Reimagining Communities of Practice: Using Marginalized Feminist Knowledge to Create Spaces of Resistance

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Abstract

This reflexive paper explores the process of engaging Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) within communities of practice (CoPs). The author contemplates the use of feminist theories such as Black feminist thought to complexify the discourse on the professionalism of ECEs. This paper addresses possibilities of using Black feminist thought to amplify voices and lived experiences of marginalized women while underscoring their uniquely relevant perspective, capacity, and right to contribute to a CoP. The author advocates re-envisioning CoPs as spaces of resistance where marginalized voices are heard and embodied, lived experiences are valued, and possibilities emerge to resist and interrupt the oppression faced by all ECEs within a professionalism discourse.

Key words

activism, Black feminist thought, Early Childhood Educators, professionalism,

Author Biography

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Reimagining Communities of Practice: Using Marginalized Feminist Knowledge to Create Spaces of Resistance

How can we as a society, preach the importance of essential work when we do not value those who embody it? I live with this tension every day as a woman of colour, an Early Childhood Educator (ECE), and a scholar of social justice education. This tension is the lived experience of many ECEs, especially ECEs of colour. ECEs are considered to be educated, creative, and skilled front-line professionals who are integral to the well-being of families and young children. Alongside this designation exists the denigration of this profession through low wages, lack of benefits, omission of their voices in policy and research, and an overall lack of respect (Richardson et al., 2021).

In this paper, I use Black feminist thought, a marginalized critical social theory (Collins, 2000, 2008), along with critical and engaged pedagogy (Freire 1998; hooks, 1994) to deconstruct the current understanding of the professionalism of ECEs. Using my lived experiences, I argue that professionalism as it is traditionally known contributes to the marginalization of ECEs, especially women of colour. Furthermore, I deconstruct professionalism within the context of communities of practice (CoP), which is a common model for professional development. Making visible my experiences within a CoP, I provide evidence of how the ECE community might reimagine CoPs as valuable spaces for activism and resistance that do much more than just enhance professional skills. I begin with an overview of how ECEs are enmeshed within the professionalism debate in the field of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC).

Professionalism in ECEC

There is no question that the ECEC professional is recognized by policy makers nationally and internationally and seen as the solution to economic, as well as social recovery, especially as countries deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. Now more than ever, ECEs are seen as essential and recognised as professionals with a designation requiring a post-secondary qualification and education (Moss, 2006). However, the recognition of ECEs as essential and professional stands in opposition to concurrent discussions and realities of oppression.

According to Collins (2000, 2008) one way that people experience oppression, invisibility, and silencing is by omission. In ECEC, the systematic exclusion of ECEs in areas such as policy, research, and public discourse has led to their invisibility and the silencing of their voices (Richardson et al., 2021). The discourse on professionalism has provided a way for ECEs to push back against this oppression, raise their voices, and be acknowledged as worthy and valuable to the field. According to Osgood (2006), advocacy by and on behalf of ECEs foregrounds professionalism as a medium to situate them as valuable and project them as influential people in the field of ECEC. Scholars critiquing this concept of professionalism have pushed back, arguing that professionalization could be a means to police and control this highly gendered and beleaguered sector (Osgood, 2006; Richardson, 2021).

In Ontario, the designation of Registered Early Childhood Educator (RECE) is the process for professionalization of ECEs. Upon completion of a two-year diploma or a qualifying four-year degree, graduates of ECE and early learning pre-service education programs may register with the College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE). The CECE is a government- and member- funded organization whose mandate is to "protect the public interest" rather than the interests of ECEs. The CECE requires professional members to engage in "reflective practice" and ongoing professional development as set out in their Code of Ethics under "Responsibilities to Colleagues and to the Profession" (CECE, 2017).

The motivation behind this push for ongoing professional development is, arguably, to promote adherence to high-

quality standards in the field of ECEC (Dahlberg et al., 1999). Yet, the ever-increasing professional expectations imposed on educators (i.e., education, ongoing professional learning, accountability to curriculum documents, and pedagogical documentation) are not rewarded; chronically poor wages and/or working conditions of these educators persist. This creates a "professionalization gap," (AECEO, 2017; Richardson, 2021) whereby the growing responsibilities of ECEs are not accompanied by increased time, financial, or professional resources. Rooted within neoliberal values of personal efficiency and accountability, professionalization becomes the responsibility of educators, which contributes to their marginalization (Richardson, 2021).

In addition, the ECE sector mirrors the hierarchical organization of Western society. Viewed through the binary lenses of "care" and "education," the field of ECEC study and work historically and contemporarily holds less value due to its association with "care" and "care work," whereas teachers in the education system are held in higher esteem due to their association with "education" (Abawi, 2021). This hierarchical social organization not only undermines the value of ECEs in our societies, but it also reflects the way young children, and the entire field of ECEC is viewed. This devaluing has a significant impact on the professional and personal identity of educators working in the ECEC sector, who are perceived by many as "glorified babysitters" (AECEO, 2017; Bleach, 2014; Share et al., 2011).

Professionalism and Communities of Practice (CoPs)

CoPs are recognized as a model to advance professionalism for ECEs. The Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO), a long-standing professional association, defines CoPs as "self-determined learning groups that connect folks to supports, resources, and shared experiences to strengthen a unified early years workforce" (2022, para 1). CoPs are not a new model. In fact, various scholars who have researched this model speak to its efficacy for professional learning and furthering professionalism in several fields (Koliba & Gajda, 2009; Wenger et al., 2002), including ECE (AECEO, 2022; Hammond et al., 2015; Tarr, 2010). Research posits several benefits of participation in a CoP, and, in the field of ECEC, CoPs are used as spaces to further reflective practice and strengthen the professional identity of ECEs.

Participation also helps ECEs generate new knowledge about themselves and their teaching and acquire the professional language required to discuss children's learning and their practice with others (AECEO, 2022; Hammond et al., 2015; Wenger et al., 2002). In addition, CoPs connect participants to resources and supports and create a forum for sharing personal and professional experiences as an ECE (AECEO, 2022). However, Koliba and Gajda (2009) argue that CoPs have become a "largely normative and under-operationalized construct" (p. 98).

In this paper I argue that ECEC practitioners must reimagine traditional constructions of CoPs in order to redefine them as a space that amplifies the voices of ECEs to unsettle their continued marginalization through professional norms. Using Black feminist thought, a marginalized feminist social theory, I disrupt CoPs as neutral, objective, passive spaces where professional learning occurs in a linear and sequential manner. I critique the traditional and current understanding of CoPs that position them primarily as learning groups used to reinforce knowledge and further current concepts of professionalism. In using a Black feminist perspective, I examine not only the hierarchical positioning of ECEs in the field of ECEC but also deconstruct knowledge and knowledge producers who continue to dominate the field of Early Childhood Education. Using personal narratives of participation within a CoP, I use Black feminist thought to explore the messiness and politics of being an ECE who uses a lens of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2017). I reconceptualize CoPs as spaces of resistance where individuals come together to create counternarratives to challenge assumptions of professionalism and reimagine ECEs as humans worthy of recognition and respect. In the following section, I detail the continued marginalization of ECEs in the field of ECEC.

Marginalization of ECEs

An ongoing issue in ECEC is the invisibility of ECEs in childcare policy and discourse, which worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic and contributed to the continued marginalization of these educators (Richardson et al., 2021). While acknowledging the collective oppression faced by ECEs, it is essential to recognize that ECEs are not a homogenous group of people and they do not all experience marginalization in the same manner. Abawi (2021) has argued that a key factor in marginalization that is often overlooked is the racialization of ECEs. In Ontario, this sector is predominantly non-white; these

ECEs experience significant income and earning gaps compared to white ECEs (Colour of Poverty, 2019; United Way, 2019). A recent report by Statistics Canada (2020) confirms that immigrants, especially visible minorities, are disproportionately represented in front-line service jobs generally. In our current contexts, this population has been affected disproportionately by the economic impacts of COVID-19 compared to the rest of the population, resulting in wider wage and earnings gaps.

To understand the status quo in Canadian societies, we need to place the racialization discourse alongside the dominant developmental discourse in the field of ECEC, which continues to foreground the perspectives of male, white, foundational theorists from Euro-western backgrounds (Burman, 2008; Perez, 2017). Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. 2015 explain that "As regimes of truth, discourses hold power over individual and societal ways of understanding the world; they organize our everyday experience of the world, govern our ideas, thoughts, and actions" (p. 46). The dominance of this discourse has contributed to the universal understanding of the terms "child," "childhood," "educator," and "early childhood education" that are socially constructed concepts (Burman, 2008). These normalized images and discourses shaped within white perspectives do not represent the reality of the field.

Scholars have argued that individuals who do not identify with the norm (due to differences in race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, etc.) occupy the position of the "other" (Burman, 2008; Perez, 2017). At best, they are mentioned as an afterthought within scholarship and discourse, usually within a deficit context (Burman, 2008). Even though the reconceptualist movement has created fissures in this discourse by bringing in ideologies from feminist, queer, post-colonial, decolonial, and disability scholars, these still foreground white voices and perspectives (Perez, 2017). Multiple scholars have argued for more and better representation of people of colour and marginalized knowledges in the field of ECEC, in order to interrupt this dominance (Menon, 2022; Perez, 2017).

The use of Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000, 2008; Perez, 2017) and the lens of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2017) makes visible the social positioning of educators in ECE policy, research, and discourse. As a social group, all ECEs are marginalized and oppressed due to their multiple identities (female, care workers, occupying a lower socio-economic class, etc.) and occupy the position of the "other". But even within this marginalized group there exists a hierarchical organization where ECEs of colour from immigrant and refugee backgrounds and those working with marginalized populations, like newcomer families and children, occupy a lower stratum. Not only do these latter ECEs embody the oppression of undervalued essential workers, but they are further marginalized due to their intersectional identities of being a person of colour, not having a Canadian education, being bi/multilingual, belonging to a lower socio-economic class, having varied religious affiliations and so on.

Why Use the Lens of Black Feminist Thought?

Wane (2004) explains Black feminist thought as

> Theorizing using an interactive model to examine the ways in which power relations between intersecting systems of authorization normalize a hierarchy of privilege through racialized, sexualized, gendered, culturalized, and class positions originating from dominant ideological frames of social organization (p. 147).

Several scholars have explained the marginalization of ECEs using a feminist ethics of care framework that examines care and caring within society (Langford & White, 2019; Richardson et al., 2021). However, there is limited scholarship that situates ECEs within marginalized feminist theory such as Black feminist thought. Perez (2017) argues for centering this critical social theory to make visible the complexity and politics in the field of ECEC. Originating from the lived and embodied experiences and scholarship of Black women such as Collins (2000, 2008), hooks (2000), Lorde (1984), Wane, (2004), and others, this theory allows us to further our discussions about marginalized women's empowerment, intersectionality, and how their lives are entangled within power and oppression.

Arising from a space of invisibility, unrecognized within male-dominated knowledges and lack of representation, this social theory paves the path for confronting issues faced by Black people, women of colour, and other marginalized groups. Centering the legitimization of lived and embodied knowledges of women who are on

the margins of society is an essential tenet of this social theory. In addition, using Black feminist thought is a commitment to make visible the invisible, hold space for the voice of the oppressed, and actively engage in issues of social justice in the field of ECEC. If we expect ECEs to be advocates for children and families, it stands to reason that they include themselves within advocacy. Perez (2017) argues that Black feminist thought can be used to critically think about and within the field of ECEC to unpack inequities experienced by educators, especially ECEs of colour. This critical theory provides the framework and language to examine how ECEs are situated within hegemonies of power relations among systems of authority that marginalize them by normalizing the hierarchy along racial, gender, and class positions.

CoPs as Spaces of Resistance

In the following sections, I describe how CoPs may be used as a space for ECEs, especially ECEs of colour, to go against the grain, to resist existing discourses and meanings, and create counter narratives. First, I present my personal experiences of a long-standing relationship with a group of ECEs from immigrant/refugee backgrounds and our decision to form a CoP. Next, using Black feminist thought, I critique the traditional conceptualization of a CoP and, using the key concepts of intersectionality, power and privilege, and Black feminist activism, I aim to reconceptualize CoPs as a space for resistance.

When Lives Entangle

As a woman of colour, an immigrant, a mother, an ECE, and a scholar of social justice education, I occupy various social locations that not only inform and shape my identity but also inspire my research and practice. I first met this particular group of ECEs in 2006 in my role of faculty advisor as I visited a Center for Newcomer Children (CNC) program. As a faculty advisor, my role involved visiting early childhood settings to not only support and guide students who were completing placements within these centres but to also create, build, and sustain relationships with our community partners and ECEs who generously welcome, supervise, and guide pre-service educators.

The CNC program is funded by Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) which "facilitates the arrival of immigrants, provides protection to refugees,

and offers programming to help newcomers settle in Canada" (Government of Canada, 2021, para 1). This program for young newcomer children is offered by various Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) in conjunction with different settlement services, including Language Instruction for Newcomers (LINC). The NGOs serve newcomer families from immigrant and refugee backgrounds as Canada is not only a country built on immigration but also welcomes and resettles refugees from various parts of the world. To support the NGOs (which are also funded by IRCC), the IRCC founded the organization "Childminding Monitoring, Advisory, and Support" (CMAS) in 2000, which works with partners such as community organizations to identify gaps in services and create a flexible model of care that meets the needs of these groups (CMAS, 2013). "The development of Care for Newcomer Children (CNC) was a direct response to feedback from settlement-serving organizations that wanted to assist parents in their settlement but found that a lack of childcare kept parents from using many of their services" (CMAS, 2013).

Even though CNC centres are accessed by newcomer families for childcare and are valuable resources in our communities in Ontario, they are not part of the mainstream discourse of ECE. As a federally funded program managed by organizations that report to the federal government, this program seems to occupy a childcare niche that renders it invisible to mainstream ECE discourse in Ontario. This invisibility extends to the ECEs working in these programs. In fact, the educators in this program are known as "child minders" or "CNC staff" even though many are RECEs (CMAS, 2013). This terminology adds to the denigration of these groups of ECEs who, in many spaces, are not recognized as RECEs, even though they have the same qualification as other RECEs working in mainstream childcare and are required to adhere to the same professional standards set by the CECE. Within a collective that is marginalized in ECEC policy and discourse, this group of ECEs is predominantly made up of racialized women and occupies a lower status than those working in mainstream childcare.

My visits started in 2006, and over the years, what started off as 1–2 hours of observation and consultation per term, developed into deeper connections and longer conversations. Through our common lived and embodied experiences as women of colour, immigrants, newcomers, and ECEs, my visits became invitations to gently step into

their lives while inviting them into mine. As I furthered my scholarship by pursuing my doctoral program in social justice education, these ECEs generously supported my research by sharing their experiences of working with newcomer children and their families.

While this narrative may come across as one of belonging and meaningful relationships (which it is), that is not the only story. As a scholar of social justice education and feminist ideologies, I intentionally practice reflexivity and bear witness to the messiness of being and staying involved in relationships. Reflecting on the politics of relationships, I strive to present an unsanitized narrative while acknowledging that it is necessary to place myself in a space of discomfort if I am to engage in an ethic of resistance (Lenz Taguchi, 2006). Even as I was building a relationship with these ECEs, I was aware of how we simultaneously occupy positions of privilege even as we identify as marginalized. As a faculty advisor working in a post-secondary institution, I occupy a position of power and privilege in my relationship with the ECEs. Acknowledging this and inspired by Black feminist thought, I intentionally work on this power imbalance between us and use my social location to engage meaningfully with this group of ECEs to learn more about issues meaningful to them.

CoPs: Perpetuating Marginalization or Creating Disruption?

When I joined the AECEO, this acted as a catalyst to the formation of our CNC based CoP. I joined this long-standing organization to affirm the presence of women of colour as ECEs and researchers. Furthermore, I saw this as an opportunity to leverage my power and privilege to address the inequitable status of ECEs working in CNC programs and make visible the hierarchies in this workforce. Through our collective decision, these ECEs and I decided to partner and create a CoP through which we could make visible our narratives of marginalization and oppression.

In this section I draw from Wenger et al.'s (2002) understanding of CoPs and their explanation that "Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (p. 4). Wenger et al. (2002) posit that groups now called CoPs have been around ever since humans lived and worked in a social environment. CoPs create a space where participants contribute to sharing, learning, and building knowledge not only essential for survival but also furthering exploration and innovation that is essential to modernizing societies. These communities are prevalent in society, and they can be found within multiple spaces. They may be influenced by various roles, interests, and associations that lead to the creation of these unique groupings. The foundational requirement to enter this space is a shared interest in a certain area of learning even though the participants may not work together. Within this space, the interactions are valued and valuable. The environment created within this space presents opportunities for sharing information, insights, and giving and receiving advice. This space also allows open discussion, problem solving, exploration, and brainstorming sessions. Furthermore, these groups may also tap into the members' needs and aspirations (Wenger et al., 2002).

In this section I argue that centering professional development in a CoP as imagined by Wenger et al. (2002) constructs a romantic and sanitized version of professionalism by not addressing the politics of being an ECE. Using a traditional understanding a CoP enacts particular subjectivities and a belief that professional development is a "linear, finite process of acquiring and then applying prescribed knowledge" (Pacini-Ketchbaw et al., 2015, p. 66). It maintains the hegemony of normalization and universalization of the image of the ECE as a technician that is rooted within male, patriarchal, white, Euro-western knowledges. To disrupt these hegemonies, in the following sections, I deconstruct a few key functions of a CoP using Black feminist thought. First, I reflect on the notion of knowledge construction in a CoP by asking who is producing this knowledge and what knowledge is valued? Next, I argue that it is essential to center the discourse of power and privilege in a CoP using the lens of intersectionality to illuminate multiple identities. Finally, using Black feminist activism I imagine CoPs as spaces of resistance that further professionalism by making visible the counter narratives that emerge from collective experiences of marginalization and oppression.

CoPs as Spaces to Value Embodied Knowledge of the Marginalized

> Because elite White men control Western structures of knowledge validation, their interests pervade the themes, paradigms, and epistemologies of traditional scholarship. As a result, U.S. Black women's experiences as well those of women of African descent transnationally have been routinely distorted within or excluded from what counts as knowledge (Collins 2000, p. 251).

Collins's (2000) words are a call to reflect on how the knowledge producers in the field of ECEC continue to feed the hegemonic dominant discourse. Situated within a body/mind dualism, knowledge production traditionally is understood within patriarchal, Western ideologies. Scholars argue that knowledge creation distinguishes the mind from the body and is gendered in nature (McGuire & Reger, 2003). "Masculinity" is associated with intellectual pursuits, logical thinking, and linked to success and growth whereas "femininity" is coupled with the emotional nature of the human and related to caring and irrationality—characteristics that are traditionally not valued or associated with knowledge production. Reason, objectivity, and linear and logical thinking are considered hallmarks of the ideal intellectual who is imagined within a patriarchal framework. This dominance of who produces knowledge and whose knowledge is valuable is reproduced within society and this hierarchy is replicated in structures and discourse not only in ECEC but also in many other fields of education and work. The invisibility of ECEs, the devaluation of care work, and the absence of people of colour in early childhood scholarship can all be explained if we think deeply about who has access to knowledge production.

Even though Collins (2000) centers the experiences of Black women in the U.S., I argue that using Black feminist thought allows ECEs, especially ECEs of colour, to produce counter narratives that arise from their embodied and lived narratives. Embracing this critical social theory in the field of ECEC "explicitly politicizes children's and teachers' understanding of social inequities" (Perez, 2017, p. 59). In our CoP, we all identify as women of colour from immigrant and refugee backgrounds, with a vested interest in learning from and with marginalized populations like newcomer families and young children.

Our embodied knowledge of displacement, relocation, racism, marginalization, and oppression are centered within our CoP as we acknowledge that our knowledge is valuable.

Our CoP is a space to make visible lived and embodied knowledge that is traditionally not valued in elite spaces. As we listen to our collective lived experiences of marginalization, we witness and honour pain, suffering, joy, frustration, and despair, among other emotions. We share stories told by our mothers and grandmothers and cultural values passed down over generations. We embrace ourselves as embodied learners and educators who do emotional work with newcomer children and families. Even as we connect with each other, we learn with and about newcomer families who face multiple barriers and struggle silently to create a new beginning in Canada even as they face oppression due to their differences. Learning with and from our individual and collective struggles situates us as knowledge producers and our knowledge as valuable to the field of ECEC.

CoPs as Spaces to Explore Power Imbalance Through Intersectional Identities

Situating CoPs within discourses of professionals coming together to learn deeply about shared passions produces an image of equals coming together to learn, share, and become better professionals. Imagining CoPs within this framework sanitizes the complexity of our relationships and identities and ignores our embodied marginalization. I argue that ECEC needs to deconstruct the myth of homogeneity in a CoP of ECEs by thinking with intersectionality. Crenshaw (1991), a Black feminist scholar, and one of the founders of Critical Race Theory in the U.S. legal academy uses the metaphor of intersecting categories of discrimination to locate those who are marginalized within simultaneous intersections of power and privilege. Crenshaw (1989) asks us to

> [c]onsider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars travelling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them.

Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in an intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination [...] But it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident: Sometimes the skid marks and the injuries simply indicate that they occurred simultaneously, frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm (p. 149)

I borrow from Collins (2000) who explains that as a heuristic, intersectionality can be used to study micro-, meso-, or macro-level social phenomena. Identifying our CoP as a micro-social phenomenon, the paradigm of intersectionality is used to explore and get a deeper understanding of how we can come together to explore, learn, and create oppositional narratives that reveal not only our intersectional identities but also use this lens to better understand how we continue to be oppressed by "multiple, converging interwoven systems" (Crenshaw, 2017, p. 304).

Scholars researching the oppression of ECEs rarely use an intersectional lens. Carastathis (2014) explains that oppression in women's lives is not a singular process, nor can it be understood through binaries. Harris (1990) argues that using a singular (race) or a binary (race/class) lens centers the experiences of relatively privileged members of oppressed groups. This is a flawed analysis because it does not reflect the lived experiences of people who experience both or multiple intersections. According to Mohanty (2003) "the assumption [is] that categories of race and class have to be invisible for gender to be visible" (p. 107).

Intersectionality captures the embodied experience of simultaneous oppressions experienced through multiple social locations. Ontologically, using intersectionality allows an understanding of how systems of oppression converge and are intricately linked. So, Crenshaw's (1989) concept of structural intersectionality makes visible the lived experiences of people by presenting oppression as a cohesive force rather than fragmenting those experiences through categorization. It creates awareness of the multiplicity of oppression experienced by certain groups of people and intricacies of these intersections, rather than monistic approaches that fragment the experiences of women of colour. According to Harris (1990) using a monistic approach that only pays attention to certain intersections does not capture the complexity of lived experiences.

In our CoP, conversations of how we occupy simultaneous spaces of power and privilege take precedence. Even though these ECEs face marginalization within intersections of race, class, education, religious affiliation, and gender, they acknowledge that they hold positions of power in their interactions with newcomer families. As established citizens from immigrant/refugee backgrounds and fluent speakers of English, these ECEs occupy an exalted status that the newcomer families look up to. Additionally, using an intersectional lens is a reminder for me, as an academic, to intentionally acknowledge the power imbalances within our group and to ensure that I practice reflexivity and question my own intentions of being a part of this CoP. It is an intentional effort to continuously reflect on ways in which power permeates our everyday lived experiences.

CoPs as Spaces for Activism and Societal Change

Scholars of Black feminist thought argue that many educational pedagogies reflect and perpetuate social arrangements (Collins, 2000, 2008; hooks, 2000, Perez, 2017). In revisiting the professionalism debate in ECEC, educators understand this as a tool to police and oppress a marginalized population. Educators continue to be monitored and made accountable because they bear the obligation of professionalism as an individual responsibility. The burden falls upon them to deal with their marginalization in their personal and professional lives. It is up to the educators to confront public sentiment such as "child minders" or "glorified babysitters," push for policy change in ECEC policy and for a decent wage and benefits and be taken seriously as valuable professionals who influence the lives of young children and their families.

In this section, I not only think with Black feminist scholars but also with Freire (1970) who argued that the personal is always political (Darder, 2021). Drawing from critical and engaged pedagogy frameworks (Freire, 1998; hooks 1994), I argue that CoPs can be spaces to critically think about the politics of the lives of educators, children, and families. During one of our CoP meetings, our conversations about anti-racist pedagogy allowed us to make visible our own lived and embodied experiences of racism. As we told our narratives, we witnessed a collective belonging, a connection to each other. We felt charged as we welcomed our narratives of anger, pain, humiliation, insecurity, and shame. The CoP created a

space to address the deep impacts of racism not only on our lives but also on the lives of families and young children who are newcomers to Canada. Instead of sanitizing our pedagogical practices, this honest and painful discussion allowed a space to think deeply about our pedagogies as ECEs and collectively reflect on how we may shift our thinking to bring about positive transformation in our personal and professional lives. It not only positioned us as advocates for newcomer families and children but also brought to the forefront our fight to be recognized as valuable humans who deserve a decent wage and benefits and for our voices to be heard.

As Collins (2000) explained, "rather than seeing social change or lack of it as preordained and outside the realm of human action, the notion of a dialectical [power] relationship suggests that change results from human agency" (p. 274). Drawing on Black feminist thought and the work of Freire (1970, 1998) and hooks (1994) within our CoP is a commitment to intentionally embrace the messiness and difficulties of being emotionally engaged with one another. We accept ourselves as individuals who care for each other and as educators who care for newcomer families and children. A commitment to embedding care, love, emotion, passion, and a suspension of objectivity marks the core values of our CoP. We recognize that education and learning are political, not neutral. Using a feminist perspective to create critical consciousness is founded on the assumption that the knowledge we create in the CoP and our critical thinking must inform our pedagogy, practice, and ways of being as we live and learn as educators and worthy humans. We see our collective pain and anger as catalysts to bring about change. Therefore, within hegemonic oppression exists our collective and individual agency to dismantle, change, and shift power imbalances that opens possibilities for social justice and equity.

Conclusion

Where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognize our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them in their pertinence to our lives. That we not hide behind the mockeries of separations that have been imposed upon us and which so often we accept as our own (Lorde 1984, p. 43).

I conclude with this quote, which inspired me to invite this group of ECEs to form our CoP. Lorde's (1984) words inspire us to stand up for each other and recognize our collective responsibility to stand up for social justice. Even though I occupy spaces of privilege and power because of my access to academia, I still do not belong in many spaces. In many places where I have a seat at the table, it is clear that my presence is tokenistic. The distinctions that separate and compartmentalize us are created by hegemonic forces that strive to keep us apart so we cannot unify and resist. The spaces we occupy and the relationships we are involved in continue to shape us. These interactions can be debilitating, or they can be uplifting. It can create a sisterhood or place us within contentious situations.

Black feminist thought is my theoretical home. It has allowed me to feel a sense of belonging. Using this critical social theory has not only given me the confidence to speak up for myself but also for others who are marginalized. It holds space for voices from the margins and centers the value of marginalized knowledge and lived realities. When critically examining the scholarship that examines the marginalization of ECEs and their struggle for decent pay and benefits, we need to create awareness that not every ECE experiences oppression similarly. Using Black feminist thought makes it essential to understand our differences and acknowledge that even within a marginalized population such as that of ECEs there exists hierarchies and strata where ECEs of colour occupy a contentious status due to their intersectional identities.

In this paper I examine the reconceptualization of CoPs within the context of the professionalism discourse and reimagine these traditional groupings intended for professional learning as a space for resistance. Giving voice to the marginalized and their experiences of oppression in a CoP not only values the oppressed but also creates a space for the embodied and lived experiences of oppression that empower them through discursive practices to create possibilities for collective activism. To resist hegemonic forces that continue to silence ECEs in spheres such as policy, research, and societies, we need to nurture these spaces and voices that disrupt and interrupt the status quo. I wonder what possibilities might arise if we use marginalized social theory such as Black feminist thought to value our inherent humanity and center social justice and equity in our everyday lives.

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