Before race: A literature review on de/colonial habits in play within early childhood

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Abstract

In this article, we consider the academic literature regarding how racial discrimination is *pre*figured in societal norms and habits in early learning and childcare in Scotland and England. Specifically, we outline what we see as a salient opportunity to strengthen the existing knowledge base, namely how race and racism are understood in young children's relational habits and play prior to explicit acts. Leaning on the work of Jones and Okun, the article signals how a broader understanding of coloniality may inform earlier intervention in childhood practice. We conclude by introducing our interest in resurgent Froebelian pedagogies, especially in Scotland where they intersect strongly with national frameworks. We consider their potential affordances for understanding and intervening in childhood colonialities and strengthening childhood decolonialities.

Keywords

anti-racism, childhood, colonialism, decolonisation, Froebel, habit, literature review

Introduction

While it is increasingly accepted in certain educational circles that it is no longer sufficient. or indeed possible, to be merely 'non-racist' (Kendi, 2019), consensus varies according to what an actively 'anti-racist' approach may look like in practice for those working with young children. Against a backdrop of popular belief that racial discrimination is exceptional in this age group (Atkinson, 2009; Park, 1928), concerns have been noted within decolonial fields about the extent to which a narrow focus on explicit racism at the interpersonal level misses, or conveniently ignores, the ways in which discrimination is first enabled by hegemonic, cultural, affective and

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institutional assemblages of norms and values (Jones and Okun, 2001). This is not to dismiss interventions which challenge explicit acts of racism, but rather to pose the question of how else race can be understood at its root. Most pertinent to our own interests is the question of how these norms are produced in the daily values, assumptions, choices and reframings of the world in children's play encounters – reflecting their relationships in the world, both before and beyond explicit racist acts.

Some early childhood pedagogies lend themselves more strongly than others to surfacing children's affective experiences and epistemologies. In particular, based on our prior survey of the policy landscape in Scotland and England (Tembo and Bateson, 2024b), we turn our attention in the second part of this article to the resurgence (or reimagining; Wasmuth, 2022) of Froebelian approaches which emphasise free flow play (Bruce and Halder, 2015) and an educative focus on relationships (Tovey, 2017) over and above outcome-led curricula. Despite a growing interest among Froebelians in the intersection between race and early childhood (our research, e.g. is being funded by The Froebel Trust), there is as yet little clarity about how well Froebel's original principles could be articulately and generatively broadened to meet the pressing commitment towards anti-racism. We spotlight, then, the potential affordances in Froebelian discourse and practice for new ways of witnessing, understanding and responding not only to coloniality in children's everyday play encounters but also to the decolonial possibilities available.

Situating race, racism and anti-racism: An overview and discussion of the literature

Methodological approach

Given that educational policy in England and Scotland is largely silent about how early learning and childcare (ELC) practitioners should respond to the affect and prefiguration of race in children's play (Tembo and Bateson, 2024b), in this article we focus on the extent to which academic literature might fill the void. At the outset – while we hope to build on literature which speaks to the ways in which educators make sense of race and have strategized to promote equity – we rule out for consideration here large swathes of such writing on race and early childhood as being distinct (and at times contrary) to our own interests. For, although the history of the colonial fabrication of race is generally acknowledged in the literature, we recognise and are concerned that the majority of writing about race in early childhood treats it as an a priori reality/inheritance, primarily requiring strategies of explicit naming, showing and relational mediation (e.g. through 'equal representation' in story books, circle time discussion etc.; see Derman-Sparks et al., 2011; Gaine, 2005; Van Ausdale and Feagin, 2001). This is not to discount the important contributions some of these writers have made to the gross limitations and explicit avoidances in didactic and programmatic curricula to attend to race inequality with children, or to wider institutional inequalities (e.g. the under-representation of minoritised people in the workforce). It is simply to be clear that they do not address play in early childhood as a principal arena for the re/production of race on affective terms; nor, more importantly, do they consider how the shaping of children's formative (neuro-diverse, but culturally hegemonized) thinking-being first enables or challenges these re/productive capacities. Indeed, such focus on didactic and programmatic curricula themselves, in reinforcing reified subject-object relations, power dynamics and knowledge – may be part of the problem – but perhaps one that early childhood educators are in a unique position, professionally, to decolonise. If play was marginalised in early childhood, this broad omission in the literature would perhaps be understandable; but since it has, for more than a decade, been the

firm centre-ground on which both conservative and social democratic early childhood policy has been converging, it is vital that we now bring the de/colonialisms of children's play to wider critical attention. However, before we approach the events, assemblages and unstable becomings pertinent to racialisation in children's play, we must first gesture towards not just the fabrication but the inherent instability of race itself. It is an instability which is both a product of, and challenge to, colonial insistences of thinking and being, and perhaps to certain forms of anti-racist action. Practically, the search strategy for this literature review involved drawing on the author's existing expertise within this area. In addition, we also employed keyword searching in academic journals and books related to areas of race and racism, decolonisation, early childhood studies, and the scholarship around affect and forces of habit.

Situating race, racism and anti-racism

We approach anti-racism from the perspective that 'race' is a constructed social and material category upheld through racialisation (Blickstein, 2019; Vila and Avery-Natale, 2020). Defined as the process through which racial differences are established and naturalised, racialisation usefully problematises any understanding of race as essential or biologically rooted. As Dabiri (2021: 13) succinctly notes, racial identities were essentially invented to sow division in order to more effectively produce oppression. Numerous other writers have demonstrated at length how race was propagated as a cultural project through colonialism – which produced and relied on Othering to institutionalise early extractive capitalism (Eze, 1995; Fanon, 2008; Said, 2003). Solidifying that modality was a historically-particular culture in Europe and North America of individualisation, command/control, and either/or binary thinking – colonialism's primary epistemic and cultural norms and extractive enablers.

In today's society, race continues to habitually shape 'individual' (we problematise this term elsewhere, see Tembo and Bateson, 2024a) experiences of being in the world, maintained through the neoliberal processes that serve to perpetuate individualism and maintain the historically-present logics of colonialism. Defined as a set of 'political-economic practices that proposes that human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade' (Harvey, 2016: 22), the multiple processes of neoliberalism saturate the British context in which we situate this project - including our understandings of early childhood and how it should be 'serviced' (Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021). The intersections with race are by no means incidental, but rather at the crux of how identity is governed as part of the so-called (white) democratic ideal (Mbembe, 2019; Olson, 2004; Táíwò, 2022). While we acknowledge the real legacies, significance and utility of speaking in terms of racial identity, we remain aware of the need to problematise its foundations in ways that are critical of representationalism, essentialism, separatism and propertarian logics (Tembo and Bateson, 2024a). Others too have carefully articulated the ways in which neoliberal norms of competition, competitiveness and anthropocentric domination mask potentially more relational, co-creative and care-full ways of being in the world (Bellacasa, 2017; Mignolo, 2012). Affirming racial identity in this way, then, may work to perpetuate and reproduce the very issues we seek to challenge. It might be the problem rather than the solution. In response, Hall (2021: 331) suggests that:

> The political question is *not* 'How do we effectively mobilize those identities which are already formed?' so that we could put them on the train and get them onto the stage at the right moment, in the right spot . . . but something really quite different and much deeper.

Hall's claim enables a line of flight towards reconceiving anti-racism on the basis of 'subjectifica-tion'. That is, not beginning with the raced individual as a priori, through a framework where bod-ies are known only according to prior significations, but rather, from a post-colonialist viewpoint, questioning how race itself is brought into being in ways that serve to segregate individuals. Rather than a politics based on identities, anti-racism in this way might be reconceived as the search for an identity based on politics (Lipsitz, 2006).

Race, in its inception, is doubly unstable. Its categorisations and governmentalities were, and remain, continuously manipulated – at sea – the better to enable elites to coerce shifting alle-giances between and against oppressed peoples (who's in, who's out) in response to economic and political whim and purpose (Dabiri, 2021). Simultaneously, however, these fissures reveal assem-blages which oppressed, subjectified peoples may, under certain conditions, perceive, infiltrate and counter-manipulate, subvert, repel, recreate, where they are not adopted as narrow identifica-tions but rather the basis for new kinds of alliance. For, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) claim, every assemblage is at once a process of territorialisation and deterritorialization. As an ethical and methodological praxis, as Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. (2011: 23) write in their work on race and early childhood:

> We need to engage in understanding what race (or gender or sexuality) 'is and can be, in as many variations as possible' (Hames-Garcia, 2008: 330). Understanding what race can be allows us to work toward making race work differently. What new elements can race be linked to and, as a result, transformed into something new? What kinds of encounters are possible?

We argue that an approach of this kind challenges anti-racism ideas that focus primarily on behav-ioural acts of interpersonal prejudice and discrimination within humanist and structuralist concep-tions of race. Rather, thinking in terms of subjectification offers an avenue to consider the cultural norms that inform racism, thus going beyond interventions that append blame onto individuals. Such a way of knowing effectively broadens the ambit of inquiry to consider the wider colonial processes through which difference is produced.

Coloniality in early childhood studies

Efforts to consider the role of coloniality in early childhood are not new. As a brief non-exhaustive overview, writers have engaged with postcolonial knowledges in early childhood to challenge dominant narratives on the child in terms of subjectivity and identity (Aitken, 2019; Diaz-Diaz and Semenec, 2020;), gender diversification efforts among the workforce (Mohandas, 2021), research methodologies (MacRae and MacLure, 2021), the ethics of care in ECEC environments (Langford, 2021), non-human space and place in the Anthropocene (Nxumalo and Villanueva, 2019; Pacini-Ketchabaw and Taylor, 2015; Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015; Trafí-Prats, 2020), literacy practices (Murris, 2016; Murris and Haynes, 2018), and narratives of self-regulation (Diaz-Diaz, 2023). Yet interpretations and interventions vary significantly across contexts. Liebel's (2020) text, *Decolonising Childhoods: From Exclusion to Dignity*, adopts a postcolonial framework within childhood on geopolitical terms, examining the extent to which children's lives in the Global North and South are constructed unevenly. Liebel does acknowledge a more relational mode of subjectiv-ity on postcolonial terms, though the implications of this argument are not entirely carried through in the rest of the text. Their focus on citizenship rights and policies could be said to be incompatible with the project of decolonisation, and may even domesticate it within a liberal framework (Tuck and Yang, 2012).

Thus far, then, few, if any, have considered the de/coloniality of children's *play* encounters as it contributes specifically towards *the re/formation of race-ism*. Certainly, nothing has taken place in the UK context within which we situate ourselves. Delgado-Fuentes (2021) writes briefly of the coloniality in play modalities imposed on globally minoritised communities, for example, shifting games away from communitarian purposes and outcomes towards those with reified roles, aims and winners. However, this focus on game play rather signals the usurpation of free-flow play by rules-based games (Bruce, 2015; Lilley, 1967), and so occludes the broader intersections of colonial hegemonies *within* children's autotelic and spontaneous play (this is not to discount the ways in which children create and imitate rule-making in their free-flow play, itself a product of colonial mimicry). Importantly, Delgado-Fuentes highlights analysis of how 'culture has been impoverished as play and playfulness have been restricted in modern Western culture' (: 204), arguing that play itself is inherently problematic for established states and civilisations, a claim we will return to briefly later. Meanwhile, variations of Pacini-Ketchabaw's collaborations are significant in honing in on affective encounters that produce race and coloniality in formal early childhood spaces. Yet the focus predominantly remains on adult-child interactions (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2011), or explicit discussions about race between children (Pacini-Ketchabaw and Berikoff, 2008). We want, rather, to emphasise – with Alanen and Mayall (2001) – that children are continually engaged in creating new worlds entangled with but also *beyond* adult, linguistic and rules-based interactions. As an aside – unhelpfully in the context of discussing colonialism and race, perhaps – Alanen and Mayall's conceptual focus within Childhood Studies came for a while to be known in scholarship as 'tribal childhoods' after James and Prout's work to synthesise these overlapping perspectives (James and Prout, 1990). With connotations on the one hand of Golding's dystopian *Lord of the Flies* and, on the other, orientalism (Said, 2003), Mayall's (2002) latter conceptualisation of 'children's childhoods', while imprecise, is more inclusive.

The affective habits of coloniality

As a springboard, we must look to broader framings of the entrenchment of colonialist characteristics throughout contemporary culture to give impetus to our own research into children's affective play encounters. Widely cited across the scholarship, Tema Okun and Kenneth Jones' foundational work (Jones and Okun, 2001; Okun, 2021) outlines a number of characteristics that show up in everyday encounters (wherever neo-liberalism has reach and roots) to disconnect and disenfranchise individuals from the whole. In this article we will continue to credit Jones and Okun, although since Jones' death the work, wholly online, has remained 'live' and been updated by Okun many times in different media, in response to demand from those using their tools and actual events. Its foundations, however, as Okun (2021) credits, remain firmly rooted around their original joint conceptualisation. Understood as 'white supremacy characteristics', for them:

> One of the purposes of listing [these] characteristics is to point out how organizations that unconsciously use [them] as their norms and standards make it difficult, if not impossible, to open the door to other cultural norms and standards. As a result, many of our organizations, while saying we want to be anti-racist and multicultural, really only allow 'others' to belong if they adapt or conform to already existing cultural norms.
> (Jones and Okun, 2001: 8)

The crux of Jones and Okun's argument speaks to the broader role of cultural characteristics in facilitating how race emerges in interactions between people. Specifically, Jones and Okun

articulate the historical construction of an insider culture (denoted materially but also figuratively as 'whiteness') through the following (constructed) *characteristics*, collectively manifested:

- Perfectionism
- Urgency
- Defensiveness
- Individualism
- Accumulation (quantity over quality)
- Worship of the (reified) written word
- Objectivity/rationalism (distinct from body/emotion)
- Singularity (there is one right/best way)
- Paternalism (decision-making for others)
- Either/or (black and white) thinking
- Power hoarding (power as scarce)
- Fear of open conflict/the right to comfort
- Progress as 'bigger/more'.

These characteristics, it is argued, while they may individually have shown up in different times and places, were uniquely and comprehensively knitted together during the modern era of empire and enlightenment. We are drawn to them not in the interest of proving any causal or classificatory link between particular traits and racism, but rather for their utility as guiding heuristics to better grasp processes of racialisation in children's play in more affective ways. The authors provide a wealth of nuance and contextualisation which we cannot do justice to here, but Okun (2021: 3) elaborates:

> White supremacy colonises our minds, our bodies, our psyches, our spirits, our emotions . . . as well as the land and the water and the sky and the air we breathe. White supremacy tells us who has value, who doesn't, what has value, what doesn't, in ways that reinforce a racial hierarchy of power and control.

Theoretically, Roberts-Holmes and Moss's (2021) writing on the neo-liberal basis of early childhood education ably demonstrates the institutionalisation of these colonial habits in early childhood today, directing the view and management of childhood as a distinct policy agenda. They illustrate the predominant language and systems built since the 1980s to configure children around discourses of

> 'outcomes' and 'quality', 'testing' and 'assessment', 'interventions' and 'programmes', 'evidence-based' and 'best practice', 'investment' and 'human capital', 'preparation' and 'readiness', 'markets and marketing'. . . with its corollary of 'the logic of competition between students, teachers, schools and writ large between nations' (Ball, 2017: 23)"
> (Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021: 20–32).

These are problematic as they epistemically foreclose an ability to grasp different modalities of knowing how children might be and become. Practically, meanwhile – and despite the sector's cognitively dissonant loyalty to the idea of the 'child as innocent' (Robinson, 2013) – many of our colleagues in early childhood practice have readily acknowledged that each of the characteristics identified by Jones and Okun are at times evident – 'in play' – among young children directly, as well as between adults, and between adults and children. This is not surprising, given that the

policies Roberts-Holmes and Moss examine are only advanced articulations of a cultural project that children have been swimming in from birth. For example, whether from anxiety or privilege a child in nursery might seek an adult's 'ruling' as soon as different sets of needs come into conflict (singularity). Another may be preoccupied surreptitiously (or otherwise) with gathering and hoarding all the pieces of a wooden train track – quietly (or otherwise) deconstructing the work of others around her, troubled by collaborative enterprise (accumulation). A third may become worried or angry if someone else's building of a sandcastle does not exactly follow the prescriptions of the castles he has seen in picture books (perfectionism). Such episodic observations intersect with a small body of literature (e.g. Cederborg, 2021; Cobb-Moore et al., 2009; Danby, 2005; Kyratzis et al., 2001; Singer and Hännikäinen, 2002) which ably shows, for example, how 'young children, just like older children, can build up and maintain asymmetrical [power] relations during play by jointly co-constructing status positions through their use of language, body space and objects' (Cederborg, 2021: 612).

Crucially, a still smaller number of writers have attended to the ways in which young children may – outside narrowly developmentalist interpretations of individuation (Mahler, 2018) – *subvert* habitual power relations autonomously and productively (Alanen and Mayall, 2001; White, 2015). Again, practitioners have informally shared many such stories with us – for example, of children enjoying anti-authoritarianism and poly-vocality during delighted, carnivalesque (Bakhtin, 1984) dislodgings of traditional songs and nursery rhymes, which might see daddies instead of babies going 'wah wah wah' in the 'Wheels On The Bus'; or in the generous, quasi-ritualistic circulation of objects of power (a toy or tool endowed by the collective with special significance and authority within an act of play). Jones and Okun (2001) signal such decolonial potentialities ('antidotes') in counterpoint to each of the characteristics (listed above). For example, to challenge singularity (the tacit or explicit affirmation of 'one right way'), people and organisations can routinely acknowledge uncertainty, provisionality and gaps in their knowledge. To challenge the pre-extractive reifications of meaning in the supremacy of the written word (particularly pertinent in ELC cultures which misguidedly elevate literacy as a focus of their work; Suggate et al., 2013) people can (and children do) emphasise the depth, dynamics and power of oral and other forms of indigenous communication.

Little, though, has been written about how these broad power plays and foregoings specifically enable or problematise racialisation among young children. As we have indicated, the academic focus to date remains fixed on how power unfolds within and around race as an 'established reality' (Bigler and Liben, 2007; Kivel, 2017). Besides the expected critique in conservative discourse ('too woke', 'not all white people'), thus far there has been little scrutiny of Jones and Okun's terms within the academic scholarship. We question whether Jones and Okun's use of the word 'characteristics', understood as a *singularly identifiable* feature or quality, is indeed the most appropriate term, especially in light of the research on affective 'habits' of whiteness (Ahmed, 2007; hooks, 2013; Pedwell, 2021; Sullivan, 2006). Perhaps reconfiguring these characteristics as habits, understood as tendencies or practices performed consciously and unconsciously, privately and collectively, might better capture the ways in which is colonial norms are reproduced in less visible ways. One step further might be to playfully frame them as 'habit-us', to signal both the *dialogical* and *environmental* interplays within which these dispositions occur as well as Bourdieu's (1977: 86).original concept of habitus, which he describes as 'a subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class'. A complete analysis of Bourdieu's theory is outside the scope of this paper. Still, it is worth acknowledging his claims in another text (Bourdieu, 2000) that affectivity was a form through which he believed children encountered social and cultural (and in

this case, colonial) norms. Bringing habit-us together with habit and affect offers a onto-epistemological framework to scaffold our understandings thus far.

To be clear, then, Jones and Okun (2001) provoke us to productively reconsider children's play in three distinct ways. First, to look beyond power plays and anticipate colonialism as potentially *ever-present* in children's everyday imaginaries, choices, beliefs and experiences (not limited to singular incidents or individuals). Second, to view play as 'of a piece' with wider environmental endowments – inviting us to think refractively, for example, about the relationship between children's play and adult modelling (while not discounting children's potential for autonomy). And third, overarching these, to consider play within a broader but unified framework of more-than-racial 'affects' and decolonial anti-dotes, within which we – and other adults and children – might glimpse systemic influences and by extension collective opportunities to disrupt racialisation both within and beyond the nursery. This attentiveness to affect offers a useful shift in knowing towards inequality as *felt*. A focus on affect within research inquiry unsettles any fixed conception of identity as anterior to experience itself (Manning, 2012; Zembylas, 2015). It further enables a line of flight away from a purely negative critique of coloniality, towards a framework in which we might grasp capacities for resistance against these habits. Unfettered play may offer both a window into, a working out of and a working out from the colonialities surrounding early childhood. By emphasising its free-flow nature, resisting its subordination into a plethora of classificatory play 'types', and being clear (at least anthropologically) that rules and adults have a limited role in children's play, we can begin to conceive its potential for disrupting inherited norms and values as well as reproducing them. Not all play spaces, however, are equal in this regard. Play, as Delgado-Fuentes (2021) signals, is fundamentally a *problem* for advanced civilisations. At first, as Puritanism did to playhouses and fascism to art, they shut it down. Then they appropriate. We may see such a pattern replicated in the late-twentieth century elision of play (Gray, 2011) and subsequent re-establishment of 'play-based learning', which arguably attempts to predefine, dose and control play, such that it is questionable to what extent real play (qualified as 'free play') is possible.

Froebelian affordances: Surfacing coloniality

At face value, Froebelian pedagogies – and explicitly Froebelian environments – offer unique territory in which to observe children's entanglement with colonialism and proto-racialisation. We will expand on four main reasons for this briefly below. First, historical association: Froebel himself situated his educational reforms in clear (and ultimately punished) opposition to Prussian imperialism, and his appeal to practitioners today is frequently motivated by their personal concerns for children's rights and wider social justice issues (Bruce et al., 2019; The University of Edinburgh, 2022). Second, his pedagogical emphasis: Froebel's pronounced commitment to 'free play' is unmatched in other (European) educational traditions, potentially allowing us (where contemporary practice is coherent with the theory) cleaner insight into children's priorities, imaginaries and relationships – relatively uncoupled from the adult imperatives and directives which persist in many more mainstream settings. Third, his unitarian premise: Froebel demands practices which support and are highly observant of the human, post-human, political and ecological entanglements of children's lives. This holds theoretical sympathy and research affordances with Jones and Okun's understanding of whiteness/colonialism and its potential antidotes as weaving through *everything*. Finally, the current policymaking environment: Froebelian pedagogies (and their proponents) have experienced something of a renaissance in the UK, both explicitly (among 'Froebelians') and indirectly (through assimilation into both statutory and non-statutory standards and guidelines, e.g. Scottish Government, 2020).

As such, Froebelian-influenced settings have a marked potential to influence – for good or ill – more affective approaches to anti-racism in early childhood. How these four considerations stack up in practice remains to be seen and considered – something we intend to explore, informed by Jones and Okun (2001), within explicitly Froebelian kindergartens in the UK. For now, let us briefly unpack and contextualise these four claims about potential Froebelian affordances for surfacing colonialism among young children.

Of his time, Froebel uses masculine terminology in a universalist sense, but his practice and writing demonstrate a strong commitment to gender equality. In our quotations we mix a retention of the original pronouns with occasional substitutions to convey this.

Froebel's anti-imperialism

Following his study with Pestalozzi, Froebel positioned his educational philosophy both explicitly and implicitly in opposition to Prussian imperialism and European mechanisation. He took on the role of activist, writing to newspapers and infiltrating the aristocracy to repeatedly question the coloniality of State education:

> If I had announced that I would educate [children] specifically to be servants, shoemakers or tailors. . . then I should certainly have won praise. . . I should have become a State-machine; I should have been busy cutting out and shaping other machines. But I wanted to educate them to be free, to think, to take action for themselves.
> (Froebel, 1826 cited in Lilley, 1967: 41).

Froebel viewed both industrialisation at large and the Prussian project specifically as usurping of human diversity and creativity, particularly in its subordination of women and children. He advocated German unification, not as nationalism, but as localism – a stepping-stone to broader freedoms and community, not only between small(er) nation states but between humankind and the wider (natural) world (Lilley, 1967: 20–21). While Froebel was an avowed naturalist he was more broadly ecologically-minded, and it is not improbable to imagine that he would have extended his brand of unitarianism in sympathy with post-materialist and post-humanist perspectives had he been writing today. 'Free and joyful activity', he wrote, 'flows from the vision of the whole world as a unity; all life and activity are one'. (Lilley, 1967: 36). In founding the kindergartens, he took significant political (not to mention financial) risk, and it is difficult not to conclude that his death in 1851 directly resulted from the State's eventual ban on them just 1 year earlier.

'Free play'

Froebel's resistance throughout his writing to the monopolisation and reification of space, religion, economy, Education, knowledge and citizenship led him to figure play, over and above Pestalozzian empiricism, as not only the foremost site of learning but as fundamentally resistant to prescribed identities. Froebel believed it was in play that children give the most explicit outer expression to their emergent inner realities alongside assemblages with/in the wider and natural world.

> At this stage play is never trivial; it is serious and deeply significant. . . for in his [sic] choice of free play a child reveals the future life of his mind to anyone who has insight into human nature.
> Froebel (circa 1830, in Lilley, 1967: 84)

Bruce et al. (2017: 13) elucidates:

> In play there is no necessity to conform or bow to the pressures of external rules, outcomes, target or adult-led ideas. Rules in play, can be broken, created, changed and challenged. This enables children to face life, deal with and face situations, work out alternatives, change how things are done and cope with their future.

Play, then, in the Froebelian sense, is not 'innocent'. It is a space where realities are born, ideas contested, risks taken, mistakes made and identities tested. Radically, even for today, Froebel advocated that the adult's primary role is to protect the space for play to occur with as little *adult-eration* as possible, writing that 'education must be permissive and following, guarding and protecting only; it should neither direct nor determine nor interfere' (Froebel, in Lilley, 1967: 51). This was not extolled to support a laissez-faire approach, but rather to enable observant practitioners to come alongside and support children – in shared enquiry and wonder – to fully express themselves; the better to know themselves in all their relationships, both human and non-human and ask their own new questions about their own new realities. In this way, Froebelian pedagogies, faithfully interpreted, aim to foster environments in which the entirety of children's entanglements in the world can surface, be explored and brought into relationship. On this, Froebel is not puritanically reductive, or (in the context of our interest in racial equality) performative. He wants children and adults to go deeper:

> The child who gives the appearance of being good is often not intrinsically good, that is, does not want what is good of his own choice or out of love or respect for it. [Conversely] the child who seems rude of self-willed is often involved in an intense struggle to realise the good by his own effort. (Lilley, 1967)

By implication, this demands that practitioners interested in children's entanglements with coloniality not rush to locate the bad, or the good, on superficial terms.

Unity in diversity

As mentioned above, play affords children, and adults, ways to suspend and complicate so-called 'reality' as well as to produce it. Children in Froebelian communities are, theoretically at least, able to show up fully, in all their incompleteness or becoming, free of anxiety about standardised learning and testing.

> [All people] perfectly represent the essential character of God and humanity – which is inherent in them. . . *if* each one in childhood develops as individually and personally as possible.
> (Lilley, 1967: 59, our emphasis)

Froebel's individual here is not that of contemporary individualism and atomic citizenship, inviolable and supreme, nor does he seek out a world or divine order without rupture, change and complexity. Rather, by the affordance of genuine freedom in her play, the child reflects and shapes the emergence of the whole ecosystem of which they are a part and is, in turn, shaped by it. He elaborates:

> The form of a person's life should not be regarded as an [unchanging] fact but as a constant and progressive process of becoming, a continuous advance towards an infinite goal. . ."
> (Lilley, 1967: 57)

'Free and joyful activity [in childhood] flows from the vision of the whole world as a unity; all life and activity are one. . . [We] should recognise Nature in her multiplicity of form and shape, and also. . . come to a realisation of her unity. So in his own development [the child] follows the course of Nature and imitates her modes of creation in his games'.
(Lilley, 1967: 37–38).

Such epistemological rupturing - such as Deleuze describes in his critique of *Alice in Wonderland* (Deleuze, 1990) – allows that free play surfaces a continuous plurality of differences, commonalities and transmutations everywhere. As Derman-Sparks et al. (2011) argues in *What If All the Kids Are White?*, this realisation must be a cornerstone strategy of anti-racist practice in childhood. If anything defines Froebel's writing it is his obsession with the idea of unity in diversity (or diversity in unity) and conversely his resistance to the violent assimilation of self into citizen, of culture into State, of nature into economy.

Following his children, Froebel observed that diversity found its fullest expression as they played and made relationships in (and mirroring) the *open-endedness* of the natural world. For Froebelian practitioners, then, there is an imperative to create similar conditions for difference to thrive – rather than be subsumed or tokenised to meet the ends of preconceived curricula or inclusion strategies. As we have seen, this is not about extolling a naïve harmony or multiculturalism but rather enabling dialogism and stimulating learning.

A changing policy landscape

The new national practice guidelines for early years in Scotland, *Realising the Ambition* (Scottish Government, 2020), were written by trained Froebelians, explicitly foreground Froebel and lean heavily throughout on his vision of holistic, self-directed learning, play and the role of the adult as *enabler* rather than teacher. This supports and also fuels a burgeoning community of Froebelian practice in Scotland, where teachers have, indeed, been removed from settings (partly in support of this agenda and partly to save money) and thousands of ELC practitioners nationwide have trained in Froebelian practice, many directly supported by Local Authorities. In England, the Froebelian resurgence, while not formally recognised or incorporated into guidance, operates strongly below the radar of current Westminster policy, with The Froebel Trust, Centre for Research in Early Childhood and Roehampton Institute among others facilitating a number of policy, advocacy and training interventions. Froebelians also strongly influenced the authorship and advocacy of *Birth To Five Matters* (Early Years Coalition, 2021).

While Froebelian practice and principles languished in the 80s and 90s, they can no longer be ascribed to an outlier movement. They have reached tipping point in Scotland and become once again influential in England – despite, or perhaps, in spite, of the political tensions outlined in our corresponding article on policy affordances and tensions for anti-racist practice in ELC (Tembo and Bateson, 2024b). The movement is driven by evidence about *what works* in ELC to build relationships with families and support children to learn and by explicit commitments to children's rights. In that frame, the opportunity and obligation to make stronger connections between Froebelian principles and contemporary social justice issues, including anti-racism, is keenly felt.

Criticisms of Froebel's philosophy

The principal criticism levelled at Froebel cites his early didacticism, the narrow and conscriptive 'Gifts' or play experiences through which he felt children would come to a natural realisation of unity and difference (and thereby a universe of learning). It is widely recognised, however, that

over the course of his work he relaxed these founding principles in favour of greater trust in children's own aptitude to uncover these realities in their own ways, given proper freedom with support. His lasting aim was 'to provide an environment where children felt secure enough to match their inner life with the demands of the outside world, where opportunities existed. . . to experiment through their play in areas not yet known, but vaguely surmised' (Liebschner, 2001: 15). While Froebel is rarely named in them, general critiques of child-centred pedagogies from feminist and post-structural standpoints offer valuable checks and balances to the depoliticisation of childhood (Langford, 2010). Indeed, while Froebel, as we have argued, does not sanction it – the Froebelian movement remains not entirely immune to charges of laissez-faires, colour or difference-neutralising idealisations of children, just as much as mainstream ELC persists in tokenistic multiculturalism. Taken out of context, individual passages of Froebel's work risk propping this up. We therefore see a clear opportunity as anti-racist researchers to come alongside Froebelian practitioners and uncover (as well as provoke) stronger and perhaps even exemplary connections between Froebelian theory and practice. It is this that our research within Froebelian settings will now move towards.

Conclusion

This article has sought to scope and evaluate the wider academic literature pertaining to race, coloniality and early childhood in a UK context – building on our literature review into the policy context in Scotland and England (Tembo and Bateson, 2024b). In offering such a review, we have sought to situate the field in which we find ourselves as researchers and lay the foundations for further inquiry around young children's de/colonial habits to better understand the affective experiences that pre-figure, underpin and contribute to racialisation and racism. However, we acknowledge the risks of such an approach. Pedwell (2021) reminds us that the mobilisation of habit in more generative ways could easily succumb to instrumentalism and uphold forms of control and discipline. Jones and Okun (2001) themselves make clear the need to avoid weaponising their writing. In response, we maintain our ethics of response-ability in seeking to unsettle the ways that racial discrimination is prefigured in societal norms and habits. This approach also informs our desire to situate the habits as guiding heuristics – techniques that steer us but do not strictly define an outcome. Ultimately, entangled with the affordances offered through a Froebelian context, we sense an opportunity to offer new ways of supporting children to create and experience decolonial modes of knowing that refuse the often essentialising logics of racial identity.

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