share social and political similarities (Abawi & Berman, 2019). Canada and the United States have horrific histories of genocide against Indigenous peoples, residential schools, slavery, and anti-Black racism. Although these are different experiences, they are both influenced by White supremacy (Abawi & Berman, 2019).

## Reconceptualizing ECEC Spaces

The topic of anti-racism in ECEC is not always discussed, as it is viewed as a topic that should be discussed with older children, typically with high school students, if at all. The dominant perspective is that children do not notice racial differences and are too young to understand concepts of race and racism (Berman & Abawi, 2019). However, children are aware of racial differences in their peers as they identify racial differences between their peers, their play materials, and their caregivers from a young age. Specifically, findings from the frequently discussed 'doll experiment' has shown that Black and White children prefer playing with White dolls and defining White dolls as "good" and Black dolls as "bad" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012).

There are criticisms regarding the credibility of these studies, as it is challenging to determine the specific reasoning behind children choosing to play with the White dolls and what that outcome represents. Nonetheless, it shows that children can recognize whiteness and see how White skin is viewed as the default experience. All levels of education are “dominated by mainstream academic knowledge that reinforces and reproduces existing cultural, political, and economic structures” (Banks, 2016, p.198-199). It can create a culture where White children have internalized racial superiority, and racialized children have internalized racial inferiority (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). Both can have internalized effects that negatively impact a child’s emerging sense of self and overall development in all domains. Transformative theorists Apple (1982), and Freire (1985), among various others, “view schools as social institutions where critical and radical thought can be fostered” and a space in which minoritized groups can become liberated (Rezai-Rashti, 1995, p.5). Reconceptualist ECEC scholars argue that young children can engage in meaning-making processes regarding race and do so through social interactions and play experiences (Berman & Abawi, 2019). While schools are often seen as spaces to shape young minds, little attention is given to early years education and their role in promoting equity issues.

Moss (2007) considers how early years settings can be used to discuss democratic practices and politics. Moss (2007) illustrates that “[democratic participation is a means] of resisting power and its will to govern, and the forms of oppression and injustice that arise from the unrestrained exercise of power... [and allows room for the] possibility for diversity to flourish” (p.7). Educators must not categorize childhood as a “standardized and universal experience” (Berman & Abawi, 2019, p.183). With this understanding, Abawi and Berman (2019) call for the reconceptualizing and rethinking of early childhood, where early years

professionals consider power relations alongside children, where certain “bodies, identities, and beings are privileged and whose are pushed to the margins in the developmentalist discourse narrative” (p.5). By doing so, they argue that it decentres whiteness and pushes marginalized communities’ to the front in the effort to “dismantle the assumption that there is only one proper way to grow, learn and be, especially in settler-colonial spaces such as Ontario” (Abawi & Berman, 2019, p.5). This current study thus contributes to the reconceptualization discourse of ECEC. This reconceptualization includes shifting to viewing ECEC as a space where political discourse can happen, specifically with discussions about anti-racism.

There are several theoretical approaches to how children can explore race and racism in early childhood settings. Nonetheless, there seems to be limited research to see how educators implement these practices and their overall experience surrounding anti-racist education. This research challenges the idea that teaching topics related to anti-racism to children in the early years is inappropriate or unnecessary and advocates for continuing to engage in this practice. The study focuses on how early years professionals engage in anti-racist practices and how whiteness influences their experiences as an educator. It is discussed that White individuals often do not feel comfortable engaging in topics surrounding anti-racism and discussions about race (DiAngelo, 2018). Rezai-Rashti (1995) states that “critical pedagogies advance the notion of the teacher as an intellectual committed to creating an alternative collective will. Critical pedagogy involves heeding the voices of those minority students that have been silenced for so long. In legitimizing those voices and empowering those students, a new voice for liberation and democracy will be produced” (p. 5). This research encourages conversations about how

educators, regardless of race, must engage in conversations about anti-racism with the children in their care.

## Putting Anti-Racism into Practice

As previously mentioned, this research contributes to anti-racism in ECEC, specifically regarding filling the gap between theory and practice. Ahmed (2012) explains that anti-racist work should be automatic, where it is embedded into all aspects of an institution, not just a short time in one lesson plan. When educators fail to acknowledge and address this with their students, they contribute to upholding White supremacy. Through their silence, they further marginalize racialized students and ultimately deny them a childhood within their education system, which was built on ideologies that never welcomed these children in the first place (Abawi, Eizadirad, & Berman, 2021). Children are competent individuals that can understand if they do not feel accepted or supported in specific spaces. Children are gaining their sense of themselves and their world, and educators have a role in guiding them through that. Educators must go beyond the centering of White experiences in their classrooms and challenge their students' thinking and their own (Abawi, Eizadirad, & Berman, 2021). Educators should recognize their unique role in educating future generations on these topics to create a more just society for all (Dei, 2010).

White educators may perceive anti-racist policies and practices as exclusionary of White people or portraying them as instinctively racist, making them resistant to engaging in anti-racist practices themselves (Ahmed, 2004). It is suggested by Clarke and Watson (2014) that educators engage in critical discussions surrounding topics of whiteness and the limited understanding of various White identities. One consequence of being a member of the dominant racial group is

that members give less thought to how their dominant status shapes their life outcomes" (Underhill, 2017, p.1935). Racial socialization "illuminates how and what people learn about race and racism" (Underhill, 2017, p. 1935). However, when it comes to White parents, or in this case, White educators, they do not engage in "speaking with their children about race and racism because they subscribe to a colourblind ideology and believe talking about race is impolite [or racist]" (Underhill, 2017, p.1935). Abawi and Berman (2019) note that:

"the extant Canadian literature points to the calls for implementing anti-racism education in both pre-service and professional development programs such as those provided through the College of Early Childhood Educators (CECEs), the profession's regulatory body for the province of Ontario. The scholarship, as mentioned earlier, 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 colleague." (Berman et al., 2017, as cited by Abawi & Berman, 2019, p.9)

There are various advocacy groups for the profession of ECEC, two of them being the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care (OCBCC) and the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO). These organizations have initiated more professional learning opportunities for early years professionals to engage in anti-racist education, specifically, anti-Black racism. The AECEO and OCBCC help provide additional resources to help extend the professional learning opportunities for these educators. Hosting these events allows educators who may not have been working in the system for several years to become aware of new pedagogical approaches regarding current topics in the field of ECEC. Bringing more educators into these conversations creates more active participants in helping to fight for equality for the children and families they serve. As Lee (2014) suggests, educators must be able to look at how their education has implicit biases, how their worldview may be misguided to benefit the dominant culture, and how that affects their view of nondominant groups in society.



There are some challenges to implementing an anti-racist approach in ECEC. Regarding society's view of the child, there is an assumption that discussing concepts of racism, power, privilege, and whiteness are too complex for children to understand. Implementing an anti-racist education framework does not require money and specific materials but the proper time, space, and support to do so (Kelly, 2012). Unfortunately, the reality is that racialized children cannot avoid the discrimination and oppression that comes with their race or ethnicity. This ideology furthers the narrative that racism does not impact our society, as there is the illusion of equal opportunities (Ahmed, 2004). If we had every person equipped with the tools to unlearn their prejudices and biases and disrupt systems that further the oppression of racialized individuals, society could begin to stride towards equality.

Lorde (1984) mentions that disrupting racism is a lifelong journey. One of the several reasons this is a lifelong journey is that it is so deeply entrenched in our socialization. The current worldwide approaches to tackling racism are not extensive enough, and there are not enough individual actors working to dismantle racism. The rationale for this research is to help bring understanding to this lifelong journey of anti-racist work and the role that all educators must partake in. Anti-racism is not something that should be so easily pushed to the side, and it should not be viewed as voluntary or optional to engage in with children. Anti-racism requires an all-hands-on-deck approach, or it will lead to what Lorde (1984) describes as a "mythical norm," where each person does not think they are an issue, leading to no real progress being made. The research study advocates that all educators, regardless of race, should be engaging in anti-racist practices to best support children in their care.

## Summary of Chapter Two

This chapter has examined the significance regarding the need for anti-racist work to be included in ECEC. The contexts of Canada and Ontario were explored regarding their approaches to equity work in the field of ECEC. There is an identified concern of minimal policies or curriculum documents to account for anti-racist education in the country as a whole and, more specifically, in Ontario, posing the justification of this study. Global policy perspectives from Ireland, Australia and the U.S. were reviewed to compare anti-racist work being conducted in Canada. Lastly, the reconceptualization of ECEC spaces and the implications for practice were considered regarding pre-service training and in-service professional learning opportunities. This chapter has identified limited recognition of anti-racist work within ECEC spaces, further justifying the need for this research. The next chapter covers the methodology, research design, methods, data analysis strategies, and ethical concerns of this research.

## Chapter Three: Methodology and Methods

This chapter outlines the methodology and methods used in this research. The methodology chosen is a qualitative case study, which is defined and justified regarding the research and the research questions. The data collection process is also described. The research design is explored regarding sampling and recruitment processes. The participants recruited for the study are introduced, as well as the data analysis method utilized in this study. Lastly, this chapter discusses the study's ethical considerations and potential limitations.

### Methodology

#### Qualitative Research

Qualitative research helps to provide an “in-depth, intricate and detailed understanding of meanings, actions, non-observable as well as observable phenomena, attitudes, intentions and behaviours” (Gonzales et al., 2008, p.3, as cited by Cohen et al., 2018, p. 288) of a specific “program, practice, or setting” (Mertens, 2020, p. 296). It allows researchers to observe, interpret, and make sense of phenomena and the meanings that individuals attach to them (Mertens, 2020). There are critical forms of qualitative research where real-life scenarios are analyzed to point out the intersecting and prominent barriers that exist to oppress or exploit specific groups of people in society (Hammersley, 2013, as cited by Cohen et al., 2018). Since this current study covers anti-racist practices in ECEC settings, it justifies the methodology choice of qualitative research. A qualitative research design assisted in understanding anti-racism and how early years professionals make sense of anti-racist practices. Qualitative research is

flexible, as it provides spaces for participants with varying circumstances and experiences, which can be impacted by various social and contextual conditions (Cohen et al., 2018). Qualitative research makes room for the participant's perspective regarding the diverse "beliefs, values, intentions, and meanings, as well as social, cultural, and physical contextual factors" that influence a person's experiences (Mertens, 2020, p. 298). Furthermore, a qualitative case study allows the research to capture the voices of early years professionals' experiences with anti-racism and how whiteness influences their practice.

Mertens (2020) mentioned that the researcher's worldview or paradigm associated with their research connects to the nature of qualitative research. Researchers will often acknowledge their biases, values, and social positionality to determine how the researcher interprets the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Therefore, it is relevant to utilize a qualitative research design regarding the research as it allows room for reflexivity. Reflexive researchers must acknowledge their past experiences, and the influence they have on the interpretation of the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As a RECE myself, it is crucial to recognize my positionality, as I am tackling a topic with which I have education, training, and experience. I also hold privilege in society due to my whiteness, and I will discuss issues surrounding race and racism, where I do not have first-hand experience.

## Case Study

Case studies present a unique opportunity to explore "real people in real situations" rather than only "abstract theories or principles," and show how theory and practice come together (Cohen et al., 2018, p.376). Case studies are an approach that helps to explain intricate issues,

situations, and experiences that focus on a particular example or group and how they interact with the phenomenon or experience at hand (Mertens, 2020). The word *case* is often used to analyze any number of units, such as individuals, groups, schools, or towns (Mertens, 2020). A case study approach focuses on a specific instance to better understand a “complex context” (Mertens, 2020, p.305). Regarding the research, using a case study helped to understand the context of the early years professionals’ experiences regarding anti-racist practices. Using a smaller group size as the case to focus on helps gather participants’ “multiple perspectives in order to catch its ‘complexity and uniqueness’” (Simons, 2009, as cited by Cohen et al., 2018) while also being appropriate for the scope of this research plan.

## Research Design

### Sampling

In connection with this research project, the research project interviewed early years professionals working in a licensed child care setting in Ontario, Canada. The eligibility criterion included early years professionals working in either licensed home-based or licensed centre-based child care settings, as these are the most common early years programs. In addition, licensed child care settings typically have children attend their programs consistently or long-term, compared to drop-in or temporary settings, such as community programming or day camps. Since anti-racist work is a long-term commitment (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012), having a regular, consistent, or long-term learning environment is ideal for anti-racist education. Therefore, another criterion for the participants was to work in a licensed child care setting for at least one year. A minimum of one year of work experience ensures that each participant has more

experience navigating their workplace and has built a connection with the children in their classrooms. Moreover, having more experience in their workplace setting may assist them with their confidence and comfortability in teaching these subjects since that can be challenging to navigate in ECEC.

Furthermore, the sampling procedure that was used was non-probability purposive sampling. Participants may identify with any gender, race, or ethnic background. Using a purposive sampling procedure helped to ensure a representative sample of diverse participants for the case study. The rationale for using purposive sampling rather than random sampling is that it helps to gather the experiences of a diverse group of educators. The context of this research gathered the experiences of racialized and non-racialized educators. Doing so provides an opportunity to analyze the differences in experiences based on race and help the best answer the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study gathered detailed and deep understandings of the participants' experiences rather than a study with a more generalizable outcome (Cohen et al., 2018). The research uplifted the unique voices and experiences of the participants involved in the study. Specifically, the research intention was to have a small purposive sample that showcases the challenges and successes of implementing anti-racist practices as early years professionals.

## Recruitment

The research sought four participants to volunteer their time to participate in the study. These participants belonged to different racial/ethnic groups. As mentioned previously, purposive sampling was used to assist in recruiting a diverse group of participants. Having a

diverse sample best supports the goal of this study, which is to capture different experiences of early years professionals engaging in anti-racist practices while working in licensed child care settings. The recruitment process included reaching out to external organizations with access to various communication platforms to reach the targeted participants. One of the larger organizations contacted was the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO), which is an organization that advocates for the advancement of the field of ECEC and the professional recognition and support for ECEs in Ontario. In addition to being the researcher for this project, I am also a RECE with connections to ECEC organizations based in London-Middlesex, Ontario. The local organization contacted was Strive, a professional development and learning agency based in London, Ontario, which serves London-Middlesex and its surrounding areas. Strive provides workshops and learning opportunities for RECEs and other early years professionals. Therefore, AECEO and Strive were ideal organizations with access to an extensive database of early years professionals. When the researcher contacted these organizations, they received a letter of information (refer to Appendix B) about the research project, the verbal consent script, and recruitment materials to invite potential participants. These recruitment materials included a social media graphic that outlined the purpose of the research, the eligibility criteria to be a participant, and the contact information to inquire about becoming a participant. Utilizing external organizations to assist with the recruitment of the participants provided a low-cost and efficient way to find a breadth of participants at both a local level (London-Middlesex and its surrounding areas) and a provincial level (Ontario as a whole).

In addition to using external organizations to help with recruitment, this qualitative case study also used purposive sampling. Cohen et al. (2018) mention that purposive sampling is frequently used in qualitative research to construct the sample of participants to meet the research's goals. The research obtained a sample of participants representing various social identities, specifically regarding race, and made comparisons amongst participants who are racialized or non-racialized.

Furthermore, when the participants applied to volunteer for the research study, they had to complete a questionnaire on the online surveying platform Qualtrics through Western University. The questionnaire was a basic screening process to gather demographic information from the potential participants. The demographic information collected is their name, contact information, gender, racial and ethnic background, the type of early years settings they work in, and how many years they have worked in that setting (see Appendix C). The primary screening process of their demographic information helped to ensure that the potential participants met the eligibility criteria. The screening process also assisted with purposive sampling to help to ensure that the most diverse group of participants was selected for the study.

## Participants

A total of four early years professionals participated in the research. Table 1 outlines the participants' work experience, race/ethnicity, and gender. This information gives us more context for each participant's life concerning the research. This information was self-proclaimed in a pre-screening survey the participants filled out prior to engaging in the interviews for the study (See Appendix C).



*Table 1: Research Sample*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>How long they have worked in the field of ECEC</b>
Elizabeth	Female	White	8 years
Olivia	Female	White (Irish and Italian third generation)	6 years
Mariam	Female	South Asian, Pakistani Canadian, Muslim	4 years
Charlotte	Female	White/Caucasian	3 years

### Elizabeth

Elizabeth is an Executive Director of a non-profit child care centre located in a city in Southwestern Ontario. She has self-identified as a White female. Elizabeth has been a Registered Early Childhood Educator since 2016, holding a bachelor’s degree in Psychology and an Early Childhood Education diploma. She worked as an Early Childhood Educator for a year, then moved into a supervisor role, and has been an executive director since 2018. Overall, Elizabeth has eight years of experience in the field of ECEC.

### Olivia

Olivia works as a Registered Early Childhood Educator in a non-profit childcare centre located in a city in Southwestern Ontario. She has self-identified as a White, Irish, and Italian third-generation female. Olivia has been a Registered Early Childhood Educator since 2019, holding a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Leadership, a diploma in Early Childhood

Education, and a diploma in Autism and Behavioural Science. As a student, for their field experiences, she has worked in kindergarten and child care settings. She also worked as a supply staff throughout her post-secondary experience and now works full-time as a toddler-age educator. Overall, Olivia has six years of experience in the field of ECEC.

## Mariam

Mariam works as a Registered Early Childhood Educator in a non-profit child care centre located in a city in Southwestern Ontario. She has self-identified as South Asian, Pakistani Canadian, Muslim, and female. She has been a Registered Early Childhood Educator since 2020. She holds a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Leadership and a diploma in Early Childhood Education. She has worked in a preschool-age classroom full time but currently works as a supply staff in a licensed child care centre. Overall, Mariam has four years of experience working in the field of ECEC.

## Charlotte

Charlotte works as a Registered Early Childhood Educator in a non-profit child care centre located in a city in Southwestern Ontario. She has self-identified as a White/Caucasian woman. She holds a bachelor's degree specific to the field of early years [name not included for confidentiality purposes]. She also has a diploma in Early Childhood Educator. She has been a Registered Early Childhood Educator since 2018. She has been working in ECEC in various roles, as a supply educator and in before and after school programs, but currently works as a preschool educator in a licensed child care centre. Overall, Charlotte has three years of experience working in the field of ECEC.

## Methods

### Interviews

The method chosen for collecting the data from the participants was using semi-structured interviews. Qualitative interviews are often unstructured and aim to gather views and opinions from the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The interviews were one-on-one interview sessions. Since the concept of anti-racism may be a challenging or uncomfortable subject for some people to discuss, individual interviews were conducted to create a more comfortable environment for the participants. For those individuals who are non-racialized, it can be uncomfortable to talk about race (DiAngelo, 2018). Additionally, it was important to consider the feelings of racialized participants when sharing their struggles or experiences. It is crucial to ensure that all the participants have an opportunity to share their thoughts and experiences. Creating these one-on-one interview environments helped to mitigate each participant's responses from being silenced or influenced by other participants' experiences, judgment, or pressure from their presence.

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted virtually. The interviews took place over an online conferencing platform, Zoom, that Western University has a contract to protect users' safety of their personal data (Western Technology Services, 2021). As a researcher, creating a comfortable environment is vital, so each participant feels that they can share their feelings, experiences, and stories without feeling judged. Before the interview, we reviewed the letter of information and consent forms that were given to them prior to the virtual interview. Participants also had an opportunity to ask any remaining questions regarding the

research. Participants were notified that they could skip any questions that they did not feel comfortable answering or end the interview at any time. If they did choose to end the interview, they would not face any consequences, and their information would be destroyed. After receiving each participant's consent, the interview began with the semi-structured question guide (see Appendix D). Some questions are created before the interview and include additional probing and follow-up questions based on their responses.

Once the interview began, the participants were informed of the interview protocol being used, which is both an online recording and written notes. Consent to audio and video recording was collected from the participants to record the interview. The Zoom platform records video and audio simultaneously, but two separate files are saved with audio only or both audio and video after the recording ends. If participants did not want their video to be recorded, they were welcome to turn off their camera or request that their video file be deleted after the interview was finished. In addition to the recording, the participants were informed that there would be written notes being recorded during the interview. Taking written notes helps if the online recording feature fails (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

## Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis processes are complex and have various chronological steps, with several levels of analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Regarding the data analysis procedures, written notes and reflection were conducted at every data analysis stage. However, immediately after conducting each interview, the researcher engaged in a short reflection period to write notes regarding significant themes or concepts that emerged during the interview.

Afterwards, each interview was transcribed, organized, reviewed, reflected on, coded, generated descriptions and themes, and then represented those descriptions and themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

## Coding and Content Analysis

The primary data analysis procedure was coding the data collected from each participant. Coding is “the process of organizing the data by bracketing chunks... into categories... and labelling those categories with a term...” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p.314). Coding as a data analysis procedure is helpful with qualitative case studies, as it helps to better understand the “...information about people, places, or events in a setting” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p.315). In addition, qualitative case studies use the themes created from the coding process to engage in further complex analysis about “each individual case or across different cases” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p.315).

## Ethical Considerations

The central ethical considerations regarding the scope of this research project would be confidentiality, data security, and consent. Due to health and safety measures in place because of the current COVID-19 pandemic, these interviews were facilitated over the online conferencing platform, Zoom. Western University has a Zoom platform with extensive security measures to protect the data exchanged and stored on it. Since Western has a contract with Zoom, it prevents Zoom from storing or selling the information used on it through those Western University-based Zoom accounts. Participants were screened and chosen to participate in the research, and separate links and passwords were created for each interview. A waiting room was also enabled

to ensure that only that selected participant would be allowed to enter the video call. The researcher recorded the video call for data analysis purposes to code the participants' responses in the interview. To ensure the confidentiality of participants, the interviews were conducted in private by the researcher, who wore headphones so that the participants had complete privacy with their identity and shared their experiences. The recordings were stored on the researcher's personal computer, locked with passwords to ensure that all data was kept secure and confidential from other individuals. Regarding the primary screening process with demographic information, any person who submitted personal information to Qualtrics and was not chosen to move forward as a participant had their data destroyed. Likewise, if a participant decided to withdraw from the study, they would also have their information destroyed. Ethical considerations were addressed through the ethics application sent to the research ethics board at Western University. The study was approved to move forward with recruitment and interviews (see Appendix A). Through the letter of information and consent form, all concerns regarding confidentiality, data security, and consent were explained to participants.

## Summary of Chapter Three

This chapter has provided information about the research methodology, research design, methods, strategies for data analysis, and ethical considerations. Ultimately, a qualitative case study provided the best approach to respond to the research questions and gather the participants' experiences. Furthermore, since anti-racist practices are not often put into practice in ECEC settings, this research provided more insight into the experiences of early years professionals with anti-racism and whiteness.

## Chapter Four: Presentation of Research Findings

In this chapter, the findings from the semi-structured interviews will be discussed in relation to the research questions: 1) How do early years professionals engage in anti-racist practices in early years settings? and 2) How does whiteness influence practice in early years settings? Four main themes were identified from the interviews: 1) Early years professionals' understanding of anti-racist education; 2) Experiences engaging in anti-racist practices with children; 3) Experiences with whiteness influencing anti-racist practice; 4) Encouraging anti-racist practices in early years settings. Within each main theme, some sub-themes emerged from the interviews with participants during the coding process. The sub-themes discussed in this chapter will also connect to the literature reviewed in Chapter Two.

### Understanding of Anti-Racist Education

At the beginning of each interview, the participants were asked about their familiarity with the concept of anti-racist education. Three of the four participants conceded that they felt somewhat familiar with the topic, while one claimed to be very knowledgeable about it. Elizabeth explained that she was not completely familiar with anti-racist education, citing the lack of emphasis on this topic during her schooling, as she lived in a predominantly White city where racial issues were infrequently discussed. Olivia and Charlotte acknowledged that they learned about anti-racist education through their post-secondary educational experiences. In contrast with the other three, Mariam explained her definition of anti-racism and how it works in her practice with children by saying:



It's about teaching children from an early age about the differences and there are differences, and then there are people treated differently because of those... stereotypes. Talking to children early about this - these things - is important. It teaches children at an early age that all of us are equal, even though we look different. We come from different backgrounds.

Mariam and Olivia noted that many educators and the public assume that children do not care about anti-racism, cannot handle hearing about these topics, or cannot understand them. Mariam suggested this is not the case and that children need to learn about these issues early. Charlotte also pointed out that children will eventually learn about topics surrounding race, so it is essential to talk about them. Olivia stated that having young children learn about anti-racism helps them have a foundational understanding and build on their learning as they grow older. However, the participants other than Mariam did not attempt to define anti-racism, instead relying on their individual experience in determining its features. Subsequently, they emphasized their understanding through their experience learning about anti-racism at the post-secondary level and their attempts to implement anti-racism in their practice. According to Dei (2010), anti-racism involves questioning dominant discourses and developing students' critical reflection abilities. Learning how to engage in critical reflection is important because, in the absence of an anti-racist learning environment, students learn in a monocultural context (Lee as cited in Au, 2014), which endlessly reinforces the stereotypes that underlie systemic racism. Specifically, Elizabeth made a note of how these systems oppress certain racialized groups, such as in her example of policing within Black communities. When asked, Elizabeth said she thought oppression did not extend to education or care settings apart from secondary school settings, which she agreed are oppressive. Elizabeth argued that systems like the criminal justice system, which involve police officers using deadly force, are more concerning given that people's lives are at stake. Accordingly, Collins and Bilge (2018) emphasize the importance of critical education, as the typical approach often fails to address institutional and structural racism.

Although the interviewees noted the existence of structural racism in society, it did not seem that they related it directly to the child care systems they work in.

### Significance of Anti-Racist Education Within Early Years Settings

The participants were also asked about their opinions regarding children engaging in conversations about race and racism. Specifically, participants were asked whether they thought it was appropriate to do this work with young children and if they viewed it as a part of their role as early years professionals.

All four participants agreed with their opinion that engaging children in topics about race and racism are vital and a part of their role as an ECE. Charlotte shared that part of an ECE's role is to socialize children and interact with people from varying backgrounds. She continued to explain that children must learn to be respectful and kind members of society. Charlotte explained that we must talk to children about race politely and respectfully. Rezai-Rasthi (1995) proposes that multicultural education is intended to promote cultural acceptance, but it can be problematic, as it focuses on social control, rather than social change. When we refrain from acknowledging institutional racism, this exacerbates the issue (Rezai-Rashti, 1995). Although acknowledging children's differences is important, it cannot be done in isolation; it must include acknowledging power imbalances, discrimination, and privilege (Lee, in Au, 2014). Charlotte did not mention discussing institutional racism with children, but instead promoted the idea of respecting others' differences and being kind to others.

Elizabeth discussed her belief that anti-racist education is essential; however, ECEs need to be compensated and supported much more than they are currently for their work. Elizabeth explained that a lack of adequate compensation can deter educators from engaging in anti-racist

work on top of their daily commitments. She explained that the education and the culture children are raised in shape their beliefs. Olivia and Charlotte also find it is vital to engage in anti-racist education because children's brains are in their most formative years when they enter the child care system. Olivia explained that children's early social interactions with people are essential, which is why it is important to note the prominent role ECEs play in supporting their development, as it has lifelong impacts on their overall development. Charlotte explained that she learned through her pre-service training that children initially are egocentric, which makes it essential to teach children how to care for one another. Olivia said that it is crucial that we unlearn the biases imposed on us through several generations and prevent passing down our biases to future generations. Olivia discussed anti-racism and said that:

...It's quite a hot topic and it...is quite hard, but it's important to get uncomfortable and to make it so that it's no longer uncomfortable, that it's a part of our daily lives, and that... it becomes normal to be able to talk about race and talk about... inequalities that are happening... and hopefully giving them the tools to be able to... know what to do, how to support the people around them, or how to support themselves.

Olivia explained that child care sets the foundation for children's lives, so we need to incorporate topics of race, racism, and anti-racism. Olivia expressed the importance of age-appropriateness, as did the other participants, Mariam, Charlotte, and Elizabeth, and that interacting with different age groups will be implemented differently. But by beginning these conversations early on, Olivia explained that children have a foundational understanding of the topic and will build on their knowledge as they age. Olivia stated:

...By the time they're at school, they've already made their decisions of what they think of the world... of what the world means to them... and... by then, I think early intervention is key.

Mariam explained that all children should learn about anti-racism regardless of their age, but the learning process for infants and toddlers can be challenging to navigate. However, in her experience working with preschoolers, she finds they are very capable of understanding concepts related to race. Mariam finds that more educators need to incorporate anti-racism into their practices. Mariam stated that our world is constantly changing, as it is very globalized and multicultural, especially in Canada, so we cannot expect children to not hear about these topics or know what is happening in the world. Olivia pointed out a similar idea by explaining how children are going to be asking questions, and these discussions should be facilitated by ECEs that have knowledge and training on the topic, rather than children making their own assumptions.

## Experiences Engaging in Anti-Racist Practices with Children

The participants were asked to share how they engage with children about topics surrounding race or racism in their everyday practice and then reflect on their successes and challenges in engaging children in these discussions.

Elizabeth explained how she celebrated Ramadan, a Muslim holiday, at her centre to account for the diverse religious identities of the children and staff. She explained how she has diverse play materials, such as dolls of different skin colours. Elizabeth acknowledged that she is not an expert on anti-racism, leading to her not feeling very knowledgeable about the topic. Olivia also added that when she sets up the learning environment, she is intentional about the dolls and books that she uses, to ensure various racial demographics are showcased. Since the children in Olivia's centre are predominantly White, she wants to expose them to different races

through the play materials in her classroom. Charlotte also voiced how she engaged in anti-bias practice in small ways through literature. However, Charlotte noted that sometimes it is difficult to have a diverse book collection if your centre lacks adequate funding for those resources. Charlotte pointed out that some of the children in her care have had discussions amongst themselves regarding their different skin tones. Charlotte explained how she helps to facilitate discussions with children in an educational and informative way that does not shame the children for exploring these topics.

Mariam commented on the anti-racist work she conducted specifically with the pre-school age children in her classroom last year when the graves of Indigenous children who attended residential schools were discovered in Canada. Mariam shared:

I didn't talk to them specifically about the graves because I feel like it was too much to talk about. But I did talk to them about residential schools... and I had [them] understand about their Indigenous population, um, and [the] different groups and living here for... for thousands of years, [they are] the original people of the land.

Mariam went on to share how she was surprised about the conversation she had with the children in her care, who were between 3 years to 3 and a half years old at the time. She shared that the children were upset by the information regarding residential schools and explained how they thought it was unfair that Indigenous children were taken away from their families.

Although it was a challenging conversation with the age group, she expressed the importance of children understanding this from an early age. Mariam noted that it is essential to give them this information in a way that does not overwhelm them so that the children can handle it. Mariam mentioned that clear communication with parents is necessary for anti-racist work, as she frequently informs parents of what she plans to discuss with children in her classroom and finds that there is not any pushback from the families. Communication as a strategy to implement anti-

racism connects to the ideas of Ali and Awad (2016) and Delpit (2006) regarding the importance of valuing the experiences of racialized and ethnically diverse children and their families and implementing this value into educator's pedagogy. Mariam explained that when you want to learn more about a child's culture, language, or how to pronounce their name, it is best to ask the families, as they are happy to help.

Elizabeth shared that in her experience, younger children do not bring up world events related to race or racism. Elizabeth thinks those instances may be inappropriate for children to learn about. Elizabeth mentions:

I think it's not on us to share news or information about it – that's really traumatizing, and I don't think that's our place. But if the child brings it up, yes, it is in our place... to listen to what they're saying. But I don't think... we should be bringing up the big events. But you know, talking about hair and skin color... is important.

However, Abawi and Berman (2019) discuss that using a critical race approach can help to develop critical reflection skills and in return, help make an impact on the world (Au et al., 2021). Au et al. (2021) also note that preventing children from learning the truth about historical and current realities defies a child's right to knowledge. Preventing children's awareness and learning about these topics can contribute to children's ignorance in subjects related to race and racism and leads to further complacency in society (Au et al., 2021). There was a focus from participants about the need for age-appropriate conversations, as children need to be able to understand the topics they are discussing. Elizabeth goes on to explain that these larger world events may be discussed in older grades because children can comprehend them better.

Regarding conversations about physical differences between races, Elizabeth pointed out that she

is encouraging of discussing with children about differences between people's hair and skin colour. Elizabeth also shared that a form of activism their staff engaged in was wearing coloured ribbons in solidarity with the Muslim community, which was in relation to an anti-Muslim hate crime that occurred. Elizabeth pointed out that school-age children would be more likely to learn about world events related to racism rather than children in early years settings. Elizabeth mentioned that if any children had questions related to race, racism, or any world events, that she would be sure to listen to the children and not shame them for their questions, even if they might seem inappropriate. Participants seemed to focus on protecting children from conversations about events specifically related to the suffrage of racialized groups. However, participants voiced that if the children in their care were to bring these topics up, they would explore it with the child.

### Successes Engaging in Anti-Racist Practices

Elizabeth shared a previous experience in her practice, where one child commented on a Black child's hair, asking what was wrong with her hair and why the texture was different. Elizabeth stated that some non-Black children would also notice and mention the darker skin tones of their Black classmates. Elizabeth explained that her response to this child's question was to demonstrate that the Black child's hair grows differently than the White child's hair and noted that nothing is wrong with her hair. Elizabeth indicated that children in ECEC settings are very young, so they are exploring the world around them. Elizabeth added that exploration comes with noticing differences in their peers and asking questions about them. Elizabeth said that

young children are excited to learn more about their friends, which makes it easier to discuss it with them. Elizabeth noted that she is unsure how that could change over time as children grow older.

Olivia shared an experience at work when she wore an orange shirt from a local First Nations reserve in her community to represent the September 30<sup>th</sup> holiday, National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, formally known as Orange Shirt Day. She explained how there was a design on it that a school-age child was trying to identify. The child thought that Olivia's shirt had a race car printed on it. Olivia explained to that child that the image was a bird. Olivia and the child talked about how she purchased the shirt from a local Indigenous reserve and how the design represents the local First Nation community's culture. Olivia shared with the child the purpose of the day and what wearing the shirt is supposed to represent.

“I was explaining to him about it – trying to be as most age-appropriate as possible... talking about how, you know, today's a day to try to help make up for past causes - [be]cause we weren't supposed to be here... but we came anyways, and we didn't listen to them saying 'no, no thank you', and we just kept on going. And I [said] you know how much you don't like it when people don't listen to you when you say, 'no thank you', and he [said] yeah.”

Olivia shared that even if the conversation is uncomfortable, it is still important to discuss conversations about race. Olivia speaking about this idea relates to what DiAngelo (2018) coins as *white fragility*, which is “triggered by discomfort and anxiety, it is born of superiority and entitlement” (p.28). Olivia further explained that there are moments as an educator when she might not know how to discuss a topic with a child. Olivia and Mariam expressed how approaching topics about race can relate to the feelings or experiences children have already had, for them to grasp the ideas as this helps to build on their learning. Olivia and Mariam



emphasized the importance of facilitating children's learning in an age-appropriate way, as some topics could be too shocking for children to hear about all at once.

Mariam discussed how she engages in anti-racist practices by encouraging children's native or home language use in the classroom. She explained how she invites parents to get involved by sharing their culture, such as how they speak, how they live, and their celebrations. She explained that many children's families attending her centre speak several languages. As mentioned by Banks (2016), it is important to empower students to unlearn harmful patterns of Eurocentric thinking, which Mariam attempted to do by normalizing the use of different languages in her classroom. Mariam explained how some parents brought it to her attention that their children feel uncomfortable speaking their home languages and do not want to speak any other language than English. Mariam shared that she encouraged home language use during their meal times by asking children to say certain foods or drinks they were eating that day in their home languages. By doing so, Mariam is engaging in a culturally responsive pedagogical approach, as she includes and collaborates with children and their families regarding their diverse races, ethnicities, and languages (Ali & Awad, 2016; Delpit, 2006).

Mariam expressed how children can become familiar with other languages by exposing them to those new sounds from an early age, which could help them accept other languages and not view them as strange or different. Mariam also wanted the children in her care to begin fostering their sense of cultural identity. To do this, she facilitated an activity where she sat with each child and helped them write down some ideas such as their names, how they greet others in

their home language, what country their parents come from, among other things. After gathering that information, they engaged in an art activity where Mariam discussed with the children how their different backgrounds still make them Canadian. She explained how she wanted to conduct this activity so children could begin to accept that they are multilingual, and their home countries and different cultures are important and should be celebrated, not hidden. She explained this use of language was also extended into the infant classroom in her centre, as those educators asked the children's parents if they speak different languages at home. The educators would then use them in the classroom with the infants to help promote language use to support the infant's understanding, as they only know a limited number of words in their age ranges.

Charlotte recalled an experience where one of the children in her classroom was participating in Ramadan. Charlotte explained how it became a learning opportunity for the other children to understand their peers' cultural practices. She explained that the Muslim child took it upon herself to create a dramatic play experience with some other children after their meal, to discuss Ramadan and what fasting was. Charlotte noted that the class then read a book about Ramadan to extend their learning in the interest they expressed in the topic.

Participants were asked to share what they feel has encouraged them to engage in anti-racist practices in their work settings. Elizabeth shared that working alongside other racialized women has helped her to understand her privilege better. She shared that hearing about various world events or tragedies gave her a new understanding as it affected the racial/ethnic groups that her staff also belongs to. Olivia stated that social/political movements such as the Black Lives Matter movement have helped her to reflect on these topics. Olivia explained that many of

the professional learning opportunities she engaged in during the summer of 2020 were connected to topics such as anti-racism, anti-bias, and anti-White supremacy. Olivia explained that this motivated her to learn more, as she had been interested in these topics beforehand. Olivia shared that in her bachelor's degree program, she conducted research about the need for adequate Indigenous representation in policymaking. Olivia shared that she also follows many accounts on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok that share information about these topics. Mariam shared that learning about the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action Report* has helped her understand Canada's history regarding its treatment of Indigenous peoples and how to best implement this in her practice with children. Mariam also explained that instances regarding the rise in Islamophobia and discussions of these events in her pre-service training encouraged her to begin having these discussions with children early.

Charlotte explained that her workplace developed an EDI action plan to address issues such as hiring and child care practices, removing bias and barriers, and ensuring that their centre was fostering diversity. Charlotte shared that she felt fortunate to know that her workplace cares about these issues. Charlotte mentioned how as an educator, she is doing small-scale advocacy work working directly with children and noted that she is happy to know that racialized individuals are getting opportunities to advocate for changes at a professional level in the background. However, Ahmed (2012) argues that anti-racist work is not done in an isolated environment and should be integrated into all aspects of an institution. This connects to Charlotte, as she connects anti-racist work being conducted in a particular part of an institution. Charlotte explained that she wants to make sure there is room for the voices of those who need to

speak on those issues, as it is not her experience as a White person. She noted that at her workplace, there does not seem to be any bias or prejudice against a particular group of people, and she is glad that all people are treated fairly and respectfully. However, according to Ahmed (2012), the focus of diversity work has shifted to altering perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness embedded within an institution. This connects to Charlotte's thoughts about the EDI committee, as her perception of whiteness in her institution has changed since they have initiated this EDI work.

Olivia also shared how her work has an EDI group that works to address issues in her child care centre. She explained how her work is predominantly White, and there is often an unwillingness to discuss topics of race. Olivia discussed when issues regarding racial discrimination arise, the situation is often diminished and ruled as a misunderstanding rather than discriminatory or harmful behaviour. Olivia expressed that she was working on the EDI committee and worked on presenting the information to their Board of Directors. She explained that the EDI statements released from their data were intriguing; however, she felt that the statement did not represent their everyday practices, and no changes were made to the centre's policies or pedagogical approaches. She suggested that the solution requires more communication and support for how educators can implement this EDI statement into everyday practices, as there seems to be a lack of collective effort. Olivia's experience connects to the idea that institutions can claim to be anti-racist while not doing any actual anti-racist work (Ahmed, 2004). Olivia critiqued the EDI statement, explaining that it feels as if the statement is for appearances rather than actual work being done in her child care centre. Her critique connects to

Ahmed (2007), and how politics in diversity work has devolved into 'image management,' intending to create the 'right image' and correct the wrong one (p.605).

### Challenges Engaging in Anti-Racist Practices

The participants were asked to discuss a time in which racial discrimination or an inappropriate conversation about race occurred among children within their work setting and whether they intervened.

Elizabeth stated that she could not recall an incident of racial prejudice, suggesting that this is because the children she works with are very young. Because of their age, she found their intentions pure because their interest derives from curiosity. Elizabeth then referred to racial discrimination as bullying, which she noticed was more of an occurrence among older-aged children.

Olivia recalled an incident that occurred during her first field experience when she was in her pre-service training for early childhood education. She explained that her classroom had many White children and only one Black child. One of the White children was standing next to the Black child and commented on his skin tone. She said:

...I remember they were lining up to go to nap time, and just this one – the other boy was standing next to the other child, and they just got really weird, and we were like “what’s-what are you – what are you doing?” and he’s like “he’s scary... he’s so scary”. And we were like “what do you mean he’s so scary?” and uh, [he said] “he’s just- he’s just so dark.

Olivia continued explaining how she was shocked by this child’s comment and was unsure what to say. She explained that the RECEs in the classroom, who were her mentors then, forcefully told him not to say such things as it was mean and upsetting to the child. When reflecting on the experience, Olivia pondered if the educators handled the situation in an

appropriate manner. Olivia explained how she thought talking about it with the child would have been a better approach. She further reflected:

...Talking about it and talking it through, to maybe reach a better understanding...  
would have been a better way rather than - maybe he's now [going to] internalize those things – that thinking – and know it's not something you should say out loud, but he's [going to] think it on the inside... [it] might have been a missed opportunity.

Olivia finished by explaining how it is crucial to diversify children's thinking by exposing them to specific conversations, so they do not grow up narrow-minded. When further probed on asking how it felt to be in that situation as a student on placement rather than the staff, she explained how she was scared to advocate for the Black child since she was inexperienced. Olivia thought it was not her place to challenge or disagree with the staff members who had more experience than her. However, Olivia explained that advocating for children has become something she has been working on as an educator now in the field, stating that "...there's not always somebody in the room that's [going to] say it, so you should be the person to say it". When asked a follow-up question regarding what she would do in a situation like the one she faced in the present day, she shared that she would need to pause and think about a situation like this. Olivia explained the importance of being on the same page as her co-educators in her classroom, as she needs to feel appropriately supported in these discussions. She explained that due to her and her co-educators' whiteness, it is important to research the topic so that they can approach such situations appropriately. Olivia then said she would bring it up as a discussion with the children as a group over meal times, discussing it using books or videos. Olivia concluded by considering how these preconceptions may persist since there is not enough discussion about race and racism. She explained that she would view a scenario like the one

previously described as an opportunity to show something missing in the classroom that needs to be supported.

Mariam referred to her experience when trying to implement anti-racist practices in her classroom when teaching children about Indigenous communities in Canada. She explained that when watching videos of Indigenous peoples, there were some different words and tones from the singing that were unfamiliar to the children, prompting one of the children to laugh. Mariam explained that she responded to this student's laughter immediately, where she told the child that she did not understand why they were laughing, as many children spoke different languages in that class, including the child themselves. She explained to the child that they were listening to this language to become familiar with it. Mariam shared that "...if you don't talk to them [about inappropriate instances related to race], we don't teach them... that's how racism and everything starts". She discussed further that if educators do not intervene when young children say inappropriate things about different races, they may think it is okay to laugh or tease others who are different.

Charlotte shared an experience that she had in her pre-service training. When sitting with a group of children who were colouring, one of the children referred to the peach-coloured crayon as the skin-coloured crayon. She said she had a moment where she paused, as she had just discussed this type of conversation during her pre-service training when learning about anti-biased practice. She asked the child why they called the crayon "skin-coloured" and discussed how there are different shades of skin colour, and other children in their program also had different skin tones. She explained that she tried to address it at the moment and hoped the message stuck with them. When asked a further probing question about her comfort level as a

pre-service student, she explained that she has become more comfortable working in the profession and discussing this topic with time. Charlotte explained that she was scared to talk about it but found it easier since she was talking to children rather than their parents.

Charlotte also shared that she had observed something with the younger age groups born during the COVID-19 pandemic. She found that since these children were less socialized due to restrictions on social gatherings, a few White children showed discomfort toward racialized educators when they first entered the child care program. Charlotte pondered if this was due to the children's lack of social experiences with people that looked different from their families. Although it was subtle and disappeared over time, it was something that she found interesting.

Elizabeth explained how she listened to her staff members recount instances of racism that happened to them as racialized individuals, which was challenging for her to hear. She pointed out that although it is difficult to hear, it is much harder for her staff to be afraid to exist based on their racialized and religious backgrounds. She also explained she is working on listening to those with experience as a racialized individual rather than speaking; she explained how she is not someone who has experienced racism, so it is challenging for her to talk about it. Elizabeth also voiced the difficulty that comes with challenging existing systems in place that perpetuate racism.

Olivia explained that although she has received a lot of information and education on anti-racism and similar, she feels that she is sometimes unsure how to implement these strategies that she has learned. She also explained that her centre is predominantly White, which poses some unique challenges, as her coworkers do not typically discuss topics of race. She mentioned how she tries to find ways to incorporate anti-racism into her practice, which is challenging due



to the young age group of toddlers, along with balancing the daily responsibilities as an ECE.

Olivia explained that agreeing with the other educator in her classroom regarding how to engage in these conversations about race is challenging, especially if there is an age difference. She explained that pre-service training needs to incorporate more discussions on navigating workplace disagreements regarding values and pedagogical practices. Mariam explained how she wishes that there were more resources available for early years professionals, as there is not a lot of information on how to implement the learning she received in her pre-service training.

Balancing differences amongst co-workers alongside the lack of resources available on anti-racist education in early years settings makes it very challenging to implement. She explained it is hard to find resources that enable educators to make changes in their place with their limited planning time. Charlotte also noted that educators are often so busy during their daily shifts that they will not have time to extend children's learning on this topic, so it often is neglected. Olivia also indicated that implementing anti-racism is challenging in ECEC environments since there is a perception that our field is not professional, so we are not qualified to teach anti-racism.

Mariam explained that she did not feel prevented from engaging in anti-racism at her centre, as her administration and the families she works with support the anti-racist work she conducts in her classroom. Mariam also noted that although her workplace is supportive of her doing anti-racist work with children, she finds they do not encourage other educators to follow suit. She noted that there needs to be more encouragement and support for other educators to do the same so that all children receive an anti-racist education. As mentioned by Lorde (1984), without all actors helping with anti-racist work, it can lead to the creation of a "mythical norm",

where everyone does not see themselves as someone who contributes to the problem and leads to a lack of change in a system.

Charlotte shared the importance of professional development and planning time being properly compensated, especially regarding anti-racism. Charlotte expressed that having proper resources, funding, and time are all necessary to engage in anti-racist work. Charlotte stated that “we’re shaping very young children’s ideas about the world and how we treat other people”. Charlotte explained that although it may seem like common sense, it is more complex as we need the time to be intentional about implementing anti-racist strategies with children. Charlotte expressed: “If you don’t... have opportunities to be intentional and provide anti-bias practice, then you’re kind of setting [a] whole group of people to potentially feel like they don’t belong.”

However, as DiAngelo (2018) mentions, it is important to focus on how racism will manifest rather than leaving it up when racist incidents may occur. Charlotte explained how it saddens her to think about how some of the racialized children in her classroom could potentially be excluded or discriminated against when they grow older. This relates to one of Ahmed’s (2004) declarations of whiteness ‘I am/we are happy (and racist people are sad)’. Ahmed (2004) expresses that White subjects may express their shame about racism, and that expressing it can reveal a paradox, whereby simply acknowledging that one feels bad about racism gives the self-perception that they are good. This relates to Charlotte’s comment about discussing how the children in her care will potentially experience racism, as it puts the responsibility onto an external source, rather than being accountable for how this could occur within the child care centre by Charlotte or other educators.

Charlotte went on to explain that larger systematic issues need to be addressed, as there is a lack of funding for diverse play materials that prevents children from feeling represented in their classrooms. Charlotte stated that the lack of representation in play materials is "...subtly sending a message to children that don't meet that... criteria that they don't matter, and that's not true". Charlotte then discussed how it could be awkward to talk about these topics with children, especially if parents disagree with their children learning about these topics. However, Charlotte thinks that even if you don't agree with someone else, you must be respectful towards them. When asked a follow-up question about how a disagreement would be navigated if it were to arise, Charlotte said that she would seek out support from coworkers or her supervisor, as it is not something she would feel confident handling alone. Charlotte went on to explain how she feels that if children do not have access to diverse and inclusive play materials or do not learn about the topic of race, children will not seek it out through their regular play interests. She noted how ECEs practices are rooted in observing children's interests and developing play experiences based on them, such as nature. Charlotte explained how her previous example about a child in her class celebrating Ramadan exposed the children to a holiday they would not have potentially been interested in before. However, Kelly (2012) believes that anti-racist education does not always require money or specialized resources but rather sufficient time, space, and support.

Elizabeth was asked a follow-up question regarding her confidence levels, answering children's questions about topics regarding race and racism. She explained she would pause and go to the board of directors or speak to the parents before engaging children in conversation, as involving parents is a better approach. She mentioned how children are very impressionable, so it is important not to put ideas into their heads and want to protect children from complex topics

related to racial suffrage. When asked a follow-up question about how Elizabeth would navigate any disagreements with parents if children were asking questions about topics surrounding race or racism, she explained that due to the child's young age, she would have to respect the parent's wishes. She mentioned that once children get older, the parents will have to understand that those conversations will not be able to be avoided. Mariam noted a similar concept by talking about how not addressing children's comments can be where racism and prejudice are created in children's minds.

### Experiences With Institutional Support and Anti-Racist Training

Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences in their training or education prior to their role as an ECE, in the ways that they did or did not prepare them to engage in anti-racist practices after graduating.

DiAngelo (2018) states that there is limited access to information about racism, and many people first learn about these topics in post-secondary education. For white people, it can be "the only time they may encounter a direct and sustained challenge to their racial reality" (DiAngelo, 2018, p.201). Elizabeth and Olivia shared that there was not much preparation to engage in anti-racism. Elizabeth noted that she learned more about the topic through personal interest, specifically through the news and conversations with friends. Elizabeth shared that the Black Lives Matter movement specifically motivated her to want to learn more about the topic, as it was horrifying to watch and hear about. Charlotte noted a similar experience about how these courses fostered her interest in the topic of anti-racism. Mariam shared that growing up in Pakistan, race was not a topic that was discussed. Mariam explained that once she received her

degree in Canada, she felt more equipped to discuss these topics. Olivia and Charlotte echoed Mariam's sentiments, as they found their experience in their bachelor's degree programs was much more extensive regarding anti-racist education. Mariam and Charlotte explained that topics such as anti-racism were connected to many courses in her education. In contrast, Olivia only recalled a few courses in her education that specifically mentioned anti-racism but noted that it was more extensive than her diploma program training. However, Olivia and Elizabeth noted that they wished that there were more courses specific to anti-racism available. Olivia mentioned that she wished these courses were also taught by racialized professors, as she noticed that White women were predominately in the program and were being taught by White women professors. Each of the four participants holds a bachelor's degree as their highest level of education and noted that their experience in those degree programs felt more extensive regarding anti-racist practices than their diploma program experiences.

However, Olivia, Mariam, and Charlotte note that there is a bit of a disconnect regarding learning about anti-racism in class and knowing how to implement it in the classroom. Those participants note that although we can talk about theoretical issues, it is more challenging to discuss them with children. Charlotte discussed how she wishes there were more practical components to learning about this topic, as it is not always visualized in practice easily when learning about it. However, Charlotte explained how her goal for the College of Early Childhood Educators Continuous Professional Learning Program was to learn more about anti-Black racism, anti-bias practice, and inclusion.

## Experiences with Whiteness Influencing Anti-Racist Practice

The participants had to reflect on their race by asking them about the differences in experience between themselves as either White educators or racialized educators regarding implementing anti-racist practices.

All three White educators, Elizabeth, Olivia, and Charlotte, brought up their whiteness throughout the interview, explaining how this changes how they approach topics that connect to their White privilege. Mariam, a racialized educator, noted her racial positionality as an immigrant. In addition to their whiteness, all three White participants shared their intersecting categories of identity, such as being a woman and coming from a lower socioeconomic status. The participants explained how these could affect their lives in discriminatory ways and acknowledged how they could somewhat relate to the feelings of racialized groups; however, they note that it is an entirely different experience with the added layer of race. As Crenshaw (1990) and Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) mention, intersectionality is tightly woven into the fabric of our experiences and cannot be viewed from a single perspective. This connects to how the participants are aware of how their multifaceted identity influences their experiences and how adding another layer can change an individual's lived reality.

Elizabeth explained a situation in which someone had pointed out the lack of representation of racialized ECEC professionals in executive director child care meetings. She noted that because of her whiteness, she has an easier time speaking her mind, as people will not label her as a racial stereotype. She explained how she found it to be a significant issue, as she knows she has been given the privilege to lead as a White person. Elizabeth also went on to

explain how she holds many privileges, not only in terms of her race but through her ability to speak English fluently. Elizabeth explains that many of her staff members speak several different languages, and it is challenging for them to communicate with others as there are communication breakdowns at times. Olivia expressed a similar experience, citing her disappointment when she saw several parents avoid speaking with educators who do not speak English fluently at her workplace.

Olivia and Charlotte make a note of their lack of experience with dealing with barriers or challenges since they are not a racialized person. She noted how many educators will go by “Canadian names” instead of their real names to make it easier for others, which connects to Mariam’s experience with having her name shortened. Olivia noted her racialized colleagues’ experience dealing with subtle forms of racism, such as microaggressions, and how she finds that she does not always identify them as harmful due to her race.

Elizabeth said that she had not experienced racism in her centre due to the multicultural atmosphere of the environment. Elizabeth explained how racism would not be tolerated if those individuals were unwilling to learn. She stated that as an Executive Director, she would have to remove them from their position at the centre since they hold a responsibility to the children in their care as that could be instilled into them. This procedure of dealing with racism in the workplace connects to the idea of how “shame would not be about making the offender feel bad (this would install a pattern of deviance), so 'expressions of community disapproval' are followed by ‘gestures of reacceptance’ (Braithwaite 1989, p. 55, as cited by Ahmed, 2004, p.5).

Elizabeth recounted her own biases that she learned from her parents by explaining how her parents held biases towards Indigenous peoples, viewing them as “lazy”. Elizabeth explained

how once she learned more about Indigenous communities and their hardships through residential schools, her perspective changed as it was misinformed. Elizabeth explained how people think racism is something from the past, but it is still present in our everyday lives.

Olivia mentioned that she finds in her own experience that the older, White educators in her centre often do not want to talk about it and will not bring up the topic as they find it inappropriate to discuss. This connection to discomfort from discussions about race relates to DiAngelo's (2018) concept of White fragility, as White individuals can feel discomfort talking about systems they benefit from. Olivia also takes note of her internalized biases that she is trying to unlearn and challenge. Olivia said that she does not want to pass those beliefs on to the next generation, so she is trying to learn more about it, as she wants to be able to support racialized communities. Olivia argues that this is a way that we can challenge racism by starting these conversations while children are young.

Olivia explained that she is a third-generation Canadian, as her family came to Canada in the early 1960s. She explained that although her family were not colonizers who directly contributed to the harm in Canada due to colonization, she acknowledged that she benefits from the colonial system through her whiteness. Olivia expressed how her benefit from white supremacy drives her to engage in anti-racism; however, she points out that it can be challenging as diversity work is difficult on your physical, mental, and emotional health. This connects to Ahmed's (2012) idea that diversity work is extremely challenging, as diversity workers are challenging large systems and institutions with a history of oppression. However, in contrast, DiAngelo's concept of White fragility connects to the idea where White people find themselves expecting "racial comfort and become less tolerant of racial stress" (p.200). Lorde (1984) notes



how anti-racist work is a lifelong commitment. Olivia shared a similar sentiment by valuing the importance of self-care when engaging in this work. Olivia felt that it is difficult to engage in anti-racism or diversity constantly. Hence, she finds herself taking breaks from engaging in anti-racist practices in her work as an educator. Olivia noted that those breaks from engaging in anti-racism can show complacency with upholding white supremacy, and it is important to hold yourself and others accountable for those actions or lack of inaction.

Mariam shared a story from working in her field placement during her pre-service training. She explained that her mentor at the time changed her actual name (different from the pseudonym, Mariam) to be easier to say, noting that the children probably would have difficulty pronouncing it. Mariam shared her feelings regarding this experience, stating that she was beginning in the field and unsure what to do, so she accepted this new shortened name as her own. She shared that it was not until another educator discovered her real name and the child care centre director asked her which name she preferred that Mariam told them she preferred her actual name. She said that after that incident, she was then referred to as her actual name by her colleagues. She noted that her mentor at the time was also a racialized individual who was an immigrant to Canada. She explained that she found it confusing that her mentor would do that to her, who is also a racialized person, and it was a White educator who advocated for Mariam's name to be said properly. Mariam explained that this scenario led her to advocate more for herself and motivated her to ensure all children's names were being pronounced correctly, as she did not want anyone else to feel the way she did.

## Intersections of Identity and the Influence on Anti-Racist Practices

As stated by Crenshaw (1990), intersectionality is the idea that identity cannot be fully understood through a “single axis framework”, or single category of social identity, such as race or gender (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). Elizabeth mentioned how she can understand and relate to her coworkers, who are also women, regarding the oppression and challenges women face. Charlotte also explained her intersection of identity, as she is a White woman from a lower socioeconomic status. Charlotte and Elizabeth explained that they can empathize to an extent but cannot completely understand as she does not experience what racialized individuals experience daily. It is important to note that intersections of identity are difficult to separate, as “the dynamics of intersectionality are deeply significant, and it is impossible to develop critical social justice literacy without an ability to grapple with their complexities” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p.462).

Mariam went on to explain the experiences of educators who have an added layer of social positionality with being a newcomer in Canada. Mariam mentioned that there seems to be a discomfort with educators in her centre who are newly immigrated to Canada. She shared that she has been living in Canada for a while, and has received her bachelor’s degree here, so she feels a bit more knowledgeable about Canadian racial issues. She explained how it could be easier for White or racialized Canadians to talk about Canadian racial issues as they grew up in the country. She explained how many newcomers will not engage in those conversations as they fear saying something inappropriate or something that will upset others. However, DiAngelo (2018) describes how “when we move beyond the good/bad binary, we can become eager to

identify our racist patterns because interrupting those patterns becomes more important than managing how we think we look to others” (DiAngelo, 2018, p.246).

## Encouraging Anti-Racist Practices in Early Years Settings

Participants were asked what they believed would encourage themselves and other educators to engage in anti-racist practices in early years settings.

Elizabeth noted that to encourage more participation in anti-racist education, there needs to be more support from the Ministry of Education and the Ontario government regarding anti-racism, as she feels that the government does not prioritize it in the early years. Olivia explained a similar concept relating to Canada’s new federal child care deal, which is looking to invest in Canada's child care and early years system. Olivia noted a gradual shift in how the field of ECEC is being viewed. Charlotte also mentioned the federal child care deal and how she wishes anti-racist education was incorporated into the budget, regarding an anti-racist team that will work towards it being utilized in ECEC practices. Elizabeth and Olivia expressed the need for more anti-racist courses for future early childhood educators to take while doing their pre-service training. Olivia noted that this should also extend to educators who have worked in the field for several years, as they may be unaware of this topic. Olivia and Charlotte also expressed that there needs to be more of a practical piece regarding anti-racism, as it is often unclear how to implement anti-racism in practice. Olivia expressed:

It’s one thing to read about it, and it’s another thing to talk about it, and it’s a whole other thing to... then go forward and work with children and be able to be age-appropriate and still talk about those things”

Mariam explains that it is hard to find age-appropriate resources regarding anti-racism in the early years and would like to see more practical resources created with young children in mind. Mariam noted that most anti-racist resources are geared towards adults, as we think that is who is learning about this topic rather than children.

Elizabeth and Mariam also advocate for more paid professional development opportunities for ECEs on anti-racism. Elizabeth explained how busy ECEs could be regarding their daily schedules, and there is not enough time to often think about anti-racism. Elizabeth voiced that there is no designated time for professional development in general, and especially not in anti-racism. Elizabeth explained her role as an Executive Director, as she often seeks out professional learning opportunities for her staff. She also communicated that she must emphasize finding anti-racist specific professional learning opportunities. However, Elizabeth expressed that the government also needs to provide support since it is hard to do all alone as an Executive Director of a standalone child care centre with less funding and support.

Some participants also made a note of the documents that shape their everyday practice as early years professionals. Charlotte and Olivia brought up the curriculum document, *How Does Learning Happen?* (2014). Olivia noted the Early Learning for Every Child Today [ELECT] (2007) document; Charlotte cited the College of ECE's *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* (2017) document. Olivia critiqued the document *How Does Learning Happen?* (2014), as she feels that it is outdated, along with other curricular documents. Olivia voiced that curricular documents should take a new approach of incorporating more experiences of racialized individuals to minimize the White-centred approach that the documents use. Olivia discussed how these documents reflect the Reggio Emilia approach, which is a pedagogical approach in the

early years, that focuses on student-centred learning, which originates from Italy. Olivia shared how she feels these documents are heavily based on this approach, which can idealize a Westernized approach to child care. Olivia explained that the documents should reflect the diversity of Ontario while also helping educators to know how to implement these practices.

Mariam explained how she would like to see more active encouragement by the management at child care centres for their educators to engage in this practice rather than only responding to issues. Mariam found that many people are uncomfortable talking about these topics related to anti-racism and that people find topics about race controversial and challenging to discuss. This connects to DiAngelo (2018) as she mentions how topics related to race can be seen as socially taboo. Mariam mentioned that having more opportunities for educators to discuss their experiences with anti-racist practices could be helpful. Mariam noted from her own experience that it seems like there should be more incorporation into early years policy and curriculum documents regarding anti-racist practices. Mariam explained how the curriculum document, *How Does Learning Happen?* (2014) talks about belonging but does not explicitly mention things related to anti-racism, so educators do not focus on it as it is interpreted differently. Elizabeth, Olivia, Mariam, and Charlotte all discussed the importance of research being conducted on anti-racism in the early years, which encouraged them to participate in the study.

## Summary of Chapter Four

The findings discussed in this chapter were based on the experiences and perspectives of the study's participants. The participants shared valuable insights regarding how they engage in anti-racist practices with children, how whiteness influences their practice, their own experience engaging in anti-racist education or training, and their perspectives on how to further support and encourage anti-racism in ECEC. In addition, this data showed how educators perceive what it means to be anti-racist, their opinions regarding the importance of anti-racist work with children, how privilege and positionality impact their work, and what changes they hope to see made in the future moving forward in this topic.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

The chapter provides an overview of the research, a summary of the major themes from the participants' experiences, and the limitations of the research. Additionally, this section includes recommendations that are supported by the participants' perspectives and experiences. Finally, the research's significance and future directions will be considered.

### Overview of the Research

This research aimed to examine the incorporation of anti-racism education in ECEC settings, specifically licensed child care centres in Ontario, Canada. In addition, the research examined how educators engage in anti-racist practices and how whiteness, privilege, and power influence educators' daily work. Through semi-structured interviews, four early years professionals were invited to share their experiences and perspectives on anti-racism education's challenges, successes, and issues.

This study was guided by the theoretical frameworks of CRT and whiteness studies and explored the following questions:

- 1) How do early years professionals engage in anti-racist practices in early years settings?
- 2) How does whiteness influence early years professionals' practice in early years settings?

The study was conducted to contribute to growing conversations and discourses in the literature regarding anti-racism in child care and early years systems. In addition, this research advocates for the reconceptualization of ECEC settings as environments in which children can

learn about race and racism, where children are viewed as capable and willing to engage in these topics with others.

## Summary and Discussion

### Use of Diverse Play Materials

The participants discussed their methods for engaging in anti-racist practices with children in their classrooms. The three White educators explained how they use diverse play materials to include different races and ethnicities. The diverse play materials include dolls and puppets that are racially diverse, as well as children's books that discuss different topics surrounding race. The participants' comments suggest that they perceive their use of these materials as singularly illustrative of their engagement in anti-racist work. The same participants explained that when children brought up conversations of race, they were openly explored and extended upon. However, it seems that some participants did not find that children always brought up the conversations about race on their own. One participant, Charlotte, noted that she finds that the subject of race does not naturally occur to children, so it does not always become a topic explored in the classroom. In early childhood education, learning should be based on children's interests, which are observed and documented by educators, and then are later extended to build on children's learning in play-based curriculum experiences (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). Participants discussed the use of play materials to provoke children's interest in the topic of race or a way to represent diversity in their classroom.



## Use of Videos

As a racialized educator, Mariam explained that she has chosen to take a different approach to her pedagogical style. Mariam explained that she focuses on children's learning surrounding race and racism rather than on academic subjects. She noted that she communicates this intention to her students' families and her supervisor. She explained that to facilitate children's learning about these subjects, she looks for age-appropriate videos talking about the subjects to initiate conversations with the children. Olivia also mentioned that videos could be a valuable way to discuss concepts of race, especially when there is a moment in the classroom where students have questions about a topic. Mariam explained that there are few videos on topics related to anti-racism, such as the residential school system, that are created for children in the early years, as it took some time to find a video that was appropriate to share.

## Influence of Whiteness and Privilege in Anti-Racist Practices

In their responses, White educators all seemed aware of their privilege, how it impacts their daily lives as educators and in society, and how their experience differs from educators who are racialized. They seemed to acknowledge their lack of knowledge in specific topics about race and racism, as they did not experience it first-hand. They also admitted their discomfort at times talking about this topic due to their lack of awareness and experience with racism. DiAngelo (2018) explains that "...white people raised in Western society are conditioned into a white supremacist worldview because it is the bedrock of our society and its institutions" (p. 245). However, like DiAngelo (2018) found in her work, the White participants can generally pick up on abstract examples of racist behaviour. Some participants were unsure of what anti-racism

includes and referred to multicultural education practices as anti-racism. DiAngelo (2018) further elaborates that regardless of whether “...the poster in the hall of your white suburban school proclaimed the value of diversity, or you have traveled abroad, or you have people of color in your workplace or family, the ubiquitous socializing power of white supremacy cannot be avoided” (p.245-246).

Mariam acknowledged that her comfort level is due to her experience as a racialized person, as well as her education on anti-racism. She explained that she feels comfortable engaging in topics surrounding race, ethnicity, and language since she comes from a racialized background and speaks more than just English. Mariam noted that in her own experience, White or racialized Canadian-born educators feel more comfortable talking about race compared to educators who are newcomers to Canada. This sentiment regarding various intersections of identity connects to Dei (2010), who notes that you may not only fit into one category of being oppressed or being an oppressor, but you can switch between these roles in different contexts. This switching between roles connects to Mariam’s experience with being a newcomer to Canada and sharing the experiences of her newly immigrated coworkers, as they may feel unable to discuss their feelings of oppression since they are not considered Canadian-born citizens. Mariam also noted that, although she has not experienced any conflict with her engagement in anti-racist practices, she perceives little encouragement for other educators to do the same. Mariam explained how this could be because other people feel discomfort engaging in topics about race and that anti-racist education is seen as more of a choice or a personal pedagogical style.

## Children Initiating Conversations About Race

All the participants noted how there is a perception by others that children are not interested in learning about topics surrounding race and racism. There was also an acknowledgment that the dominant perception is that talking about race is inappropriate with young children and is a topic to be discussed amongst older children. The participants explain how that is not the case, as young children are naturally curious and are very interested in topics about their peers and the world around them, as cited by Ontario curriculum documents (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). In addition, as mentioned by Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012), it is believed that educational spaces are politically neutral when there is a “...long history of political struggle” within education systems.

The participants explained how children often have many questions about their peers who look different from them and are curious to learn more. They stated that children may form their questions in less socially acceptable ways, but they are still learning social norms and are curious about the world around them, which includes people in their environments. Due to children's natural curiosity, questions will arise, and it is important to allow children to express their thoughts, as equal partners in the learning environment. It is crucial we explore children's interests, especially when children initiate them, as it is our duty as educators to do so as per the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* (2017), as well as the various curricular documents that shape everyday practice (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014; College of Early Childhood Educators, 2017). This duty also includes not judging children for their thoughts, feelings, questions, or interests about race and creating an environment where children are safe to explore these ideas without being reprimanded.

## Lack of Practical Understanding of Anti-Racism

A prominent theme discussed frequently amongst all participants was the idea surrounding the disconnect between education and anti-racism practice. Participants explained that it is very challenging to take what is taught in pre-service training and implement it with children in age-appropriate ways. This implementation becomes especially difficult when there is a lack of practical resources available for educators to utilize to facilitate anti-racist education with children. Participants noted that most anti-racist resources were geared towards older children or adults. The participants felt that although they had heard of anti-racism and understood its importance, there was often a lack of discussion about how to enact anti-racism education in the classroom. Educators noted that they turn towards the curriculum and policy documents that shape their everyday practices when looking to guide practices. There were concerns that many of these documents are insufficient information regarding anti-racism and are often under the umbrella terms diversity, equity, inclusion, or belonging.

## Recommendations

The early years professionals who participated in the research had several recommendations to advance the anti-racism field in early years settings. These recommendations were based on their experiences working for several years, serving children and their families. It is essential to acknowledge the experiences of stakeholders, such as early years professionals, as they are the ones who enact policies in their daily practice. Their suggestions include:

- Sufficient pre-service training on anti-racism

- Explicit anti-racist language in curriculum and policy documents
- More opportunities for anti-racist specific professional learning
- Government support and encouragement for anti-racist education

The suggestions made by the participants will be further explored below.

### Sufficient Pre-Service Training on Anti-Racism

A common theme among participants was the need for sufficient pre-service training on anti-racism. The research sample included participants who had taken both early childhood education and bachelor's degrees. Something to consider is that most of the participants noted that they felt their bachelor's degrees gave them an understanding of the importance of engaging in anti-racist practices. However, the participants found that their early childhood education diploma or other education did not incorporate anti-racism into the courses as much as the degree. Therefore, further investigation into how to incorporate anti-racism into early childhood education diplomas, the minimum education required to become a RECE and work in licensed child care settings, needs to be explored. Additionally, the participants are pursuing bachelor's degrees for their educational experience. However, some pursued their degrees to get into higher-paying positions due to the low pay of RECEs.

However, even with the degree level programs that the educators took, although there is detailed theoretical knowledge and they are aware of its importance, there is a lack of instruction regarding the practical application of anti-racism. Although the participants seemed to know the importance of it in their early years and supported anti-racist work, they were left without the tools to implement it in their practices. Moving forward, there needs to be more theoretical and

practical understanding in early childhood education diploma programs and more practical understanding of anti-racism in bachelor's degree programs.

### More Opportunities for Anti-Racist Specific Professional Learning

In addition to pre-service training, continuous professional learning is mandatory for RECEs to engage in the College of Early Childhood Educators. It was noted by many of the participants that once educators leave their pre-service training and enter the field, educators must stay current on different approaches. A participant, Olivia, noted how she works with educators who have been in the field for numerous years and may be unfamiliar with anti-racism. Participants explained that their experiences in early childhood education diplomas, the most common and base level of education to work in child care and early years, are inadequate in teaching anti-racism. All educators, especially those working in the field with children, must engage in topics related to anti-racism. The participants recommend having theoretical knowledge given to them and opportunities to learn about practical components so that educators can understand how they can take this knowledge and implement it in their daily work. Due to the fast-paced work environments, participants noted that they would like to see more designated, paid professional learning opportunities and paid curriculum planning time. Having designated time for their learning and planning allows educators to take what they learn and have the time to construct how they will implement it with children.

### Explicit Anti-Racist Language in Curriculum and Policy Documents

In addition to applying anti-racist approaches in everyday practice, educators are guided by the various curriculum and policy documents established by the Ontario government. Many

educators mentioned the document, *How Does Learning Happen?* (2014), an early years curriculum document that guides the practice of several child care centres in Ontario. Within that document, there is a lack of explicit language that mentions anti-racism. The educators express that because they use these documents daily when creating curriculum experiences for the children in their care, it would be nice to see a change in the language being more direct about anti-racism. Again, they mention that this document could have more instances of anti-racism being noted in practical ways, as it shows how to foster the four foundations: Belonging, Engagement, Expression, and Well-being. Some participants noted that anti-racism could relate to the foundation of belonging, but it does not explicitly mention it, so it often gets pushed aside and forgotten. Many curriculum and policy documents are meant to be broad, to apply to a breadth of different communities, especially in provinces as diverse as Ontario. However, leaving it to be too broad regarding essential topics such as anti-racism leaves it open to interpretation. If those educators lack understanding of what anti-racism is, they will not engage in it as they do not have the tools. This leaves anti-racist education up to those who choose to partake in it, rather than all educators incorporating it into their daily practices with children.

Some participants mentioned that their child care centres had taken the initiative to create policy statements regarding how their organization is committed to equity, diversity, and inclusion. Although some participants mentioned that their centre's EDI statements were positive, one participant noted that they found it to be more for appearances than actual institutional change. When EDI statements do not inform or change practices to be more equitable, it does not assist with anti-racism. As Sarah Ahmed (2004) mentioned, EDI statements often become non-performative as a declaration of anti-racism is rarely accompanied by actual

change. This means that these statements become stagnant, and there becomes a lack of meaning to those words, reproducing White supremacy and imbalances of power and privilege in those statements. According to Ahmed (2004), most claims about EDI work being carried out are not honestly questioning White privilege and power relations but instead want to appear to be doing so. This lack of action is problematic because it does not address the inequality experienced by racialized people, and those who are privileged continue to benefit from the existing system. Moving forward, it could be favourable to explore what creating EDI statements with actionable items in collaboration with early years professionals could look like. This way, the EDI initiatives are co-constructed with the lived realities of those working in the child care and early years systems and can be understood and implemented by early years professionals.

### Government Support and Encouragement for Anti-Racist Education

Participants identified their value of anti-racist practices being incorporated in early years settings. However, many of their barriers come from individual-level issues surrounding whiteness and systemic problems that influence their inability to engage in this work. Specifically, participants identified the stressful working environments that educators work in daily. Due to the current ratios of educators to children (1:3 infants, 1:5 toddlers, and 1:8 preschoolers) and the maximum number of children per classroom (10 infants, 15 toddlers, and 24 preschoolers), educators are working with several children daily. Many participants noted the fast-paced learning environments, mentioning how most of their day is taken up by ensuring the safety of all the children in their care. The participants explained how this lack of time during the day leaves little room to reflect, plan, and facilitate conversations around these topics, meaning that anti-racist work that is being done in child care environments is quite limited. Funding from



the government to assist educators in getting paid time to learn about and plan anti-racist curriculum experiences, as well as receiving professional pay, are all things that participants found would assist them in engaging more in this work. Some participants noted the newest federal budget, outlined by the federal government and the *Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Plan*. It is noted by participants that a portion of that budget should be allocated for investing in early childhood educators, as well as investing in anti-racism initiatives. Progress is being made to understand the importance of ECEC and its impact on children's development. However, without proper support and funding from the Government of Ontario, we will see anti-racist education in ECEC continue to be neglected. It is essential to acknowledge the role that systemic barriers and issues play and ensure that their impact on RECEs is addressed and dismantled. Having the government acknowledge the importance of anti-racism and invest in it for children and child care providers will help motivate individual actors to engage in anti-racism.

## Limitations

For the scope of this qualitative case study, a small sample size was chosen to participate. As mentioned by Cohen et al. (2018), by using a small sample with a particular group of educators, the group will not necessarily represent the wider population. Cohen et al. (2018) note how context influences many aspects of early years professionals' experience, knowledge, motivation, and support to engage in anti-racist practices. Another limitation of the research involves the demographics of the participants. The Department of Finance Canada (2021) states that most of the ECEC workforce is women, so, understandably, the participants were primarily

women. However, this still shows a lack of representation of different genders in this research sample. Additionally, the participants' races and ethnicities were not as diverse as anticipated, as only one participant self-identified as coming from a minoritized racial background. The homogeneity of the research sample poses limitations as it does not account for other early years professionals that belong to other racial groups and their lived experiences. The use of a purposive sampling procedure was not helpful, as very few early years professionals sought to volunteer for this study. Due to the ongoing concerns from the COVID-19 pandemic, the semi-structured interviews were shifted to a virtual format rather than being conducted face-to-face. Conducting face-to-face interviews could have added to the study by increasing participation. Some potential participants may have been deterred from participating in virtual interviews. This deterrence could have been because they did not have access to the internet, felt uncomfortable with security risks from the video conferencing platform, or did not have the confidence to navigate it. Additionally, shifting to in-person interviews could have created a more comfortable and personal environment for each participant and the opportunity to examine participants' body language related to each interview question.

Moreover, this research is not meant to generalize the experiences of all early years professionals. Instead, the research sought to share the experiences of the individual participants who volunteered to engage in the study. This research sought insight into how early years professionals engage with anti-racist work with children in licensed child care settings. The research provides an in-depth discussion of the data collected from participants. Other early years professionals may use this information to glean insight from their experiences concerning their practice.

## Research Implications and Significance

The field of early childhood education and care is becoming a more respected profession. The influence of COVID-19 on the ECEC workforce has become more evident than ever. ECEC environments have an important impact not only on the economy but also on children's learning experiences and overall development. It is also evident from this research study that children have discussions surrounding race at an early age. This shows how crucial these conversations are to be explored with children and facilitated in appropriate ways, fostering children's natural curiosity about the world and those around them. Although there have been conversations regarding anti-racist education in school systems, it is imperative that anti-racist education extends beyond those school-age children and allows for it to expand into early years environments as well. Early years environments need to be included in anti-racist discourses, policies, and curricula, not only beginning with school-age children.

## Future Directions

Future research needs to be explored regarding how to equip early years professionals better to engage in anti-racist practices. Future work areas need to include adequate pre-service training, ongoing professional learning, and proper funding and support from the government. It is imperative that early years professionals not only learn about anti-racism themselves but also how they can put this education they receive into action in their everyday lives. More generally, future studies in this area should emphasize how anti-racist practices can be enacted in the field of ECEC and reimagine ECEC policies and curriculum documents to include explicit mention of

anti-racism. Further study and discussion are required regarding what RECEs can do in their practice with children to promote anti-racism and what that would look like.

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# Appendix A: Ethics Approval Form



## Western Research

**Date:** 6 May 2022

**To:** Prof. Goli Rezai-Rashti

**Project ID:** 120415

**Study Title:** Investigating the Perspectives of Early Years Professionals' Anti-Racist Practices

**Short Title:** Investigating the Perspectives of Early Years Professionals' Anti-Racist Practices

**Application Type:** NMREB Initial Application

**Review Type:** Delegated

**Full Board Reporting Date:** 03/Jun/2022

**Date Approval Issued:** 06/May/2022 10:47

**REB Approval Expiry Date:** 06/May/2023

Dear Prof. Goli Rezai-Rashti

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the WREM application form for the above mentioned study, as of the date noted above. NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the expiry date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

This research study is to be conducted by the investigator noted above. **All other required institutional approvals and mandated training must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.**

#### Documents Approved:

Document Name	Document Type	Document Date	Document Version
Thesis Recruitment Poster (Amy Williams, 29-04:2022)	Recruitment Materials	29/Apr/2022	2
Recruitment Email Blurb (Amy Williams, 29-04:2022)	Recruitment Materials	29/Apr/2022	2
Interview Guide Topics for Participants(Amy Williams, 29-04:2022)	Interview Guide	29/Apr/2022	2
Letter of Information and Verbal Consent (Amy Williams, 05-05-2022)	Verbal Consent/Assent	05/May/2022	3

#### Documents Acknowledged:

Document Name	Document Type	Document Date	Document Version
Pre-Screen Questions for Purposive Sampling Procedure (Amy Williams, 29-04:2022)	Screening Form/Questionnaire	29/Apr/2022	2

No deviations from, or changes to the protocol should be initiated without prior written approval from the NMREB, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard(s) to study participants or when the change(s) involves only administrative or logistical aspects of the trial.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Page 1 of 2

Sincerely,

Ms. Zoë Levi, Research Ethics Officer on behalf of Dr. Randal Graham, NMREB Chair

*Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system that is compliant with all regulations).*

## Appendix B: Letter of Information and Verbal Consent



### Letter of Information and Verbal Consent

**Project Title: Investigating the Perspectives of Early Years Professionals' Anti-Racist Practices**

**Principal Investigator + Contact: Dr. Goli Rezai-Rashti, [email redacted]**

**Master's Research Student + Contact: Amy Williams, M.A. Candidate, [email redacted]**

#### **Invitation to Participate**

You are being invited to participate in this research study which aims to examine how anti-racist education is implemented with children in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings. The proposed study will gather early years professionals' perspectives on the issues, challenges, and successes they experience with engaging in anti-racist practices in early years settings. The research will explore educators' experiences with implementing anti-racist practices within their workplaces and how whiteness, privilege, and power play a role in engaging in these discussions with children in their care.

#### **1. Why is the study being done?**

This study is being done to help advocate for the importance of anti-racist pedagogy being utilized with children in early years settings. Since anti-racist practices are a recent concept given the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement, this research will provide more insight into the experiences of early years professionals engaging in anti-racist practices.

#### **2. Who can and cannot participate in the study?**

We are looking for volunteers to take part in a study that aims to investigate Early Years Professionals' perspectives, experiences, and challenges of engaging in anti-racist practices. Participants must be working in an Ontario licensed child care centre for at least one year in order to be considered for participation in the study. Participants working in other/unlicensed early years settings, working in a licensed child care centre for less than a year, or licensed child care centres outside of Ontario will not be considered for the study.

#### **3. How long will you be in this study?**

You will engage in a one-on-one interview over Zoom, which will take approximately 45-60 minutes.

#### **4. What are the study procedures?**

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to have a conversation with Master's student Amy Williams, where she will ask you to share your experiences implementing anti-racist practices in

your work setting. This conversation will take place over Zoom. In order to participate in the study, you must consent to this conversation being audio and video recorded. Audio and video recording are **mandatory** in order to continue as a participant in the study. The recording will be used to transcribe the conversation to collect the data for the findings of the research. You may not answer, rescind, elaborate, or change anything you would not like to be shared for the study.

#### **5. What are the risks and harms of participating in this study?**

There are no anticipated risks or harms associated with participating in this study. However, similar to online shopping, teleconferencing/videoconferencing technology has some privacy and security risks that may occur. It is possible that information could be intercepted by unauthorized people (hacked) or otherwise shared by accident. This risk can't be completely eliminated. We want to make you aware of this.

As stated in Zoom's privacy policy, personal data may be transferred, stored, and processed outside of Canada, specifically the United States, where Zoom is established, as well as in other countries outside of the European Economic Area (the "EEA"), Switzerland, and the UK. To review Zoom's full privacy statement, you can access it here:

<https://explore.zoom.us/en/privacy/>.

As stated in Qualtrics' privacy statement, they also operate within the United States, but also have affiliates (the "SAP Group") and third-party service providers outside of the European Economic Area (the "EEA") and will transfer your Personal Data to countries outside the EEA. To review Qualtrics full privacy statement, you can access it here:

<https://www.qualtrics.com/privacy-statement/>.

However, your information will be removed from both Zoom and Qualtrics' platforms as soon as possible and then will be stored securely under local password-protected files that will only be accessible to the research team.

#### **6. What are the benefits of participating in this study?**

You may not directly benefit from participating in this study, but the information gathered may provide benefits to society which include contributing to a growing conversation surrounding anti-racist practices in early childhood education and care.

#### **7. Can participants choose to leave the study?**

If you decide to withdraw from the study, you have the right to request (e.g., by email, in writing, etc.) withdrawal of information collected about you. If you wish to have your information removed, please let the researcher know and your information will be destroyed from our records. Once the study has been published, we will not be able to withdraw your information.

It is important to note that a record of your participation must remain with the study, and as such, the researchers may not be able to destroy your signed letter of information and consent or your name on the master list. However, any data may be withdrawn upon your request.

#### **8. How will participants' information be kept confidential?**

Your information will be kept confidential by means of de-identification. All data, including your name, contact information, and conversation transcription, will be stored on a password-

protected cloud storage software, being Western University's OneDrive cloud. The data will be kept in a confidential location on OneDrive for 7 years, after which it will be destroyed.

If the results of the study are published, your name will not be used. Participants will be randomly assigned pseudonyms to replace their actual names to ensure the confidentiality of their identity.

Any identifying information that you may share with us will be kept by the researcher in a secure place, separate from your study file.

Representatives of Western University's Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research.

**9. Are participants compensated to be in this study?**

There is no compensation given to you for your participation in this research study.

**10. What are the rights of participants?**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide not to be in this study. Even if you consent to participate you have the right to not answer individuals' questions or to withdraw from the study at any time. You do not waive any legal right by consenting to this study. We will give you any new information that may affect your decision to stay in the study.

**11. Whom do participants contact for questions?**

If you have questions about this research study, please contact Principal Investigator or Research Staff.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Human Research Ethics [email and phone number redacted] office oversees the ethical conduct of research studies and is not part of the study team. Everything that you discuss will be kept confidential.

**Project Title: Investigating the Perspectives of Early Years Professionals' Anti-Racist Practices**

**Principal Investigator + Contact: Dr. Goli Rezai-Rashti, [email redacted]**

**Research Staff + Contact: Amy Williams, RECE, M.A. Candidate, [email redacted]**

**12. Verbal Consent Script for Researcher to Read Aloud to Obtain Consent from Participant**

- Have you, the participant, read the Letter of Information regarding this study?
- Have you, the participant, had the nature of this study explained to you?
- Have you, the participant, had all your questions, if any, clarified to your satisfaction regarding this study?
- Do you, the participant, understand that audio and video recording is mandatory to participate in this study? Do you, the participant, agree to being audio and video recorded?
- Do you, the participant, agree to unidentifiable quotes being shared in the dissemination of the results?
- Lastly, do you, the participant, agree to move forward and participate in this study?

**Please note: This letter is yours to keep for future reference.**



## Appendix C: Pre-Screen Questions for Purposive Sampling Procedure

1. What is your name?
  - a. Open-ended answer
2. What is your email address to contact you at for participating?
  - a. Open-ended answer
3. What early childhood education and care setting do you work in?
  - a. Open-ended answer
4. Do you work within the province of Ontario, Canada?
  - a. Open-ended answer
5. How long have you been working in the field of early childhood education and care?
  - a. Open-ended answer
6. If you feel comfortable, please tell us how you identify your gender, race, and ethnic background in as many descriptors as you would like:
  - a. Open-ended answer
7. Would you like to share anything else?
  - a. Open-ended answer

Thank you for expressing your interest in participating in this research study. However, only successful applicants will be notified to participate in the study.

## Appendix D: Interview Guide Topics

### Questions for Participants

1. Tell me a bit about yourself (e.g., education level, where you went to school if applicable, how long you have been working in the field of early years, etc.)
2. Are you familiar with the concept of anti-racist education? How do you engage with issues of race and anti-racism in your everyday practice?
3. Think about a time when you engaged with children in topics surrounding race or racism. What did it look like? What were the children's responses to it? What were the successes? What were the challenges?
4. Have you experienced a situation when racial discrimination occurred by the children in your work setting? Did you intervene? How was it discussed?
5. Is there anything you feel has encouraged you to engage in anti-racist practices in early years settings?
6. Is there anything that you feel is challenging you from engaging in anti-racist practices in early years settings?
7. What are your opinions about early years educators engaging children in conversations about race and racism?
  1. Further probing questions: Do you think it is appropriate or necessary to do anti-racist work at this age group? Why or why not? Do you think it is a part of your role as an early years professional?
8. How are race and racism typically addressed in your work setting (e.g., with children, families, educators, administration)? How do you wish it were addressed?

9. Regarding engaging in anti-racist practices, what are some challenges that you feel non-racialized/racialized educators may face that you do not face as a racialized/non-racialized person?
10. Thinking back to your training/education prior to working in your current role, what ways did it help prepare you for engaging as an anti-racist educator? What ways did it not?
11. In your opinion, what are some ways that would encourage educators to engage in anti-racist practices with children in their care? What are some ways that you could be better equipped or supported to engage in anti-racist practices as an early years professional?
12. Is there anything else that you would like to share?

## Curriculum Vitae

Name: Amy Williams

Post-secondary Masters of Education  
Education and The University of Western Ontario

Degrees: London, Ontario, Canada  
2020-2022

Honours Bachelor of Early Childhood Leadership  
Fanshawe College  
London, Ontario, Canada  
2016-2020

Related Work Professor  
Experience Fanshawe College  
2021-Present

### Publications:

Bourbonnais-MacDonald, C., Anderson, T., Clough, V., Ifabumuyi, H. & Williams, A. (2021).

How early years professionals can inform an early years policy framework prototype.

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