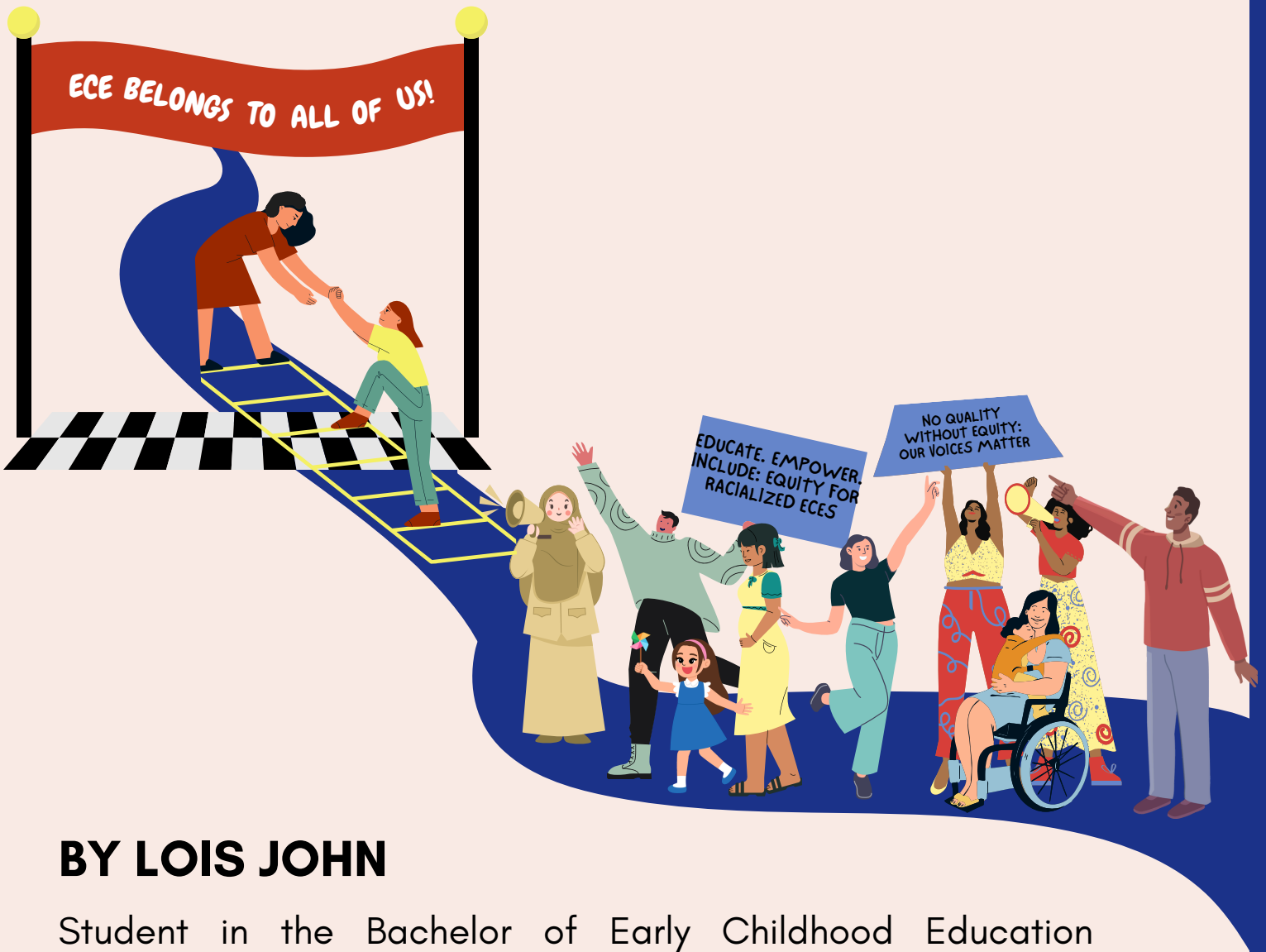
CONSTRAINED VOICES:

EXAMINING POWER DYNAMICS AND SYSTEMIC BARRIERS TO THE AGENCY AND AUTONOMY OF RACIALIZED EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS IN PROFESSIONAL SETTINGS



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AECEO student blog

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Trigger Warning: The following literature review discusses topics related to racism, discrimination, and systemic inequities in the early childhood education sector. Readers are advised that these topics may evoke distressing emotions. Please engage with this material in a way that feels safe for you, and take breaks or seek support if needed.

The struggle for agency: What's in the way?

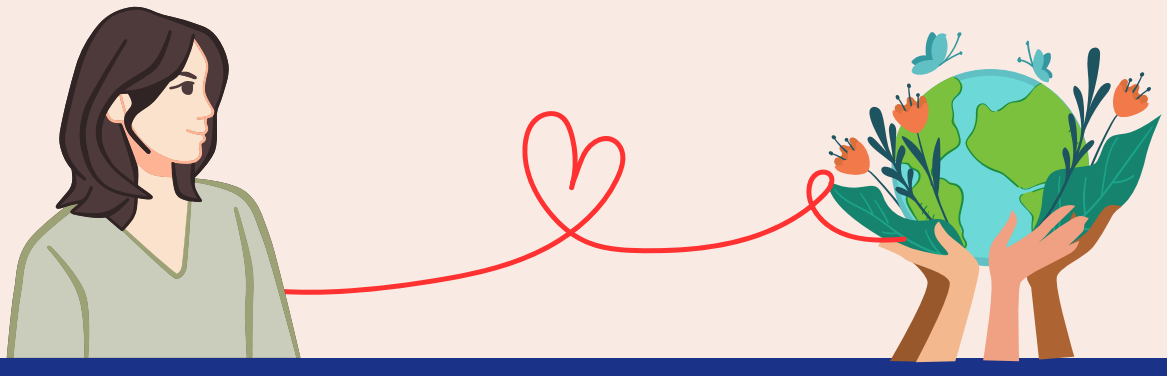
This literature review explores existing research addressing the systemic barriers and power dynamics that shape the professional experiences of racialized ECEs, focusing on how these factors impact their agency and autonomy within the field. This review will also address the experiences of racialized chicken and parents in early learning settings. To gather relevant research for this literature review, I conducted searches using the library databases available through George Brown College (GBC). I used keywords such as racialized, race, educators, Canada, barriers, power, inclusive, system, and Critical Race Theory (CRT) to guide my search for literature related to this topic.

How do you define "Asians" in this paper?

Throughout this paper, the term "Asian" refers to....

East Asians, Southeast Asians, and South Asians

As a racialized ECE, I have observed that people are sometimes surprised when my name does not match what they expect for someone who is Asian. During my field placements as a student, I often felt the need to act more outgoing than I naturally am to demonstrate my knowledge and capabilities, as being quiet was sometimes assumed to be a cultural trait rather than a part of my personality. Although these experiences did not bother me much at first, they prompted me to reflect more deeply on how other racialized ECEs might feel, especially those who face even greater challenges such as language barriers, distinct accents, or faith-based biases. This reflection is particularly important given Canada's growing diversity and the need now more than ever to ensure inclusive and respectful professional environments. This awareness has inspired both concern and a sense of responsibility, motivating me to learn more about these issues and advocate for inclusive spaces where every ECE feels valued and respected. By examining recent studies that center the voices and experiences of racialized ECEs, I aim to highlight the ways in which inequities are maintained, challenged, or resisted in professional settings. In doing so, I will investigate the following question: What systemic barriers and power dynamics influence the professional agency and autonomy of racialized ECEs in professional spaces?



Review of literature

Racialized ECEs working in Canadian ECE and Kindergarten to Grade 12 school systems face deeply rooted systemic barriers and unequal power dynamics within their professional contexts. These barriers are not isolated incidents but the direct product of institutional structures that uphold white supremacy, colonial norms, and Eurocentric standards. This analysis is grounded in AsianCrit (Asian Critical Race Theory) and BlackCrit (Black Critical Race Theory) frameworks, which center the specific experiences of Asian and Black ECEs, recognizing how racism, colonialism, and intersecting oppressions shape their realities. The impact of these conditions extends beyond the workplace, influencing ECEs' sense of agency, overall health, and professional growth.

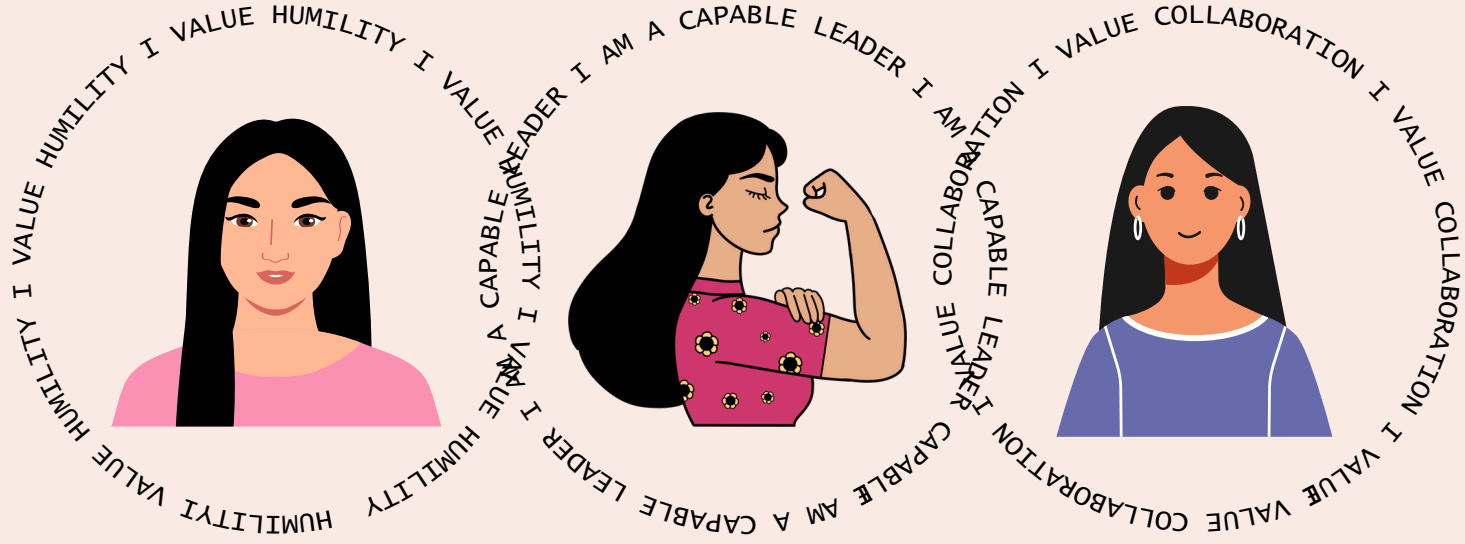
The hidden cost of exclusion: Systemic barriers in focus

Structural racism and discrimination remain embedded within Canadian educational systems. In early learning settings, anti-Black racism affects children as young as 18 months, with families reporting incidents of discrimination, exclusion, and even verbal abuse from staff and peers (Stirling-Cameron et al., 2023). Similarly, Asian ECEs in Ontario have faced persistent barriers in hiring, advancement, and promotion processes solely due to their racial identity. Despite their qualifications, these ECEs experienced a form of racism termed by Reid et al. (2024) as the bamboo ceiling phenomenon. This is a racialized form of marginalization that limits leadership opportunities for those who do not conform to white or western standards (Reid et al., 2024).

Rather than genuine inclusion, many racialized ECEs experience tokenism or tokenistic inclusion. Reid et al. (2024) also found that Asian ECEs who took on white cultural behaviors such as changing their names or altering their accents to appeal to the western society were more likely to be included in leadership discussions and tasks. Participants discussed ways in which they were performing whiteness, such as efforts to "avoid linguistic biases by decreasing Asian accents and Westernizing Asian names" (Reid et al., 2024, p. 617). They also avoided their Asian peers and built stronger networks with white colleagues. Richardson (2022) similarly describes how systemic structures within Ontario's ECE sector expect ECEs to conform to professional standards rooted in neoliberalism, without valuing their diverse pedagogical approaches or lived experiences. Racialized ECEs often felt the need to "code-switch between home and school to be considered a good candidate for leadership" (Reid et al., 2024, p. 617). Asian women generally reported facing more microaggressions, like being left out of conversations, and being rejected more often for jobs or promotions compared to Asian men (Reid et al., 2024). In the 2022 study, it was identified that ECEs' professional autonomy is limited by systemic pressures for efficiency and standardization, which leaves little space for culturally rooted or relational care practices. Asian ECEs felt pushed to hide parts of their cultural identity to fit the idea of an "assertive leader" (Reid et al., 2024, p. 617).

However, Asian women who did not act according to the stereotype of being reserved faced negative impacts on their career progression. As explained by an Asian ECE who stood up against a male administrator, “My principal thought I was overreacting to an issue that involved an irate parent who questioned my expertise. He didn’t like how I responded and didn’t support me” (Reid et al., 2024, p. 617). Richardson (2022) argues that such systemic undervaluing of ECEs’ expertise reflects a professionalization gap, where increasing professional expectations are not matched by improved wages, working conditions, or professional recognition, disproportionately affecting racialized ECEs. This performative inclusion reinforces a system in which racialized individuals are only welcomed if they conform to norms sustained by dominant ideologies such as white supremacy, colonialism and neoliberalism. As one ECE expressed, "I see that whitewashed Asians get more invitations for leadership opportunities and are part of more circles” (Reid et al., 2024, p. 616). This illustrates how diversity is performed rather than practiced, with the aim of preserving existing power structures. This system is the perfect cover up for racist and discriminatory treatment towards racialized ECEs. Racialized ECEs often face informal yet persistent barriers which keep them from leadership opportunities. In their research, Reid et al. (2024) reported that promotion processes were often based on colonial assumptions of leadership, favoring individuals who possess assertive and extroverted traits. These traits are commonly associated with Western leadership ideals that expect ECEs to be assertive, self-promotional and individualistic in their leadership style.

This did not align with the leadership styles of racialized ECEs, making them appear as unqualified candidates. Further, Richardson (2022) illustrates that Ontario's privatized childcare sector prioritizes profit over ECEs' well-being, creating working conditions where racialized ECEs face compounded challenges of systemic racism and economic insecurity. In the field of ECE, one such study found that newcomer ECEs were less likely to experience higher well-being, often due to limited support and recognition, which directly affected their career advancement (Larson & McIsaac, 2025). Eurocentric frameworks dominate educational systems and define what is considered good teaching practices or effective leadership (Larson & McIsaac, 2025). Another study highlighted that Asian ECEs were often evaluated against colonial leadership standards that disregarded collaboration or humility; qualities prevalent in many Asian cultures (Reid et al., 2024). These Eurocentric standards, coupled with market-driven childcare models, limit ECEs' ability to engage in critical reflection and ethical care practices aligned with their cultural values. Newcomer ECEs still feel like outsiders or "othered" (Larson & McIsaac, 2025, p. 192) and face discrimination at work because of their language and culture.



Since ELCC environments follow mainly “white, heteronormative Eurocentric values and practices” (Larson & McIsaac, 2025, p. 192), newcomer ECEs may experience Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF), leading to emotional and mental strain such as “increased anxiety, frustration, fatigue” (Larson & McIsaac, 2025, p. 192), which affects their wellbeing. “The accumulative stress from racial microaggressions produces racial battle fatigue. The stress of unavoidable front-line racial battles in historically white spaces leads to people of color feeling mentally, emotionally, and physically drained” (Smith et al., 2006, p. 301). Ontario’s fragmented union representation further prevents ECEs from collectively addressing these structural inequities, leaving racialized educators particularly vulnerable (Richardson, 2022). Meanwhile, research reported that Black families perceived the education system as designed to disadvantage their children, particularly Black boys, who were disproportionately streamed into lower academic tiers or labeled with learning difficulties (Stirling-Cameron et al., 2023). These examples illustrate how colonial thinking characterizes and impacts both educator and student experiences. A significant barrier for racialized ECEs and families is the lack of culturally responsive support within education systems. In a 2023 study, Black families reported that they closely monitored their children's programs to ensure that their identities were equitably represented in the curriculum. One parent explained that they felt the need to actively assess whether their children’s ECEs reflected their family's identity and values, as it was often overlooked (Stirling-Cameron et al., 2023).

In early childhood programs, Larson & McIsaac (2025) note that professionals working in non-diverse settings often lacked culturally responsive support structures such as resources, which contributed to lower professional well-being among those who did not fit the dominant culture. Richardson (2022) similarly found that ECEs working under marketized, profit-driven systems had little space to enact culturally meaningful care, as the focus remained on measurable outcomes rather than relational care practices. The emotional toll of navigating racially inequitable systems is profound and negatively impacts the overall health of the ECEs, children, families, and communities involved. Black parents lived in a state of constant vigilance, expecting their children to face racism at any moment due to the lack of respect, insufficient awareness, and cultural insensitivity among staff and peers. One parent reflected on their worry that their children were probably going to experience the same marginalization that they had experienced growing up in the education system (Stirling-Cameron et al., 2023). This system is rooted in racism and continues to prioritize self-maintenance and domination of non-white children and families.

Similarly, Asian ECEs became visibly emotional during focus groups, crying while sharing stories of systemic discrimination (Reid et al., 2024). These qualitative findings mirror survey results, which revealed high levels of disempowerment and emotional strain among early childhood professionals, particularly those with diverse identities and marginalized backgrounds. ECEs of African descent or those who identified as Black shared how anti-Black racism and discrimination affected them throughout their lives. They described frequent experiences of anti-Blackness, stating that it is "something commonplace within Nova Scotian culture and society, embedded into nearly every public system" (Stirling-Cameron et al., 2023, p. 357). Participants strongly felt anti-Black violence in schools, including early learning settings that were mostly white with very few Black ECEs or students (Stirling-Cameron et al., 2023). Participants, including Black ECEs, elaborated further on the perpetual threat of anti-Black racism, describing the heaviness of the "white gaze" (Stirling-Cameron et al., 2023, p. 360), feeling as though wWhiteness is the default. Outside of historically or prominently Black communities, families and children often felt "othered" (Stirling-Cameron et al., 2023, p. 360). For ethical and relational care to become the norm in childcare environments, ECEs' "experiences, values and ideas must be central to policy discussions, planning and development" (Richardson, 2022, p. 124). This means that ECEs' voices need to be prioritized and respected at every level of decision-making. When their insights shape policies and practices, childcare environments can truly reflect caring and responsive systems.

Power struggles: Decoding hierarchies in education

In Canada, white leadership remains the norm across all levels of educational institutions. Even in districts with large Asian populations, white administrators -maintained control over final promotion decisions. These decisions were often influenced by unspoken cultural expectations, further marginalizing racialized ECEs. Similarly, it was observed that families had little trust for white-dominated systems that continually excluded their voices and concerns. The voices of racialized ECEs are frequently ignored or devalued (Stirling-Cameron et al., 2023). A 2025 study showed that several participants felt that their perspectives were not taken seriously. Answers such as, "I feel my ideas are not worth sharing" (Larson & McIsaac, 2025, p. 185) were commonly shared, especially among newcomer ECEs. Black parents also reported that they often felt as though their concerns were dismissed or that they were seen as overreacting, further marginalizing their involvement in their children's education (Stirling-Cameron et al., 2023). Racialized ECEs continue to have limited access to mentorship, training, and promotion. Reid et al. (2024) highlighted how racialized ECEs lacked access to informal leadership networks, which are often the true pathways to career advancement.

Even in systems that publicly claim commitment to equity, everyday practices and decisions continue to prioritize those who align culturally and socially with the dominant group. Similarly, recently graduated ECEs, some of whom are racialized, were considered as part of lower well-being categories in the study, where opportunities for advancement and leadership were limited (Larson & McIsaac, 2025). To be seen as professional or promotable, many racialized ECEs feel compelled to conform to dominant or western standards. Furthermore, decisions such as changing their names were described by participants as performing whiteness, which helped them to be regarded more professionally because of their perceived proximity to whiteness (Reid et al., 2024). The performance of whiteness and the pressure individuals feel to perform so continue to uphold the discriminatory belief that western culture is the default in society and should therefore be prioritized. The pressure to assimilate felt by participants creates emotional harm and a culture in which authenticity is penalized and conformity rewarded. These studies make clear that systemic barriers and unequal power dynamics deeply impact the professional lives of racialized ECEs in Canada. These injustices range from tokenism and cultural erasure to structural racism and exclusion from leadership. Sustained by colonial ideologies and white dominant institutional norms, these unjust experiences continue to be prevalent in all facets of the ELCC sector. Addressing these inequities requires more than policy reforms; it demands a fundamental transformation of educational systems, one that values racialized voices, redistributes power, and centers equity in both rhetoric and practice.

Unheard stories: Gaps in the literature

Although this is not an exhaustive review, I noticed some apparent gaps in the current body of research available. First, most studies focus predominantly on the experiences of Black and Asian ECEs, with limited representation of other racialized groups such as Indigenous, Middle Eastern, Hispanic, multiracial ECEs, and others. There is also limited research exploring how intersecting identities such as gender identity, disability, immigration status, and language compound experiences of marginalization within professional ECE contexts.

Kimberlé Crenshaw, who first coined the term *intersectionality*, highlighted how people's overlapping identities create unique experiences of discrimination and privilege. In her influential paper *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex*, Crenshaw introduced the concept of intersectionality to address how Black women's experiences of oppression are shaped by the interconnected nature of both race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989). Her work continues to remind us of the importance of considering these complexities in research today. Additionally, much of the literature examines the presence of inequity but offers limited insight into long-term outcomes for racialized ECEs, such as burnout, career growth over time, and leadership development, all of which contribute to ECEs' wellbeing in the field.

Finally, another potentially underexplored area is the role of ECE training programs and postsecondary institutions in either perpetuating or challenging systemic inequities. Available research tends to focus on workplace dynamics without examining how ECEs are prepared or not prepared to navigate and resist structural oppression. At the same time, scholars such as Janelle Brady have researched and provided promising evidence of how racialized ECEs demonstrate resilience by actively redefining and transforming their professional identities and practices in response to marginalization (Brady, 2022). Addressing these gaps underscore the need for future research that centers the diverse and intersectional realities of racialized ECEs and that investigates both the systemic causes and the transformative possibilities of their professional agency and autonomy.

What's next? Research aims and directions

Future research should seek to explore the root causes of systemic barriers to agency and autonomy among racialized ECEs by first examining how ECE training programs in Ontario either prepare ECEs to challenge structural oppression or reinforce dominant, exclusionary ideologies. By analyzing post-secondary ECE curricula, teaching practices, and institutional cultures, the research should aim to uncover how these programs may contribute to or disrupt the marginalization of racialized ECEs even before they enter the workforce.

Building on this foundation, future research could also investigate how racialized ECEs, particularly those from underrepresented groups such as Indigenous, Middle Eastern, Hispanic, and multiracial communities experience systemic and power inequities throughout their professional journeys. Using an intersectional lens, the research should examine how overlapping identities, including gender identity, disability, immigration status, and multilingualism, shape these ECEs challenges and opportunities for agency.

Furthermore, future research could also explore long-term impacts such as burnout, limited career mobility, and exclusion from leadership roles, while giving attention to the ways in which racialized ECEs demonstrate resilience, resistance, and redefinition of professional identity.

By combining curriculum analysis, in-depth interviews, and focus groups with educators and faculty, research could generate actionable insights for reforming educator preparation programs, transforming workplace culture, and supporting the diverse realities of racialized professionals within the ECE sector.

Questions for consideration and future research

- In what ways do ECE training programs in Ontario prepare or fail to prepare ECEs to recognize systemic oppression against racialized ECEs in professional settings?

- How do racialized ECEs from other diverse backgrounds such as Indigenous, Middle Eastern, Hispanic, and those who identify as multiracial experience systemic barriers to agency and autonomy within the ECE workforce?

- How do intersecting identities such as gender identity, disability, immigration status, and multilingualism shape the professional experiences and challenges faced by racialized ECEs?

- What are the long-term impacts of systemic marginalization on the professional well-being, career advancement, and leadership opportunities of racialized ECEs in Ontario?

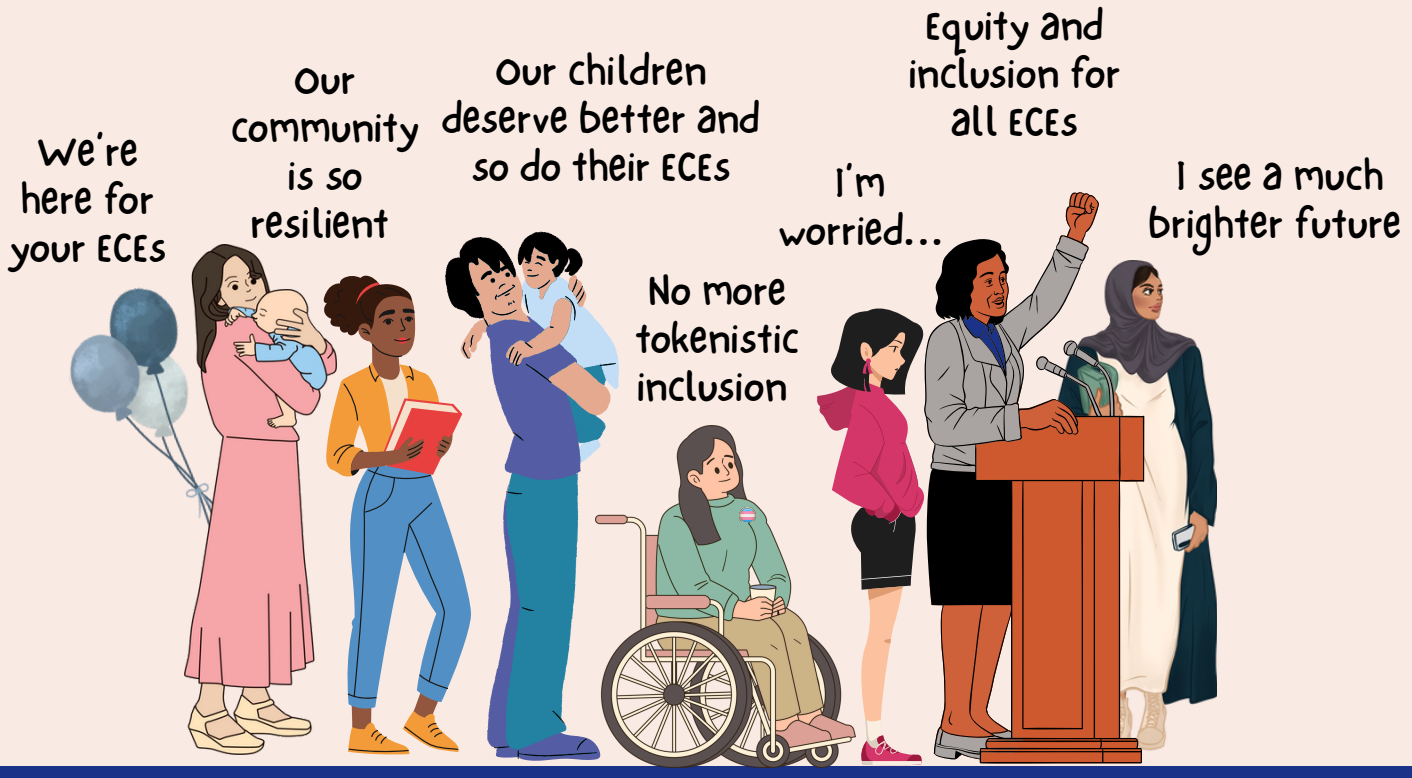
- In what ways do racialized ECEs resist, redefine, and reclaim their professional identities and agency in response to experiences of marginalization?

Equity is our future

The persistent marginalization of racialized ECEs in Canada despite growing discourse on equity, diversity, and inclusion reveals a troubling disconnect between policy rhetoric and lived professional realities. As demonstrated throughout the literature, racialized ECEs navigate educational systems marked by power imbalances, Eurocentric standards, tokenistic inclusion, and systemic exclusion from leadership and decision-making processes. These inequities are not incidental but deeply embedded within both institutional and sociopolitical structures that prioritize western norms and uphold colonial ideologies (Brady, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989; Larson & McIsaac, 2025; Reid et al., 2024; Richardson, 2022; Smith et al., 2006; Stirling-Cameron et al., 2023)

While existing research has illuminated some of the challenges faced by Black and Asian ECEs, gaps remain regarding the experiences of Indigenous, Middle Eastern, Hispanic, and multiracial ECEs. Moreover, current research often fails to consider how overlapping identities such as disability, gender identity, and immigration status intensify marginalization. Equally underexplored is the foundational role of ECE training programs and postsecondary institutions in either reinforcing or dismantling these barriers before ECEs and racialized ECEs even enter the workforce.

In response to these gaps, future research should seek to uncover how Ontario's ECE training programs contribute to the reproduction or resistance of systemic oppression, and how racialized ECEs from underrepresented groups experience and respond to inequity in their professional journeys. By employing an intersectional lens and emphasizing both structural barriers and individual resilience, future research will be able to contribute to a deeper, more nuanced understanding of professional agency among racialized ECEs. Crucial to all future studies is the goal of informing transformative changes in educator preparation, workplace culture, and leadership development, while ensuring that the voices, identities, and contributions of all racialized ECEs are not only recognized but empowered. After all, in a sector that prides itself on nurturing equity and inclusion for every child, how can we claim true progress if the ECEs guiding them continue to face systemic exclusion themselves?



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