

## Counter-Storytelling: A Form of Resistance and a Tool to Reimagine More Inclusive Early Childhood Education Spaces

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### Abstract

In this essay, I reflect on my lived experiences as a girl child growing up in my home country of Botswana, and also as a mother in a foreign country, Canada. I am experimenting with my personal essay and making connections with academic articles that will help me understand my behaviors, attitudes, and responses to challenging situations that seemed unfair and unjust. I believe sharing my experiences not only gives me a platform to reflect, but also renders an opportunity to unearth hidden ideologies that perpetuate dominant discourses that continue to undesirably affect early childhood education. Sharing the unfortunate events for me brings healing and comfort. My essay is guided by critical race theory that provokes and challenges the normalized practices in education that continue to marginalize the minority community. Also, my inspiration for this piece was drawn from Wallace and Lewis's (2020) book, which described humans as narrative creatures who need stories/narratives to make sense of the world around them. The essay unpacks and discusses four critical questions, at the same time, offering acts of resistance and refusal by applying counter-storytelling methodology.

*Keywords:* counter-storytelling, critical race theory, lived experiences, racialized minorities, early childhood education, acts of resistance and refusal



## **Counter-Storytelling: A Form of Resistance and Tool to Reimagine More Inclusive Early Childhood Education Spaces**

One evening in 2008, I had dinner with a friend and her family and friends in London, United Kingdom. It was an informal gathering as children were present. I was the only Black person within the crowd and I felt out of place and uncomfortable most of the evening. The evening got worse when one of the children genuinely asked me if I had AIDS. Before I could answer, she asked another question, if I were sleeping with lions and elephants in my home country of Botswana. The child was 5 years old. Instead of being shocked or surprised by her inquisitive mind, I felt sad and instantly blamed her parents and early childhood education (ECE) centre for her mis-education. I never got the chance to answer her questions because she was quickly dragged to her room and I never saw her again. Indeed, it was a missed opportunity for learning and unlearning for the girl and the rest of the dinner guests, too.

A decade later, I was working part-time as a support worker in Regina. My main role was to support young adults with intellectual and physical disabilities. One day, a 20-year-old girl asked me if I had enough food and clothes at home because media always present Black people as poor and sick. I was taken back to that child in the UK. It broke my heart that 10 years later, I was still hearing the same story. This time I was not sure whom to blame. Should I still continue blaming the parents? Or media? The girl? The support work program? It took me a while to realize that blaming people for their different perspectives posited a delimited approach to dealing with complex and systemic situations. Ultimately, listening to people's different perspectives about Black people made me extremely frustrated, and I began to avoid engaging in conversations about race and/or ethnicity. However, Wong et al. (2022) indicated that ignoring racist behaviors "may not only be harmful for students' wellbeing, but may also mean that implicit forms of racism remain unchallenged or even dismissed" (p. 657).

The two examples of an inquisitive toddler and young lady illustrate the manifestation of *majoritarian* stories. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) described majoritarian stories as stories that generate from a legacy of racial privilege. They are stories that "privilege whites, men, the middle and/or upper class, and heterosexuals by naming these social locations as natural or normative points of reference" (p. 28). Any ideology outside the normative falls in the category of abnormal, invisible, or unrecognizable. Because of the stories shared on media, in educational materials, and from a Eurocentric worldview that dominates Western society, stories about minority people are shared through a deficit-based lens.

### **Counter-Storytelling**

Delgado (1989) argued that a form of resistance to majoritarian stories is counter-storytelling. He further suggested that stories shared by minority communities aim to subvert the reality constructed by the dominant group. Also, sharing stories about oppression and victimization can lead to healing, liberation, and improved mental health because "oppressed groups have known instinctively that stories are an essential tool to their own survival and liberation" (p. 2436). Likewise, Liu (2015) advocated for acts of sharing individuals' experiences, most importantly reflecting on their actions because by so doing, individuals have an opportunity to step back and evaluate the situation that can inform new action and knowledge. Similarly, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) advocated for naming one's reality by using various platforms such as parables, poetry, fiction as well as revisionist histories "to illustrate the false necessity and irony of much of current civil rights doctrine" (p. 57). In a similar vein, this personal essay reflects my reality as a

Black woman, mother, immigrant, graduate student, and educational researcher. I was inspired to share my experiences after reading Wallace and Lewis's (2020) book, *Trauma Informed Teaching Through Play Art Narrative (PAN)*, which described humans as narrative creatures who need stories/narratives to make sense of the world around them. Wallace and Lewis challenged individuals to ask themselves four critical questions: Where do I come from? Where am I going? Why am I here? and Who am I? Using these questions as a structuring framework, I add to them a perspective that takes into account the generativity of counter-storytelling and critical race theory (CRT) (Fairbanks, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 2003).

The aim of this essay is to unpack these four questions using a critical lens and at the same time reflect on my lived experiences both in my home country, Botswana, and my new home, Canada. I am adopting the framework of counter-storytelling, a significant praxis of CRT. I chose CRT because of its mandate to highlight how race and racism manifest themselves in the education pipeline (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Also, CRT promotes recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of colour as strength rather than weakness. By sharing their experiences, people of colour can reclaim the power to challenge the status quo and teach about racial subordination (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Further, by using CRT through counter-storytelling, I aim to center the lived experiences of marginalized people as a way of exposing and questioning the racial hierarchies that exist in the society.

My positionality as a Black person living in a space where monovocal (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) stories dominate the society has a great potential for creating detached and lonely relationships between Black people and non-Black people. Therefore, my counter-storytelling aims to foster community building among the minority community as a way of providing venues that could remind them, they are not alone. Similarly, Delgado (1989) posited that stories build community and consensus, a common culture of shared understandings, and deeper, more vital ethics. Also, counter-stories have the potential of offering alternate perspectives about reality, and ultimately giving people opportunities to explore a different life than the one that has been constructed for them. Delgado (1989) suggested that sharing our stories “enrich imagination and teach that by combining elements from the story and current reality, we may construct a new world richer than either alone” (p. 2414). My stories might not have any impact on the current status as far as discrimination and subordination of marginalized people are concerned. However, sharing my stories may act as a commitment to reimagine and work towards creating spaces in which every child, regardless of their skin colour or ethnicity, can enjoy their childhood experiences without feeling uncomfortable and unwelcomed. I am not talking about solving the racism and discrimination crisis in Canada. I am referring to understanding how racial subordination manifests in the education spaces and how to reconceptualize it in a way that can transform my ways of building relationships and having difficult conversations with people who are committed to social justice.

### **Where do I Come From?**

Growing up in Botswana as an extrovert had its peaks and downfalls. But mostly I remember getting into trouble because of my inquisitive character. Whenever I encountered a complex situation, I would immediately request an explanation. Reflecting on my childhood years, I was taught that asking for an explanation from an adult was considered an act of insolent and arrogance. The cultural ideology of limiting children's ways of knowing fueled the existence of power hierarchy between parents and children. For instance, keeping eye contact with adults when having a conversation was prohibited. Unfortunately, this mindset of continuously reminding children that

they were minor and unimportant weaved into education settings. My elementary school teachers were not fond of my appetite to know more. I remember one morning in Grade 5 when I was 10 years old, my teacher asked a question and before raising my hand, she called out my name, and told me to be quiet until the end of class. Ever since that day, I started to learn silence. At the same time, an *imposter syndrome* manifested and introduced a deficit mindset that I carried into my interactions at a later stage of my studies. Bothello and Roulet (2019) explained an imposter syndrome as a growing sense of anxiety and self-doubt that exist when questioning one's legitimacy of their position, in this case, my position as a student within the education system. The school became terrible; I lost interest in taking part in-class activities, and I was suffocating because my teacher was irritated by my ways of knowing and learning. According to her, I was making too much noise by asking many questions. Two years later, I went to high school and things got much better; my teachers encouraged active participation and school became fun again.

This experience is an example of how an education setting—one elementary school, one classroom, one teacher—had a significant impact on my personality, confidence, self-esteem, and my interactions with teachers and other students. Applying this example in the current context, my concern remains on the Canadian education system that is embedded with dominant discourses that continue to marginalize students from diverse cultural background (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Nxumalo, 2021). I still wonder, how far can the education system stretch to accommodate the unique and complex identities of immigrant children to help them feel comfortable and have a sense of belonging? How is the education system dealing with the mismatch of cultures between White teachers' beliefs and experiences and their diverse students from various ethnic backgrounds? These are some of the questions that remain unanswered and act as learning opportunities throughout my academic journey.

### **Where am I Going?**

My youngest son who is 4 years old is the friendliest person I have ever met. All my other children were very shy and not that sociable at his age—he is the exception. Wherever we go, at the stores, playground, daycare, and doctor's office, he always says "hello" to everyone we pass by. However, during these encounters with different people, I have observed that some people felt uncomfortable when my son greeted them, some would respond with a hello and a smile, while others would look at him unresponsive, and would give me a bizarre look. At the playground, when my son excitedly moves towards White children to play with them, their parents would quickly, but quietly, pull their children away. When this happens, my son gives me a confused and sad face, and I respond with a hug and smile. When we get home, we will have a chat about the event at the playground or the women at the store who ignored him. Personally, explaining to a 4-year-old child about racism is one of the most painful experience a mother could ever encounter. After reading Sullivan et al.'s (2021) study, I better understand why some adults felt uncomfortable letting their children play with my children at the park. Sullivan and colleagues (2021) stated that too often White parents are hesitant to talk about race. Most of the time when a child brings race into the conversation, even without harmful intent, such as "Diana's skin is not the same as mine, why is it dark?" many adults disapprove and respond "It's not polite to say things like that," or they would adopt a colour-blind approach, "skin colour doesn't matter," and emphasize the commonalities between humans "because we are all the same inside." These approaches have shown to be detrimental to race relations for both adults and children because children consequently learn to avoid talking about race themselves (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020). However, when adults teach children to talk about race and ethnicity constructively, they develop empathy for others, learn

about new perspectives, understand their own identity, avoid engaging in practices that reproduce structural inequalities, and even exhibit less racial bias (Sullivan et al., 2021).

Nonetheless, I believe White parents are often reluctant to talk to their children about race because their children benefit from the effects of Whiteness. Parents of colour may talk with their children about race more frequently and in more depth because they are significantly affected by the White supremacy system. As a mother, I have to constantly remind my daughter of her strengths and abilities on daily basis because as the only Black girl in class, her difference is magnified every time she walks into the classroom. By constantly talking about her abilities I hope somehow to allow my daughter to see herself in a positive lens, a mechanism of counter-storytelling. Additionally, I have taught my sons to reach out to their teachers whenever they needed help with course content. Because I have read, experienced, and learned that the education system marginalizes non-White Canadian students. I have created a strong foundation for open communication in my family so that any single incident of unfair treatment at school, playground, or wherever, my children will be able to discuss it with us and assess whether it's a race issue or a playful moment. Also, at times my conversations with my children tend to be thought-provoking. For instance, when my fourth-grade daughter shares an incident at school about other children exchanging hurtful words with each other, I ask her what would she do if she was in that situation. Listening to her perspective in this kind of complex situation helps me to understand her problem-solving skills, and, ultimately, I will find ways of enhancing her knowledge by sharing my childhood experiences that depict the same kind of situation.

### **Why am I Here?**

As a mother, I have to find ways to teach my children about the social injustice that exists in our daily interactions. Since the teaching and learning resources in their schools and public libraries lack diversity, I have to improvise and find strategies that help my children to see themselves in picture books with brown skin, afro hair, native language, and cultural clothes. One of the practices that foster representation in my family is visiting the public library and searching for books that represent diverse cultures. Based on the *Star's* second annual diversity survey conducted in 2019, about 419 books with a Canadian author or illustrator were published in Canada, featuring 525 main characters (Dundas, 2020). Of those books, 37.5 per cent featured main characters who were White, while 29.3 per cent had main characters who were Black, Indigenous, East Asian or South Asian. About 11.5 per cent of main characters in picture books were Black (Dundas, 2020). Because of our frequent visits to the library, my children and I have built positive relationships with the librarians and they are always willing to help us find good books that my children can feel proud and confident about themselves.

In addition to supporting my children's education in a Canadian context, I created a picture book with them as my final project for one of my graduate courses, *Critical Perspectives in Preschool Education*. After realizing that the majority of books in libraries and schools represented either White children or animals, I asked my children to create a story about themselves using their best qualities. As indicated by Ladson-Billings (1998), naming one's own reality with stories can affect the oppressor. By using their voices, marginalized people can share their experiences and realities which is a "first step in understanding the complexities of racism and beginning a process of judicial redress" (p. 14). The task started casually but then I realized how my daily praises and encouragement impacted my children's confidence and self-image. I was pleased to witness the results of disrupting stereotypes about Black people. The list was endless, we are strong, beautiful, resilient, friendly, respectful, unique, generous, courageous, happy, and

so forth. This was an emotional project because even though my children viewed themselves in a positive lens, the education system had its stereotypes and had already labeled them as troublesome, irresponsible, and other negative labels associated with students from the minority community (Bernstein, 2017; Eddo-Lodge, 2020). Therefore, to challenge the stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination embedded in the education curriculum, we created our story by using our native language, *Tswana*, and my children's strengths and abilities to represent positive perspectives about children of colour. This task was much better than explaining daily acts of racism faced by my family at school and in the community.

In a similar vein, Kim and Hachey (2021) conducted a study in South Korea to examine how preschool-aged children negotiated, represented, and (re)created their voices through engaging in counter-storytelling about fairy tales. In the study, the children were given opportunities to playfully manipulate the original story using their creativity and imagination, at the same time exploring unheard voices and multiple viewpoints. The children played with themes and messages embedded in the fairy tales and recreated the stories using their own voices through drawing. For instance, when the children and teacher explored a *Cinderella* Disney storybook, children offered alternative endings of *Cinderella* in a critical and creative way. The children deconstructed the ending of the story and shared that Cinderella could have overcome her hardship through acquiring good education, studying a Korean language, learning how to ride a horse or making a robot so that she could become famous and rich. This example indicates the power that young children have to challenge the status quo and magnifies the discrimination that is interwoven in the teaching and learning materials. Also, counter-storytelling activities “offer a rich context in which young children practice deconstructing the dominant discourses, learn to tell their own stories and learn to listen to the stories of others” (Kim & Hachey, 2021 p. 644).

As an educational researcher, I am always appreciative of learning ways of incorporating counter-storytelling in early childhood education. I am here to learn alternative ways of making meaning, in particular, challenging the normalized ways of understanding the world around us. I am also here to appreciate the work that early childhood teachers engage in with young children on daily basis, doing their best to foster creativity and imaginative skills at the same time as dealing with the pressures of producing evidence-based results for their school administration. I concur with Lewis and Hildebrandt's (2019) notion that stories and storytelling are central to human experience and understanding. They further alluded that narrative understanding is an innate human capacity; we think, live, and dream in story form, making it one of the principal forms of human meaning-making.

### **Who am I?**

I am an immigrant from Botswana, a peaceful country located in the Southern part of Africa. Before migrating to Canada, I had worked as an early childhood educator for 2 years. However, my career ended earlier than expected because I refused to become a bystander and wanted to stand up to a system that was not achieving its mandated goals and mission. In other words, my theoretical perspective of early childhood education (ECE) was disconnected from the practices that were implemented in ECE settings. ECE programs in Botswana remain highly exclusive and are driven by the supply-demand approach. The government only provides an enabling environment and the expectation is that once the environment has been created, both access and quality of preprimary education will improve (Maundeni, 2013). Because the government has no accountability in the operations of these programs, the private and civil society sectors are the ones leading the programs and they are concerned about generating profit. Consequently, the high fees

charged to access the ECE programs make them exclusive and children from low socio-economic background are often denied opportunities to benefit from the programs. Due to the concerns of ECE programs, I was motivated to leave my job and enrolled in my master's program at the University of Botswana so that I could empower myself and resist the complacency of being a bystander.

Throughout my graduate studies, my research interest was always rooted on the well-being of young children. I am currently a graduate student at the University of Regina pursuing my doctoral studies in early childhood education. My lived experiences in a Botswana early childhood education context have built a strong foundation and desire to learn alternate ways of engaging with complex issues that affect children's well-being. I am an educational researcher who enjoys working with early childhood teachers and building relationships with them to understand their ways of teaching and being. As a way of familiarizing myself with the education setting, I have decided to become an active committee member in my children's schools and usually engage in fundraising events, field trips, and school activities. In a way, spending time in school settings boosts my confidence as a doctoral student who will be soon co-researching with young children and their teachers.

My doctoral research aims to examine ways that immigrant children construct their identities in early childhood education settings in schools within the context of widespread anti-Black racism. My proposed study will engage children in Pre-K to Grade 4, their families, and their teachers. The study was motivated by the experiences my children encounter at schools and other immigrant families whom I have been in communication. Further, it has been estimated that by 2041, in Regina, the proportion of persons from racialized groups is projected to increase from 18% to 41% (Statistics Canada, 2022). However, at least two major concerns remain. First, the teaching workforce is predominantly comprised of White, middle-class women. Because immigrant families bring their culture to a new place, the mismatch of cultural values and beliefs existing between home and school has a great potential of negatively impacting children's identity development (Diallo, 2021; Sturdivant & Alanis, 2021). Second, ECE curriculum is embedded with a Eurocentric worldview (Dow, 2019; Gillborn, 2006) that continues to create cultural, experiential, and linguistic discontinuities for students and educators from diverse backgrounds.

CRT will guide the proposed study to understand the social situations of Black immigrant children, and question the racial hierarchies in schooling and aiming to transform schooling for the better (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Schools are likely immigrant families' first contact with formal institutions in Canada, but Saskatchewan schools may be unprepared to create culturally safe and inclusive spaces for them (Massing et al., in-press). Therefore, magnifying the conditions of Black children's experiences in school has great potential to question and destabilize the normalized practices of ECE with the goal of transforming education so as to foster positive identity development for Black immigrant children and their families. It is hoped that my proposed study will generate recommendations for key stakeholders in the education sector to improve the conditions of schooling for Black immigrant children and their families.

Further, the proposed study intends to center immigrant children's voices and experiences. I will adopt Milner and Howard's (2013) scholarship of using counter-storytelling or counter narratives as a research method. They tend to use two-fold counter-narratives: first, for conveying the voices of those underrepresented in research, and second, magnifying these voices as analytical devices to identify and critique majoritarian narratives, especially those that target people of colour. I intend to provide the children in my study ample opportunities to share their

stories and to engage in counter-storytelling. I believe and have witnessed the power that children hold to challenge the normalized practices if given space to explore their creativity and imaginative abilities. As Kim and Hachey (2021) advocated for, “Counter-storytelling, as a critical literacy practice, can offer early childhood teachers a rich context for early instruction by positioning preschoolers as capable critical literacy thinkers, powerful storytellers, and multimodal meaning-makers” (p. 644).

### **Conclusion**

In small and incremental ways, I believe marginalized people can reclaim the power of dismantling stereotypes and majoritarian stories associated with their existence. By applying counter-storytelling mechanisms in the learning spaces, encouraging young children to challenge the normalized ways of learning, and creating safe spaces that can allow different perspectives from diverse students, I can envision an inclusive early childhood education. The reimagination of the inclusive ECE spaces include the paradigm shift of resisting the norms of traditional teaching that involves teacher-oriented activities, pen-paper learning, and high expectations from the school administration in allowing children to be powerful storytellers and to create their own picture books that can be used to teach in early childhood education classrooms. My journey as a Black mother, an immigrant, graduate student, and educational researcher will continue to nurture my collegial relationships with people who are willing to put extra effort to create spaces that can afford social justice to young children who are continuously marginalized by the society.



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