

Building an anti-racist child-care system in Canada ^[1]

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In 2021, a Montreal daycare flagged a three-year-old Black child for “troubling behaviour,” deciding to call Quebec’s youth protection services before having a meeting with the child’s parents. The parents – both of whom had previously received only positive feedback about their son from daycare staff – were shocked. One parent noted: “Once you’re reported, the powers the department of youth protection have are extremely scary. They have the right to come in and take your children based on any report.”

Following months of uncertainty and distress, a social worker deemed the concerns to be unfounded and the case was closed. But that hasn’t erased the pain or stress for the parents of being flagged in the first place. With their son being the only visibly Black child in his daycare group, the couple also began to question whether they were judged differently.

In fact, research shows Black families are overrepresented in youth protection in Quebec and beyond. The rate is particularly high for the province’s English-speaking Black population, which is about five times more likely to be reported than white children, according to a 2020 study by McGill University assistant professor Alicia Boatswain-Kyte.

Systemic racism remains a problem across Canadian child-care settings in ways that impact both racialized children and racialized child-care workers. As the provinces and territories work with the federal government to build \$10-per-day child-care systems, we need to ensure that these systems are equitable and inclusive to racialized children and their families.

We can build towards an anti-racist child-care system using a three-pronged approach that involves developing accessible anti-racism training for child-care workers; implementing a flexible mode of child-care delivery that is accessible to racialized families; and developing a workforce strategy that will ensure a well-trained and stable workforce is able to provide racialized children with consistent and high-quality care.

Anti-racism training

Currently, the bilateral agreements negotiated between the federal government and the provinces and territories to establish \$10-per-day child care commit to monitoring and reporting on inclusion goals for vulnerable populations. But these agreements do not go far enough in specifying how governments plan to provide child care that is anti-racist in its programming and delivery.

Because racialized children and workers continue to experience discrimination and prejudice in child-care settings, mandatory courses on anti-racism need to be developed for all child-care workers. These courses should be produced in collaboration with racialized communities, using regional meetings, focus groups, home visits and online surveys to better reach community members.

Ongoing anti-racism training also needs to be accessible to all child-care workers, not just new graduates who enrolled in accelerated diploma programs. This training needs to be co-ordinated through the College of Early Childhood Educators, which establishes requirements for continuous professional learning, in collaboration with provincial professional associations, including the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario, which has taken on an advocacy role for children and workers.

Workers should be able to engage in this educational work during paid work hours to ensure training is accessible to everyone. This will require governments to commit additional funds to ensure child-care centres can hire additional workers to relieve regular staff when they participate in paid education time during normal working hours.

Flexible program delivery

Beyond maintaining subsidies for low-income families, an inclusive and anti-racist child-care system needs to be flexible to meet the needs of racialized families who are more likely to be employed in precarious and low-income forms of work.

Parents who do shift work, especially in retail and front-line service jobs, need access to child care outside regular 9-to-5 work hours – in the evenings, on weekends and overnight.

While most provinces and territories have committed to providing flexible care in their \$10-per-day bilateral agreements with the federal government, it will be difficult to guarantee this. That’s because governments do not directly plan for or create child-care spaces. Instead,

the majority of child-care centres are operated by non-profit and for-profit providers, or through unlicensed in-home care providers who may decide not to provide flexible child care for precarious workers, even if there is a demand for it from parents.

In the absence of direct control and as centres struggle with staff shortages and high turnover rates, governments will need to incentivize them to provide flexible programming. This can be achieved in the short term by providing them subsidies for child-care workers who work evenings, overnights and weekends, while making access to federal funding contingent on providing flexible child care.

In the long-term, the federal government should work with the provinces and territories to expand public child care across the country. This will allow more direct control over provisioning to meet the needs of racialized families.

Workforce strategy

Providing anti-racist child care also depends on retaining well-trained professional early childhood educators (ECEs), especially racialized ECEs, who can work with children from vulnerable populations.

The child-care sector is in crisis now because its workers make only slightly more than \$24,000 a year on average while working in conditions that often lead to burnout. With 96 per cent of child-care workers being women, and with racialized and immigrant women filling the most difficult and lowest-paid jobs in this sector, low wages and poor working conditions must be understood as a symptom of systemic sexism and racism in the labour market.

To improve outcomes for these workers so they can improve outcomes for the children in their care, the federal government must work with the provinces and territories to establish reasonable and age-appropriate child-to-staff ratios to reduce burnout. A wage grid should also be instituted across the country that is based on a \$30-per-hour starting wage for ECEs and is subject to increases in areas with high costs of living (for example in Northern communities).

This three-pronged approach must also be supported by commitments to concrete timelines that specify when governments expect to achieve equality in child-care coverage for racialized children. So far, Prince Edward Island is the only province that has established a specific date for when it expects to confirm that marginalized and vulnerable children will have access to spaces that are equal to, or greater than, their share of the overall population.

In the absence of these targeted supports, racialized families will continue to face barriers to accessing child care, irrespective of cost. Their children will also continue to face discrimination in child-care settings, challenging the objective of building a universal child-care system.

Region: Canada ^[3]

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