

Early Childhood leisure experiences of African Nova Scotian children: the privilege of risky outdoor play

Milena Pimentel, Jessie-Lee McIsaac, Crystal Watson, Emma Stirling-Cameron, Nicholas Hickens, and Barb Hamilton-Hinch

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Background

The early years of development are a significant time for children. They are exposed to new stimuli and experiences that impact their learning, well-being, overall development, and life-long health.

Therefore, this study sought to respond to the following research question: *How do ECEs and parents of Black children view and experience anti-Black racism in ELCC environments?*

Methods

This qualitative research project was informed by Critical Race Theory and Black Critical Theory.

Early childhood educators (ECEs) who care for Black children and parents with Black children between the ages of 18 months and 5 years (n = 15) participated in virtual, semi-structured interviews.

Key Findings

Anti-Black approach to curriculum

Black ECEs and parents reflected on the mainstream approaches to curriculum, stemming largely from Eurocentric values and beliefs. Participants observed this Eurocentrism throughout their ECE training, careers, and their children's educational experiences. They discussed the ways that this impacted the experiences of Black ECEs and Black children in ELCC programs in Nova Scotia.

“And if we as Black parents then decide that we'll leave it up to the school and government to educate our children, we're just setting them up to fail, because all they'll learn is the cultural experiences of someone else who is incapable of teaching them of their BIPOC experience.”

Inaction on racism, social justice, and equity

ECEs provided examples of their personal encounters with issues of racism within their early learning and child care environments. Some ELCC environments, however, made attempts to embrace and promote appreciation for other cultures and customs.

“My daughter's school, I went to do the drumming with her. She drummed and she sang and the teachers were just in awe, because this little child is just often sitting and playing by herself. Then all of a sudden she is the loudest, the proudest, and she was just enjoying herself.”

Precluding Black children from culturally safe environments

As a result of the two themes explained above, cultural safety was often absent in ELCC programs.

ELCC settings were described as white-dominated spaces, with white ECEs, directors, boards, and/or administrators. Parents and ECEs discussed and reflected on the diversity within their programs, noting the lack of representation. Most parents explained how the diversity and representation in programs influenced their choice of a child care program.

“You know, because representation matters. When you see a teacher who looks like you and says “Oh wow” you know it opens up this world for a child”

Parents reflected on the harm that lack of representation in ELCC programs and the impact this has on their young Black children. One parent stated: *“During the lockdown I tried to find all these YouTube channels with educators that were Black [...] but it was interesting that my kid that they were like, “Hmm, how does she know that?” and I'm like “but she's a teacher,” but because they've never seen a Black teacher it was sort of like resenting or not sure of the message.”*

Conclusions

In addition to enabling a diverse workforce that supports Black ECEs to build thriving and diverse programs, there is an urgent need to implement comprehensive and widespread professional development and preservice education to equip all ECEs with the knowledge and skills to deliver antiracist frameworks through Africentric and culturally responsive programs. We also need to address stereotyping, the lack of infrastructure, and racism to improve cultural safety and empower Black children and Black ECEs through dismantling the Eurocentric norms in early childhood frameworks that lead to inequities and opportunity gaps among Black families and children.