

"I was born in this country!" The importance of implementing discussions about Black Lives Matter in early childhood education and care

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to address the importance of implementing discussions about Black Lives Matter in early childhood education and care. The article starts with presenting the background of the study, describing how talking about race and whiteness may perceive difficult to address for both preschool teachers as well as early childhood educators. Using two narratives from my own research history, I employ a postcolonial perspective, using the theories of Frantz Fanon, as a lens to discuss the narratives. The article has a critical perspective, acknowledging how we today still live in a world that continues of being affected by the effects of colonization. In this section, I discuss why saying children are "colorblind" is problematic. Furthermore, I try looking towards a more decolonializing and liberating pedagogy, troubling recent matters regarding skin color. Finally, I address the importance of implementing discussions about Black Lives Matter in early childhood education and why raising awareness about this movement could be so important for our society generally and future preschool teachers in particular.

Keywords

Black Lives Matter, preschool, postcolonial perspective, Fanon, auto-ethnography, narrative

Introduction

After many years as a preschool teacher working in superdiverse preschools (Giæver, 2020) and an educator in early childhood education and care (ECEC), I have come to appreciate the need to engage in discussion with my ECEC student teachers on issues surrounding race and other social phenomena in the world. The point is to prepare them for what

they might encounter when they start working in preschools.¹

For several years, I have been teaching a subject² chosen by students in ECEC called "Diversity and Unity,"³ where I have addressed issues on race and whiteness. I began implementing discussions on the Black Lives Matter (BLM, 2013) movement as part of the course curriculum following the death of Sandra

¹ In Norway, the term "kindergarten" is used instead of preschool, and kindergartens are primarily for children between the ages of one and six. However, I will use the term preschool in this article to reach a broader audience.

² In the fall semester of senior year, students are eligible to choose from five subjects.

³ *Mangfold og fellesskap* (my translation).

Bland in 2015 (Montgomery, 2019). Her case has had a deep impact on both my personal and academic life. Prior to becoming a teacher and educator in ECEC, I had been interested in and written exams about whiteness and white privilege in my master's program. Although Sandra Bland's case had an impact on me, it did not feature prominently in the news in Norway. However, following the death of George Floyd in 2020, there were massive demonstrations in Oslo in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. Between 12,000 and 15,000 people demonstrated to honor his memory. According to Fürher (2021), this was done to "express solidarity with anti-racist struggles in the USA, and denounce racism in Norway" (p. 22). Many of the protestors carried signs referencing the Black Lives Matter movement (Jørgensen & Kjærnsli, 2020), demonstrating that discussing such topics had become more important than ever before (Fürher, 2021).

Over many years working as both a preschool teacher and an educator in ECEC, I have heard sayings that "children are colorblind" and more recently "all lives matter," which have led me to construe white privilege as ever-present. White privilege can be viewed as a societal privilege that benefits white people over non-white people. hooks (2009) argued that there is a difference between what she called "white supremacy" and racism. While some white people may want to be part of diverse settings, they still "have to unlearn white-supremacist thinking" (p. 98). Through her teaching, hooks had various experiences that served as lessons learned, with the most important being "to talk about the issue of perspective, of biased and unbiased thinking, to prepare students to hear points of view they might not have heard before" (p. 100). This points to the need to address and stress discussions around these issues in educational

settings. In many ways, putting whiteness, white privilege, and racism on the ECEC agenda can be viewed as a critical issue (Yelland, 2005), including in terms of creating awareness.

However, many critical issues can seem difficult for preschool teachers to tackle, as such issues can be seen as overly risky or may seem uncomfortable to undertake as part of an everyday pedagogy. Nevertheless, as Blaise & Andrew (2005) argued, topics that preschool teachers find uncomfortable are necessary to address. It is, therefore, crucial that such issues are also part of their education in becoming preschool teachers. According to Andersen (2015), getting involved with "race" as something of significance in educational practices in early childhood can seem "...very complicated, risky and also indeterminate to get involved with." (p. 41). Furthermore, Biesta (2014) maintained that risk-taking should occupy a central place in our educational endeavors and be brought to the forefront of a critical pedagogical practice. The discussion in the article will utilize postcolonial perspectives to show that philosophy can encompass a more critical pedagogy (Belseth, 2021).

The Norwegian Framework Plan for preschools states that attending preschool shall contribute to "children's well-being, happiness, attainment and feeling of self-worth, and they shall combat harassment and bullying. If a child experiences harassment or bullying, the preschool must deal with, stop and follow up on it" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 11). It is worth mentioning that these forms of abuse are not only perpetrated by other children but also by preschool staff. A change in the Preschools Act came in 2020 when a stricter activity obligation was added for situations in which a preschool worker violated a child (Preschools Act, 2005). The Norwegian Framework Plan also emphasizes that employees should "give children

equal opportunities, promote equality and combat discrimination, prejudice, stereotypes and racism" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 56). Furthermore, according to the educational requirements to become a preschool teacher, student teachers have to undergo training to meet and handle diversity and a multicultural pedagogy, both on campus and in their field placement preschools (Hatlem & Belseth, 2017; Ministry of Education, 2018).

In order to set the frame for this article, I will now introduce the words of Frantz Fanon (1952): "Don't expect to see any explosion today. It's too early ... or too late. I'm not the bearer of absolute truths. No fundamental inspiration has flashed across my mind. I honestly think, however, it's time some things were said." (p. xi). The article presents a critical and Fanonian perspective to tackle the issue of implementing discussions about Black Lives Matter in ECEC.

An auto-ethnographic methodology

Two narratives from my own research and teaching experiences will be presented and discussed; thus, the method deployed herein is auto-ethnography (Baarts, 2012; Ellis et al., 2011; Jamouchi, 2019; Reinertsen, 2015; Suoto-Manning, 2021). According to Baarts (2012), auto-ethnography transforms from the private to the more cultural. Auto, meaning one-self, is about how the researcher makes herself/himself the object of being studied through observation and reflection. The narratives presented should not only *be* moving but should also *create* movement. All senses, feelings, and thoughts are put in motion (Baarts, 2012). As an auto-ethnographer, one has to balance between narrating and presenting, between the self and the studied, and between choosing what should be included in the narrative and what should be left out. Auto-ethnography starts from a specific life (one's own) but creates knowledge about

ways of living and experiencing the world (Baarts, 2012).

According to Suoto-Manning (2022), while the use of self-study as a methodology in teacher education has been the subject of intense debate, a notable absence from this debate has been a consideration of the critical roles of race and racism. Thus, this points to the importance of problematizing the topic of race: "This absence effectively silences the role of race in self-study in teacher education research and serves to uphold the centrality of whiteness in teacher education" (Suoto-Manning, 2022, p. 249). This accords with Jamouchi's (2019) position regarding the question of making and experience in this research in terms of researchers' understanding of a phenomenon and their way of expressing their experience of this phenomenon. Jamouchi (2019) maintained that "one can also think about how the researcher tailors the research design to study the phenomenon or case and the need to be attentive to the phenomenon with one's whole body in order to understand the situation better and more adequately." (p. 61). Andersen (2023) put it the following way: "Many who choose autoethnography position their work within critical research, because they are concerned with social justice." (p. 144–145).

Building on Ellis et al., (2011), auto-ethnographers believe that research can be rigorous, theoretical, and analytical as well as emotional, therapeutic, and inclusive of personal and social phenomena. They noted that the most important questions for auto-ethnographers are "Who reads our work, how are they affected by it, and how does it keep a conversation going?" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 284). Furthermore, I also wonder what happens to researchers who use this methodology when writing their own narratives, which then become part of the research data. Reinertsen (2015) claimed that

auto-ethnographic writing is also about scientization and learning individually and in organizations, that it is based on assumptions that the world is constructed materially, socially, and discursively, and that pedagogues create pedagogies. In using an auto-ethnographic approach, the researcher remains central to the writing process, but the writing is now thought of as a relational practice. Reinertsen (2015) referred to this as exploring/researching in practice together and believed that the writing process could be thought of as entangled material and discursive creations. Furthermore, in this way, we can create or write ourselves (ourselves) *in* and *through* the words, phenomena, or things we encounter (Reinertsen, 2015). Following Ellis et al. (2011), the auto-ethnographic method is both a process and a product.

Andersen (2023) argued that an auto-ethnographic methodology is not common in Norwegian research in the ECEC context. Thus, this article seeks to increase the contribution to research through the use of this methodology. If more researchers chose to use this methodology, it would contribute to expanding the field of knowledge in ECEC research (Andersen, 2023).

A postcolonial perspective

In the discussions around the narratives presented later in this article, a postcolonial perspective focusing primarily on the works of Fanon (1952, 1963, 1964, 1965) will be used. In his studies, Fanon worked with issues connected to marginalized groups generally and black people specifically. His work can be subsumed as an exploration of the nature of colonialism and racism (Fanon, 1952; Hudis, 2015).

Postcolonial perspectives have received considerable research attention in the last decades in efforts to look at phenomena in

different ways while also advocating that all people have the right to the same material and cultural well-being (Young, 2003). Young lamented the persistence of inequality and injustice in the world today and, therefore, called for urgent change. Thus, a postcolonial perspective can help illuminate other perspectives developed outside the West. As Young (2003) noted, “It seeks to change the way people think, the way they behave, to produce a more just and equitable relation between the different peoples of the world.” (p. 7). In this way, postcolonial perspectives can add diversity to the discussion by illuminating empirical material. Raivio et al. (2022) also argued that the use of a postcolonial lens can create a greater awareness of one’s own position. Furthermore, by deploying such a perspective, forms of power can be uncovered; by examining possible actions in situations where one group exercises domination over another, one can ask completely different questions, including those strongly rooted in ethics (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). Gandhi (1998) asserted that postcolonial theory is a scene of “intense discursive and conceptual activity characterized by a profusion of thought and writing about the cultural and political identities of colonized subjects.” (p. 5). Using Fanon’s perspectives will shed light on issues of race and whiteness, which are problematized in this article. The goal here is to address the importance of implementing discussions about Black Lives Matter in ECEC and understand why raising awareness about this movement could be so important to our society in general and future preschool teachers in particular.

Ethical perspectives

The question of ethics in research is also important, and the narratives presented here are strictly my own experiences and reflections. Thus, I will not address issues that concern third

parties. Since the narratives are strictly my own, no further actions had to be taken in accordance with the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD).⁴ However, as a researcher, I have always striven to present my research in an ethical and careful way, as ethics can also relate to a researcher's worldview (Baarts, 2012). Research ethics do not refer only to the formulated procedures but also constitute some mutually related concerns regarding understanding the world. I look to Ellis (referenced in Baarts, 2012) and the way in which she used the concept of relational ethics, where she proposed an epistemological shift from a relationship based on asymmetry—where one party (the researcher) has the knowledge while the other party (the researched) is the one about whom knowledge is to be created—to equality, that is, where both parties are subjects and are deemed knowledgeable. This shift reflects care, mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between the researcher and the explored (Baarts, 2012). The auto-ethnographer must be personally authentic in the ethical choices that they make and, thus, take a position and thereby position themselves in their field of research (Baarts, 2012). My field of research involves educating preschool teachers to be critical and aware for the benefit of the next generation.

Presentation of two narratives: Race, whiteness, and Black Lives Matter

In this section, I will present two narratives that will form the basis of the critical discussion in the subsequent section.

Narrative #1 – I was born in this country!

The year is 2011. I work as a preschool teacher, and I have just started doing

research for my master's thesis when I come across a news report (NRK, 2010) about a suburban area in Oslo, Norway, with a high number of migrants. In the news report, the news channel is following a small child, a boy, who is starting his first day of primary school. The report is primarily about how many people are now choosing to leave this area because of all the migrants, the child's parents included. When presenting the child on his first day of primary school, the boy, a white Norwegian, approaches another boy, with dark skin and says to him: "I'm a real Norwegian!" The boy with the dark skin then replies: "I was not born in any other country. I was born in Norway, actually, at Lindeberg!"

This news report shook me and made me once again question the enduring persistence of white privilege. Understanding how easy it is for racist actions to occur and for children to be influenced propelled me to conduct research on how young children of other ethnicities are received in Norwegian preschools. Young (2003) asked the following question: "Have you ever been the only person of your own color or ethnicity in a large group or gathering?" (p. 1). He addressed this and said that there are two kinds of white people: "those who have never found themselves in a situation where the majority of people around them are not white, and those who have been the only white person in the room" (p. 1). Thus, such perspectives are vital for teaching students in ECEC about, as they are expected to come across sayings such as "children are colorblind."

⁴ Since January 1, 2022, the NSD has been part of the knowledge sector's service provider (SIKT).

The second narrative occurred about five years later:

Narrative #2 – 23 Ways you could be killed if you are black in America

It is now 2016. I have been teaching pedagogy in ECEC for two years. This semester, I am teaching a course called “Diversity and Unity.” In this lecture, I have been talking with the students about race, whiteness and white privilege, and the Black Lives Matter movement. Still, you can hear some people in society claiming “All lives matter!” Towards the end of the lecture, I show my students a YouTube video called “23 Ways You Could Be Killed If You Are Black in America.” At the end of the video, I and several of the students are sitting in tears.

I found the video powerful, as did the students. It made me reflect on the need for parents of color to have talks with their children on the dangers, daily struggles, and actual risk of getting killed. It made me think of a quote from Fanon (1952) written many years prior: “As painful as it is for us to have to say this: there is but one destiny for the black man. And that is white.” (p. xiv). A white parent, teacher, or child will arguably never have to raise awareness in the context of such a crushing talk about taking precautions and the risk of potentially getting killed on account of race.

Discussion: A Fanonian perspective

Discussing the above narratives through a postcolonial perspective is complex. Fanon (1952, 1963, 1964, 1965) advocated for the black oppressed people of Algeria and claimed that the white man was locked in his whiteness and the

black man in his blackness (Fanon, 1952). What can this mean in an ECE context? Play is a vital part of children’s well-being and everyday life in preschool (Øksnes & Sundsdal, 2018). In the context of play, Fanon (1952) opined that “children at play insofar as playing can be seen as initiation to life.” (p. 10). Elsewhere, he described how the colonized at heart can experience feeling without any kind of authority (Fanon, 1963). How the little boy in the first narrative is approached by others can impact how he values life. Fanon (1963) said it aptly, “I came into this world anxious to uncover the meaning of things, my soul desires to be at the origin of the world, and here I am an object among other objects.” (p. 89). Over the past twenty years, children have been viewed as subjects, with their own voice and thoughts, expressing themselves through various ways of communication (Cannella, 1997). They are regarded as “human beings,” not “human becomings” (James et al., 1998). However, what does this mean in relation to children of all skin colors during play time with peers or interactions with preschool staff?

Earlier in the article, the term “colorblind” was mentioned, which begs the question of whether we are really so naïve to think that all children are colorblind? In an article published in *The Huffington Post*, anti-racist activist John Halstead (2016) wrote as follows:

Whiteness is not a problem for white people, because it blends into the cultural background. Black people, on the other hand, don’t have the luxury of being “colorblind.” They live in a culture which constantly reminds them of their Blackness, which tells them in a million large and small ways that they are not as important as white people, that their lives actually do not matter as much as

white lives. Which is why saying "Black Lives Matter" is so important.

Some of Halstead's key points in the article include the need to recognize that we are not colorblind, the imperative to talk to white people about institutional racism, and the critical need to adopt the saying "Black Lives Matter."

I once again invoke Fanon (1964), who challenged white people: "Where they find no room, where you leave them no room, where there is absolutely no room for them, and you dare tell me it doesn't concern you! That it's no fault of yours!" (p. 14). Fanon also claimed that it was obvious that there could only be a white race; he talked about racism as a destruction of cultural values, of ways of life. The little boy's retort in the news report that "I was not born in any other country. I was born in Norway, actually!" can be viewed as a liberating action demonstrating that Norway is a diverse country with various cultures, religions, ethnicities, and skin colors. According to Fanon, this was the goal of a colonial person; he argued that it is the colonial peoples who must liberate themselves from colonialist domination and that it is not possible to take one's distance with respect to colonialism without at the same time doing so with respect to the idea that the colonized see themselves through the filter of colonialist culture.

In the second narrative, the realization that someone could actually die by virtue of having another skin color really makes you reflect on your white privilege. It is akin to Fanon's (1952) argument that "Not only must the black man be black: he must be black in relation to the white man." (p. 90). When black parents have "the talk" with their children, one could argue that they are being colonized just from being black. Fanon (1963) believed that the

colonized subject is constantly on his guard and fundamentally acknowledges no authority. When your skin color is the factor that puts you at risk, there is still a long way to go. When this is the case, the colonized are caught in the tightly knit web of colonialism (Fanon, 1963). How can we as a society work toward a just and equal world? Like Fanon once said, what we do want is "to walk in the company of man, every man, night and day, for all times." (p. 238). This quote is still highly relevant today. However, working toward a more decolonizing and liberating pedagogy, starting with decolonization, implies the urgent need to thoroughly challenge the colonial situation (Fanon, 1963).

Toward a more decolonizing and liberating pedagogy?

Working toward a more decolonizing and liberating pedagogy cannot be achieved by an individual preschool teacher. Andersen, Sand & Zachrisen (2015) argued vehemently that the leader of the preschool also has to get involved: "Creating an inclusive practice in the preschool cannot be understood as only an individual matter for the individual preschool teacher." (p. 41). Moreover, according to them, there seems to be little room for independent and critical thinking around fundamental structures related to questions of power or taken-for-granted attitudes in preschools or society that can place obstacles in the way of the development of a fairer preschool pedagogy. They concluded by remarking that "preschools seem to strive to develop a pedagogical practice that can look after all children equally well, regardless of their background" (p. 55).

What, therefore, can be done in pedagogy lessons in ECEC? One starting point is to look at the literature we present to students. Who are the authors? In what context have they written? Some universities in Norway have now

started with what they call a *decolonizing curriculum* (Østfold University College, 2022), but what steps can be taken in preschools? Do all children have books, toys, songs, nursery rhymes, movie characters that they can identify with? Fanon (1952) raised this concern over 70 years ago through the example of Mickey Mouse and other cartoon characters. He exclaimed that “They are written for white men, for white children” (p. 124) and believed that nursery rhymes should be subject to the same criticism. He made the direct connection between this and children’s identification process, with the black child subjectively adopting a white man’s attitude. Fast forward 70 years when Disney decided to cast a black actress in the role of Ariel in the 2023 movie adaptation of *The Little Mermaid*, the racist backlash was swift, full-on, and unrelenting. However, as the main actor, Halle Bailey, claimed, “As a child, seeing a black Ariel would have changed my life” (Nicholson, 2023). A Norwegian actress with Zimbabwean roots, Tinashe Williamson (2021), wrote a book titled *Handbook for Young Antiracists* targeting six- to eight-year-olds. Shortly after publication, the book was included in the curriculum for a supplementary education course for teachers in Norway (Oftedal, 2022). Thus, developing decolonial practices is an ongoing process. One might wonder whether it is even possible. However, as Cannella and Viruru (2004) reminded us, there is a danger of modeling decolonial practices. They maintained that there can be no models for decolonial practices as such models would most likely colonize:

“Decolonialism requires recognition of colonialism while at the same time challenging the dualistic thinking created by constructions of colonizer and colonized. We cannot provide decolonial methods or models, as we would surely then create ourselves positions as colonizers” (p. 124), a point worthy of consideration.

In the introduction to this article, the case of Sandra Bland was mentioned as a catalyst for the implementation of discussions around the Black Lives Matter movement in ECEC. According to Gladwell (2019), Sandra Bland’s death is what happens when a society does not know how to talk to strangers. He discussed the importance of understanding and interpreting body language and pointed to the importance of transparency. In my work with ECEC students, I strive to prepare them for challenges that they might encounter in society in general and in preschool in particular.

The anti-racism educator, Jane Elliott, once said, “There is only one race, the human race” (NBC News, 2017). However, decades earlier, Fanon (1965) asked the following question: “Are we still living in the time when man must fight and die in order to have the right to be the citizen of a nation” (p. 30)? In the face of events in the last few years, I would argue that this question remains valid some 60 years later and points to the importance of implementing discussions about Black Lives Matter in ECEC and why educators and preschool teachers must work together toward a more liberating pedagogy for all children and parents. To make this happen, we must embark on a new start, develop a new way of thinking, and endeavor to create a new man (Fanon, 1952). Put differently, “The future must be a construction supported by a man in the present” (p. xvii). It is for this reason that it is so important to keep verbalizing the words “Black Lives Matter.”

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