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Young children as cultural, spiritual and global beings: counter narratives of early childhood literacies in culturally diverse homes in a northern English town.

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Abstract

This paper describes an ethnographic study of home literacy practices of families with children aged under four years in a northern English town. We critically engage with the tendency of dominant approaches to early childhood education in England to work from a Eurocentric, developmental and thus, often, deficit perspective. In response, our research seeks to explicitly recentre the value of culturally diverse home literacies and the ways of knowing that sit within communities and families by asking, *what can we learn about culturally diverse early childhood literacies by starting with everyday life in communities?* Our findings stand as a counter story to the dominant figure of the young (emerging literate) child as individually autonomous, innocent and apolitical. In particular, we identify how home literacy practices produced and affirmed children as cultural, spiritual and global beings, deeply involved in the ongoing-ness of family life and global religious communities. The implications of our findings are that colonial narratives of childhood literacies as bracketed off from politics, religion and inequalities only serve to recentre whiteness of childhood (innocence) as well as erasing the heterogeneity of experiences of early childhood and parenting within communities in England.

Keywords: home literacies, culture, faith, innocence, bilingualism.

Introduction

T tells us the other thing she does a lot when her grandchildren visit is zumba on youtube – she joins in too! They do English and Indian songs. T puts on youtube to show us, and tells the kids to demonstrate, which they resist at first. T puts on ‘waka waka’ which she says is toddler A’s favourite, and A murmurs under her breath ‘waka waka’. A bounces up and down, watching the screen intently. Later, as T fetches some hot drinks, the video changes to One Direction ‘you don’t know you’re beautiful’ and, as the chorus starts, A cannot resist flinging her arms into the air (like the dances on screen) and vigorously bouncing up and down ‘baby, you light up my life like nobody else’. I fling up my arm and bounce too, which makes the girls giggle.

Fieldnotes from a home visit with T and four of her grandchildren

In this paper, we share shimmering moments of joy, hope, care and struggles of everyday family literacies in a multicultural post-industrial town in northern England. Over the last two years, our ethnographic research has built an expansive picture of the repertoire of home literacy practices in which young children participate, whilst engaging critically with the tendency of English early childhood education to work from a Eurocentric, developmental and deficit perspective. Our study explicitly recentres the value of culturally diverse home literacy practices and the ways of knowing that sit within communities and families by asking, *what can we learn about culturally diverse early childhood literacies by starting with everyday life in communities?*

Dominant Eurocentric narratives about a ‘good Home Learning Environment’ and ‘correct’ parenting have important implications for the construction of ‘proper’ humanity and the ways in which early childhood is implicated in this (Kromidas, 2019; Tembo and Bateson, 2025). We draw out these implications by reading our ethnographic observations through Black Atlantic philosophical scholarship, to inform our understandings of ‘the human’ as a colonial construction, and what is at stake when certain modes of childhood are over-represented, whilst others are erased or devalued (Glissant, 1997; Quashie, 2021; Wynter, 2003).

Our findings stand as a counter story to the dominant figure of the young (emerging literate) child as individually autonomous, innocent and apolitical. The implications of our findings are that colonial narratives of childhood and literacies as bracketed-off from politics, religion and inequalities only serve to recentre whiteness of childhood (innocence) as well as erasing the heterogeneity of experiences of early childhood and parenting within communities in England.

Home literacies practices in culturally diverse homes

As scholarship on culturally sustaining approaches to literacies in early childhood demonstrates (Anderson et al, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Nash et al, 2022), equitable pedagogy should understand and start from community needs and capacities (Gutierrez and Rogoff, 2003), take home languages seriously in the classroom (Ehiyazaryan-White, 2024; Yun et al, 2025), and recognise diverse forms of learning and cultural traditions (Msqwashu, 2019; Volk and Acosta, 2001). In England and the US, a “monolingualism as the norm” culture (Viruru, 2001, p.43) frequently operates in classroom spaces (Saavedra and Esquierdo, 2019; Souto-Manning and Martell, 2016), locating bilingual children as lagging behind peers (Rajagopal and Anderson, 2025) and more likely to require remediation (Nair et al, 2023). Studies exploring culturally diverse literacy practices beyond the school / nursery (Boit et al, 2020; Cohen et al, 2023; Heath, 1983) demonstrate the importance of home literacies for nurturing children’s bilingual acquisition (Weldemariam, 2022) and cultural and religious identity (Gregory et al, 2004; Sadiq, 2022), often through diverse multimodal resources (Rajagopal and Anderson, 2025). Extant scholarship finds that the (largely unrecognised by authorities) work families do to support culturally diverse early childhood literacies often serves dual purposes, aiming to support children’s school readiness whilst simultaneously maintaining connections to home cultures and languages (Jacobs and Gomathinayagam, 2025; Rajagopal and Anderson, 2025). Additionally, children of families recently migrated to a new country frequently support family members via brokering and helping navigate a new culture (Gregory, 2001; Sadiq, 2022), skills which are overlooked and undervalued by a dominant early childhood education lens. For example, Rajagopal and Anderson’s (2025) ethnographic study of seven-year-old Anh articulated a

“communicative repertoire [that] supports his shifting fluidly between languages (English, Jrai, and Vietnamese), modes (oral, visual, written, and kinesthetic), contexts (home and school), various people

(his mother, friends, teacher, and Harini), and needs (his own and various others).” (p.9).

Thus, numerous studies have countered the assumption that culturally diverse homes lack ‘proper’ literacies or that parents are disengaged from their children’s learning (Ashraf, 2019; Edwards and Smith, 2023). Our study joins this growing body of work, contributing a focus explicitly on the youngest children (under four years) and the practices that underpin their literate becomings. All the parents involved in our research were deeply invested in and involved in their children’s learning (often as a necessity because important aspects of language, cultural practices and religious literacies would not be covered within school or early years settings) and many expressed a desire for greater participation in school activities.

Culturally sustaining pedagogies, white supremacy and early childhood

In the field of early childhood, the desire for ‘good development’ and a school-ready child (Moss and Roberts-Holmes, 2021) is underpinned by Eurocentric assumptions about personhood. Scholars have traced the Eurocentricity of, for example, autonomous subject positioning (Tisdall, 2022), self-regulation (Diaz Diaz, 2020), executive functions (Miller-Cotto et al, 2022) and language (Nair et al, 2024). Kromidas (2019) draws on the scholarship of Sylvia Wynter to explore the figure of the agential and innocent child, not as a universal but as “a genre-specific formulation of the not-yet-fully human white modal child” (p.65) that serves “as the counterpoint to the [white] adult as independent, autonomous, rational human.” (p.69). The figure of the child achieves this by reinforcing certain aspects of being human whilst erasing or marginalising others, leading Kromidas to call for new thinking around “modes of being human”. Black Atlantic scholarship is central to this rethinking; for example of Sylvia Wynter’s (2003) call for a “poetics of being and becoming human”, emphasises the importance of storytelling to understand the full extent of what it means to be human. Glissant’s (1997) writing on Relation as a rhizomatic, shifting mode of moving through the world, in which we are constantly co-constituted by other people and places, also provides fresh thinking on ‘modes of being human’, emphasising complexity, unknowability and interdependence. Quashie (2021) traces the qualities of Black aliveness, or relational vitality, arguing “worth is a human legacy” (p.108) that transcends the colonial desire to measure and evaluate individuals. In this paper we bring this scholarship into dialogue with stories of everyday family literacies from our research.

Whilst debates around ‘modes of being human’ may seem abstract, real world consequences play out in workplaces and educational settings. Okun and Jones’ body of scholarship identifies a series of characteristics or modalities that are positioned as ‘normal’ within white supremacy, including; one right way, paternalism, perfectionism, fear, either/or thinking, defensiveness, right to comfort, individualism, progress as ‘more’, worship of the written word and urgency (Okun, 2021). Whilst Okun is writing about adult organisational cultures, Tembo and Bateson (2025) have explored how children’s play in early years classrooms potentially reflects the same modalities of white supremacy. Interactions and framings of childhood, play and learning in Children’s centres (Clarke and Watson, 2014), early years classrooms (Louise and Betteridge, 2024) and homes (Rajagopal and Anderson, 2025), can play out in ways that reproduce the notion of whiteness as preferred, privileged and desirable. For example, Braden et al (2022) outline the damage that standardized and uncritical approaches to early literacy and language education can do to minoritized children by overly rewarding stereotypically ‘white’ practices such as

“sitting quietly, not moving around the classroom, following directions without deviation, waiting to speak until spoken to, expressing joy and anger in subdued ways, and individualism”

whilst overlooking or discouraging

“social skills derived from African Diaspora cultural styles: overlapping speech, communal orientations, movement, verve.”

(p.526)

This is important because assumptions about ‘correct’ parenting (Gillies et al, 2017) and ‘proper’ childhoods (Nxumalo and Brown, 2019) inform policy making and advice given to parents. As Okun and Jones point out, organisational cultures are slippery; the rarefication of some modes of being can be difficult to name or identify (Okun, 2021). Without critical examination, the risk is that a Eurocentric lens comes to hegemonically reinforce particular views of childhood as universal or natural whilst overlooking rich and important home literacies practices in culturally diverse households.

Methodology

The accounts of family life and home literacies we provide in this paper draw on both our (Abi and Zanib's) long-term relationships with and personal connections to a particular small, post-industrial town in northern England, and a discrete, one-year long period of ethnographic research in which we collaborated to address the following research question;

What are the home literacies practices of young children and their families in culturally diverse homes in a northern English town?

Nesting a formal period of 'data collection' within a longer-term commitment to knowing-with community or place calls after Margaret Somerville's (2013) description of place/body knowing, in which knowledge of a place sits in the body, over time, shaping memories and bodily ways of being. We also resonate with Mason's (2021) description of 'staying', in which relational intimacy with place and a commitment to communities exist in a "slow or obstinate" (p.707) temporality that exceeds discrete funded research projects or data collection tasks. As mentioned above, Abi and Zanib both have a long personal history and previous experience of doing research and working with communities in the town. Zanib lives in the town and has worked for more than 30 years in the voluntary sector, supporting families from diverse communities. She sits and has sat on strategic boards for community engagement, education, heritage and the arts in the town, including sitting on the board of the town's first Sure Start (from 2002), and her career as a community development worker began in the 1980's working for the first South Asian community development organisation in the town. Abi's relationship with the town began 25 years ago when she was a community outreach worker for the local museum. She has done ethnographic research with families with young children in this town almost continuously since 2011. As we were working with families who may have been vulnerable and facing wider barriers and challenges within their life, Zanib's connections and knowledge of community services, in particular, were important as she was able to signpost families to other sources of help and in some cases put in requests for them herself (for example, for toy library or a laptop for older children's homework). Our approach to ethics within this research (which received ethical approval from Sheffield Hallam University) was underpinned by practical and emotional care of this kind, undergirded by long term relations with place and individuals. Within this framework, we shared information sheets and consent forms in four different community languages at the playgroup and via personal contacts, in order to recruit participating families. Whilst it was important to us to build trust and ongoing consent to participate from the mothers who were so generously welcoming us into their intimate, messy worlds of everyday toddler life, it was

equally important to establish a stance of ongoing, emergent and embodied assent from the children themselves (Flewitt 2006; Smith and Coady, 2020); our fieldvisits or observations stopped if the children were distressed, disengaged or seemed to withdraw their assent via verbal or non-verbal modes.

We do this work in community, collecting memories and stories that we plan to share with international audiences such as this journal's readership, in the shadow of the damage ethnographic research has historically caused (Tuhiwai Smith et al, 2018) and an awareness of the incompatibility between classic ethnographic epistemologies and key tenants of Black Atlantic scholarship. In particular, Glissant's (1997) writing on opacity makes clear the dangers of a yearning for complete knowledge of another. When each being is so complexly and relationally co-constituted, full transparent knowledge relies on a logic in which "in order to understand and thus accept you, I have to.....make comparisons and, perhaps, judgements. I have to reduce." (Glissant, 1997, p. 190). Transparency demands reduction; for this reason, refusal to share knowledge has always been important to communities involved in ethnographic or participatory research (Tuck et al, 2023). Glissant's writing guides us how to listen and relate to another, without demanding their totality. Instead of accounts of others or elsewhere "which somehow always ends up contributing to the glorification of the sovereign Here" (p.37), Glissant describes metissage as "the meeting and synthesis of two differences....its elements diffracted and its consequences unforeseeable." (p.34). In this sense, encounters (including during research) co-constitute participants and researchers. This calls after Somerville's (2013) description of research as a necessary unravelling of the self.

This, then, is one of the most significant ways in which our approach to research diverges from a traditional ethnographic approach, in which the aim would be 'saturation' and full, objective understandings of the participating families. Instead, stories or vignettes in this paper aim to connect with the reader on a felt level, to invite a small unravelling of our own investments, or who we thought our selves to be.

"Transparency no longer seems like the bottom of the mirror in which Western humanity reflected the world in its own image. There is opacity now at the bottom of the mirror, a whole alluvium deposited by populations, silt that is fertile but, in actual fact, indistinct and unexplored.....with an insistent presence that we are incapable of not experiencing."

Experiencing without fully knowing the silt, we walk a line between the telling of counter stories in order to resist erasure, to “uncover debts” (Tuhiwai Smith et al, 2018) and refuse “damage centred narratives” (Tuck, 2009), without claiming to elide the irreducible complexity of each and every one of us.

We worked with participating families in two different spaces; firstly a community playgroup run by a local charity, a space mainly for refugee families and those seeking asylum to gather and play one morning a week. We sought permission from regularly attending families to create fieldnotes based on our conversations and observations. Additionally, the playgroup leader ran a series of ‘PEEP’ (parents as educational partners) sessions during the time we were researching, and group discussions as part of these sessions, about food, language and storytelling for example, fed into our fieldnotes.

Secondly, a number of families hosted us for a series of home visits; we visited each of these families three times, to hang out, observe, chat and ask questions. These encounters were also recorded as fieldnotes. Importantly, whilst some of the families we visited at home were newly arrived in the UK (like most of the families at the playgroup), we also recruited via personal contacts and some of the home-visit families were well-established in the town over one or more generations. The circumstances of these families were thus very different (generally speaking, more stable, with wider family support and more resources) and we have reflected these significant differences in our discussions of the data below. The participating families and number of fieldvisits are summarised in table 1.

In total during the study, we collected 40 sets of fieldnotes and 62 still photographs, mostly of objects in the home and things the children had made, although a small number of the photographs featured children’s hands, back of heads and so on. We (Zanib and Abi) each wrote fieldnotes separately after each fieldvisit, uploading them into a shared folder. Our aim in this was not saturation or completeness; aligned with the epistemological position we outlined above, we accept the necessarily partial and fragmentary nature of each research encounter. Rather, our duplicate fieldnotes created a density of description and a proliferation of small moments of noticing, made space for our sense making from different cultural perspectives (Zanib is British-Pakistani Muslim and Abi is white British monolingual), as

well as, on a practical note, capturing the small aside chats with the adults and playful interactions with the children we each often had separately during the busy-ness of each field visit.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Our data analysis comprised of a series of shared explorations of the dataset; we met frequently to work with the fieldnotes and images which we printed out in full and spread across the table, to enable the data to expand and deepen emerging insights. We identified key ideas iteratively through dialogue with each other and by pulling images and snippets of our fieldnotes together into physical piles as we discussed what this data had to teach us and the stories it invited us to tell. Early on in the analytic process, we provided an accessible summary of the research to our participating families, and this task drove the identification of some key umbrella findings, namely;

1. The importance of home languages
2. Children as religious beings
3. Music stories and books
4. Knowing about the world
5. Fun and silliness

We continued to deepen and develop these categories, considering what we were learning by starting with everyday community life with young children, during the writing of this paper. In the following sections, we discuss plurilingualism, spirituality and global citizenship, insights developed directly from three of the above findings (1, 2, and 4) whilst the presence of music, stories, books, fun and silliness is woven through all of the stories that follow.

Findings: the child at the nexus of languages, cultures, belongings

O and I sit on plastic chairs around the edge of the playgroup space, watching the children play. O starts telling me about the things she does to encourage her children to know Arabic (she has older children too). She talks about teaching the Arabic alphabet, using worksheets, and doing lessons in Arabic – these are on the television, several hours long. Also encouraging / bribing engagement in

learning Arabic, for example, “do two lines of it in Arabic, then you can play.” “It is work” I comment to her, “yes” she agrees.

Fieldnotes from a playgroup session

S speaks to her children in whatever language is most on her mind at that moment, she tells us. For example, she has spent the morning with her friend from Ethiopia, so she will probably be speaking Amharic for the next few hours!

Fieldnotes from a conversation at playgroup with S and her two year old S

T tells us her grandchildren understand Punjabi, which great grandma speaks, but they don’t speak it. You lose your language, and with it you lose your culture, T says.

Fieldnotes from a home visit with T and her grandchildren

All families in our study spoke multiple languages, and mothers described strategies they developed for raising multilingual children. These varied but were carefully thought through. For example, Z speaks to her children in English and in Kurdish Sorani – she speaks other Kurdish dialects but has decided to focus just on one with her children at first, in order not to confuse them. It is important to her and her husband that the children have some Kurdish for when they video call family back home. S speaks to her children in Amharic and Tigrinya, however she is not teaching them the written version of these languages because her priority is for them to learn Arabic letters first, as a foundation to being able to study the Quran.

The playgroup leader asks the group, ‘when you tell your children stories, and memories at home – do you use English or your own language?’ ‘Our language!’ choruses the group in reply. Q says, I tell him stories in my own language, but he mixes, he mixes my language and English together. She says it several times, with an inflection that suggests a question – is mixing a problem? Is it a shared experience? F tells the group that her older children can speak in her language, but not A. From the group comes assurances that these experiences are common, and encouragement for F to keep going.

Fieldnotes from a PEEP session about books and storytelling

In the accounts families provided, there is a slipperiness to ‘being literate’ or ‘being fluent’; children could hear, understand and respond in some languages and not others, children might trace Arabic letters and prepare to study the Quran whilst learning to speak other languages first, one little boy could impressively free rap, which he found easier in English. In group discussion and individual conversations, mothers wondered about this, checked whether others had the same experience. The playgroup leader’s encouragement, affirmation that home languages are important and that coming into multiple languages in messy and uneven ways was normal, was a message that families rarely received outside of this group.

Jones and Okun’s framework of key characteristics of white supremacy in organisations (Okun, 2021) describes ‘a constant sense of urgency’ (p.27) and ‘one right way’ (p.8) to approach a task or master a skill as key tenets of white supremacy. Following Tembo and Bateson’s (2025) invitation to trace how these values play out in early childhood settings, we note how ‘standard’ and ‘correct’ versions of each discrete language are often assumed to exist in early childhood curriculum, and must be mastered according to a predictable trajectory, with an emphasis on English, vocabulary and early take up (Badwan et al, 2025; Cushing, 2023; Nair et al, 2024). In our research, it is possible to trace how the rhetorics of ‘school readiness’ and the desire for young children to speak as much English as possible, as quickly as possible, devalue the multiple other language capacities families are working so hard to nurture. As O and I discuss in the vignette above, raising a plurilingual child is ‘work’.

Families’ experiences and dilemmas can be read as materialised lived experiences of the well-established critique that viewing languages as bounded, measurable and capable of being separated, is a colonial invention (Badwan, 2020; Gurney and Demuro, 2022). In *How to Tame a Wild Tongue*, Anzaldua (1999) describes the close connection between identity and the way people speak, and the damage “closing linguistic borders” (p.33) can do to those living in borderland communities who speak and mix multiple languages. Despite decades of scholarship, dominant frameworks of language acquisition persist. In English educational settings, early language is most frequently viewed as functional – a vehicle for children to express their opinions or needs (e.g. see Department for Education, 2023, p.25); there is only a brief leap from here to an emphasis on English language as the medium assumed to be the

most suitable for this function. As Saavedra and Esquiedo (2020) note, "One of the ways the teachers would describe children having "language" was through the children's ability to speak mainly in English." (p.43) (note the emphasis on both English and speaking to adults in the classroom). Thus the hegemony of 'early childhood language' encompasses not only a preference for English and a 'monolingual as norm' frame, but a broader conceptualisation of language as abstractable and functional.

An alternative view of language as being and connection can be found in Black Atlantic scholarship, particularly the writing of Glissant (1997), for whom Creole, his first language, was not merely a vehicle for the expression of ideas, rather we can think of Creolisation *as* theory. Glissant's (1997) writing on Relation describes being in the world as a constant process of change, in which we co-constitute each other and identities are endlessly shifting and relational. Thus, whilst language in education is often put to work as part of an Imperialist project to make 'the other' transparently knowable, Glissant's theory of Relation demonstrates how important it is to accept unboundedness, and that, to a certain extent, others will and need to remain unknowable to us (Shannon and Hackett, 2025). Glissant names this as opacity, urging us to 'clamour for the right to opacity for everyone' (p. 194), and invites us to view language through this lens.

Knowledges and ways of being in relation to language are lost or overlooked, then, "under the pressures for coherence, transparency, efficiency and control" (Phipps, 2019, p.15). We refer here not just to competencies in multiple languages (which many of the families had in spades) but a view of language as a mode of being in the world (Glissant, 1997), a mode of connection to family back home and to faith. These are the things the mothers in our study worked to treasure, to keep in their children's worlds. For example, S's seamless movement across multiple language as her day unfolds with friends and children, T's sadness that her grandchildren and mother no longer speak the same language, or Q's stories of life in Sudan told in Arabic. A view of language as place, being and belonging.

Children as spiritual beings from birth

"Ramadan comes - we all work as a team". M tells us excitedly. At dusk, the family works together to prepare the evening meal. "My

older daughter brings the juice jugs and prepares the drinks. I have mats to put down, then all the different plates of food – they get excited about all the colourful dishes”.

Fieldnotes from a home visit with M and her two children

The majority of the families in our study were Muslim, and religion held a considerable significance in their lives. In the run up to Ramadan (we did not carry out field visits during Ramadan), mothers told us about how the rhythm of the house changes. “They wake when you wake, early morning,” one mum said. Just because toddlers do not fast during Ramadan did not mean that their daily lives and literacies were unaffected; examples were numerous including tired children who woke with the house before dawn, no matter how quietly family members tried to move around and not wake them, to M’s reflections that the hill between her house and school always felt much steeper during Ramadan, when she needed to walk it four times each day whilst fasted herself. In these stories, devotion and religious ritual are filtered through everyday family life (Jones-Ahmed, 2022).

Whilst we are not arguing that Muslim families are unique in involving their small children in religious and traditional celebrations, there are important specificities to how Islamic teachings shaped and guided parenting practices (Rasool and Hackett, 2024). Babies are declared Islamic (Iqamah/Iqamat) at the moment of their birth (Latif, 2022), and the status of the women within Islam is particularly informed by the mother’s role in nurturing the child’s fitrah (innate potential) for Islamic faith (Julijar et al., 2024; Rasool, forthcoming). These are just two examples of a view of the child and the mother / wider family as inter-connected rather than independent. As Jackson (2020) states, the figure of the human self as sovereign, imagined as terra nullus with a free will, is a Western, colonial construct. Thus, the notion of ‘self-determinism’ as a defining characteristic of childhood needs to be critically considered (Diaz Diaz, 2020; Kromidas, 2019). As Okun (2021, p.20) writes in her description of individualism as a key tenet of white supremacy culture, “our cultural attachment to individualism leads to a toxic denial of our essential interdependence.” Mothers in our study were aware of pervasive negative attitudes towards Islam in the local area and did not always mention their religion in educational settings, even though it was so central to everyday family life. Certainly, the centrality of Islam to the young children’s literacies in these homes stands in contrast to its relative backgrounding in dominant imaginaries of early childhood development in English curricular and policy making (Abada, 2024; Bensaid, 2021).

3 year old U and I play with her toy kitchen (also an Umrah gift), taking turns to request different foods and drinks. A black plastic disk with gold writing 'God Bless our Home' is propped on the toy kitchen. U tells me, "this is from Allah's house". Her mum tells me she means it came from a family member's visit to Mecca ('Allah's house') – a free gift with some other souvenirs bought.

Fieldnotes from a home visit with R, her three year old U and baby D

For many families in our study, a spiritual Islamic identity began well before children were old enough to attend Mosque, materially in the home through souvenir gifts from Mecca mixed into the toy box, with children's awareness of family members making the Umra to Saudi Arabia, or, as M describes above, with the ways in which rhythms, atmospheres and anticipation during Ramadan and Eid caught up the whole household. A view of the (Islamic) child as co-constituted by material and discursive stuff that surrounds them, calls after Glissant's (1997) view of identity as Relation. For Glissant, identity is co-constituted through "the accumulation of sediments" (p.33) as we journey through places with their own stories and histories, encountering others along the way. Accumulating sediments are visible, for example, as U plays in her toy kitchen, serving us pretend sandwiches on the 'God Bless our Home' plastic disk that a family member brought back from Mecca. Threads, stories and knowledges run from each of us, from U, her mother, the disk, the kitchen, the sandwich, Mecca and the northern English house we currently play together in; we are each constantly re-constituted by places and others and their histories. Within this process, Glissant emphasises the role of duration or "the linked histories of peoples" (p.33) and place, writing "sediment then begins first with the country in which your drama takes shape" (p.33). This is particularly relevant in contexts in which identity is shaped by migration, diaspora and globally entangled identities.

Childhoods as global rather than 'innocent' / oblivious

Playgroup is in the smaller room today – toys are scattered across the floor and children wander, play, eat snack, parents sit and chat. The playgroup leader gathers the attention of the group and leads a

conversation about book sharing and storytelling. ‘And do you tell your children stories about back home?’ she asks the mums. OH YES! Agree the group, strongly. It is so important for the children to understand life back home, what is the same and what is different.

“My daughter was amazed that the kids can prepare and cook rice there.”

“I show my child photos from back home, before he was born and he asks ‘where am I?!’” (laughter)

Although many of the families in this discussion are from Africa, they are from different parts of this huge continent. “Not all Africa!” is a chorus that rings out, with humour and frustration, during the discussion. “Not all of Africa has lions and giraffes.” O tells me, “We had sheep, goats, cows. In Sudan – many people have a cow. When we want milk, it is fresh from the cow. We had big gardens with space for a lemon and orange tree. Everything back home is healthy!”

Fieldnotes from a PEEP session at playgroup about books and storytelling

For many of the mums in our study, telling stories of daily life back home was essential, both so that the children understood their roots and so that they would learn what the world is like and how to navigate it. Coupled with this were often moral and practical life lessons; the world being how it is, frequently unequal, uncertain and particularly precarious for young immigrant and diaspora children of colour, requires a particular response, and commentary about this was braided into stories that mothers told their children.

We saw someone begging in the street and my child asked about it – I told a story in order to explain how this can happen, what people face in life, but also how to get up from down. Or if my children are reluctant to eat their food, I use stories to tell of how others do not have food.

Fieldnotes from a conversation with S at playgroup

The song in the cartoon offers advice on how to make the right decisions in different scenarios. ‘Oh no’ the narration goes, ‘there is no towel!’ A small boy stands in the shower, the towel hook is empty – he looks at his wet feet. ‘We can always “shake them shake them shake them”!’ sings the song, as the child shakes off water and avoids wetting the floor. Watching the screen, baby L rocks back and forth in time to the song, and taps one little foot.

Fieldnotes from a home visit with T and her four grandchildren

The figure of the child-as-innocent was one that families in our study resisted through storytelling about life back home, storytelling about how life can unravel, and moral and practical lessons about how to stack the odds in favour of a successful life. Songs, stories and television shows that formed part of the families’ home literacies were often set in other countries, particularly Arab countries, and frequently included moral and practical guidance for life. For example, Omar and Hana cartoons, about the family life of two Muslim children as they play, learn and teach good Islamic moral values. In multiple ways, home literacy practices sought not to constantly separate children from “difficult knowledge” (that is, knowledge that adults have determined as difficult to discuss with children, according to a western adult / child binary, Robinson, 2013) but to sometimes convey to children what it will take or mean to survive and thrive in a white supremacist world.

Bernstein’s (2011) analysis shows how the racialised concept of childhood “innocence” serves to produce particular versions of personhood (Garlen, 2019), and often involves being innocent *of* something, that is, an obliviousness or a performance of not-noticing. Rather than an ‘oblivious’ child without responsibility, a more nuanced picture emerges in these vignettes of an unequal world, in which the child must understand their responsibilities and make good choices. We deepen our thinking about this via Okun’s (2021) writing about either / or framing in relation to white supremacy culture; she writes how this often shows up as a push to “reduce the complexity of life and the nuances of our relationships with each other and all living things.” (p.14). The vignettes in this section help us to think about childhoods as comprising both less knowledge of the world (innocence?) and deep capacity of knowing and acting. Presenting a state of childhood innocence / obliviousness as natural, ‘normal’ or

universal, is an example of how whiteness “derives power from its status as an unmarked category” (Bernstein, 2011, p.7). However, home literacy practices in our study illustrate that the aspiration for innocence as an ‘all or nothing’ characteristic of early childhood is culturally specific, and not necessarily a priority for all families.

The assertion that “there is a ‘right’ kind of childhood that all children ought to experience has been remarkably persistent” (Tisdall, 2022, p.949). Regimes of truth about ‘correct’ childhoods frequently orientate towards an anxiety to guard children from ‘developmentally inappropriate’ levels of sadness or disappointment (Wilson-Thomas and Gabi, 2025). Robinson’s (2013) discussion of difficult and subjugated knowledges in early childhood is relevant here. Drawing on Britzman’s concept of ‘difficult knowledge’, she describes how “bodies of knowledge pertaining to such issues as sexuality, death, war, poverty, violence and politics have been socio-culturally constructed as difficult” (p.23). Robinson extends this analysis by pointing out that this is especially the case in relation to subjugated knowledge subjects, (including children and families from the Global South), calling for critical reflection on how we interact with or perceive knowledge associated with ‘the other’ (examples within early childhood might include how a heterosexual educator interacts with knowledge about non-hetero lives, or how a white educator interacts with knowledge about Black lives). Whilst the vignettes in this section disrupt our assumptions about the neutrality or desirability of ‘childhood obliviousness’, Robinson’s (2013) framework of difficult and subjugated knowledges invites critical reflection on the “remarkably persistent” (Tisdall, 2022) nature of these assumptions within early childhood literacies.

Implications

How can we work with families in ways that explicitly decentre power and dominant messages about childhood and literacies? In a context where educational systems have historically placed parents of colour in deficit (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Edwards and Smith, 2023), an explicitly anti-racist, culturally sustaining approach is necessary to make space for community ways of knowing and doing literacies in early childhood. Thus a key implication from our study is the importance of critically considering what modes of being-in-the-world early years provision celebrates (for example, a willingness to speak lots of vocabulary in the dominant language to an unfamiliar adult) or erases (for example, an emerging ability to

listen and understand to multiple languages that connect the child to their diaspora identity). In their discussion of syncretic literacies, Lizarraga and Gutierrez (2018, p.38) write,

“building powerful literacies involves the centering of dispositions and practices that thrive on the boundary-spaces that are not always sanctioned as educational.”

Educators and community workers could consider how their family engagement activities could better attend to the capacities of bilingual children and the creation of translanguaging spaces (Ehiyazaryan-White, 2024), ways of being informed by faith and culture (Greory et al, 2004), the experiential and embodied knowledge of being with young children (Hackett, 2021) and collective care (Braden et al, 2023). Whilst there are excellent examples of these practices both in English and international early years pedagogy, we argue that they remain marginalised in mainstream early years practice partly because the dominant construction of the young children as innocent / oblivious / developmental / self-determining / language as functional persists unquestioned (or not questioned enough!). As we have explored in this paper, these assumptions are not neutral but are underpinned by colonial views of personhood and childhood (Jackson, 2020; Kromidas, 1999) and upheld via the characteristics of white supremacy culture (Okun, 2021).

A second practical implication from this research is drawn less from the vignettes we have highlighted in this paper, and more from the wider conversations we had with families during this research (as described in the methodology section). Mothers newly arrived in the town frequently told us they felt isolated, yearned for collective (child)care and valued the playgroup as a space that provided this. In contrast to the Eurocentric emphasis on the parent-child dyad and the nuclear family, mothers in our study spoke of the importance of extended family, siblings and grandparents to help to raise children, pooling material resources and portioning out childcare. We saw powerful examples of how well this can work at T's house, which acted as a sanctuary and gathering space for her daughters and daughter-in-law and their children, all of whom visited several days each week. In contrast, asylum seekers in England are separated from extended families and often relocated with little notice from the communities they begin to build. The colonial origins of the dominance the nuclear family (McEwen, 2021), together with the concept of Ummah (a global Muslim community that transcends state borders (Widhiyoga, 2017)), provide some further context for the value of questioning the view of the nuclear family as universal or natural backdrop for home literacies. This has important implications for policy making and how agencies might support

families with young children, for example, by acknowledging the significance of extended family and community and placing more emphasis on community building for those who do not have extended family nearby. Community building in this context needs to be hyperlocal, as mothers told us, a group ten-minute drive away is not accessible to a mother with no car, two small children with little legs, and fixed non-negotiable nursery and school pick up times (Sanders, 2019).

Discussion

At the end of playgroup there is singing and parachute time, which the children love. They squeal with excitement as the parachute silk rises and falls over their heads. We finish with 'baby shark', cued up on the big speaker. As the opening cords sound, many of the children begin to bounce on their feet and gather together around the speaker. Everyone (adults and children) dances joyfully and does the actions.
Fieldnotes from playgroup

Z and her husband open youtube and play us the song which Z wrote for her son. It is a lullaby in Kurdish, and they translate some of the lines for us; "My dear baby son, you are so amazing to have, I hope you are always with us, you have brightened our house, I give up my life for you, no matter how big you grow, always in my eyes you will be my baby." It has gathered a large number of views on youtube, and they tell us they think this is because it is relatable to many parents – these are universal feelings.
Fieldnotes from a home visit with Z, her husband and her two children

"Can I say how alive your being alive makes me feel!?!"

Barbara Christian to Audre Lorde, as cited in Quashie, 2021, p.15

Our study set out to ask, 'what can we learn about culturally diverse early childhood literacies by starting with everyday life in communities?' The resultant stories of family life

are filled with joy, liveliness and connection, exemplified by the vignettes that open this concluding section. Perhaps this is what Quashie (2021) might describe as “suspended shimmering” (p.16). For Quashie, Black aliveness, as a counter to a white supremacist world, depends on “the *capacity* to meet and be met” (p.22). This open-ness to an encounter with difference and with the world brings “something into being that did not exist before” (p.29).

Alongside this ‘shimmering’, we frequently saw a quiet living out of refusal (Truman et al, 2021); refusal to prioritise a single language, refusal to solely foreground ‘school readiness’, and rejection of a Eurocentric version of personhood over and above culture, faith and being aware of how the world is and how people live in other places. One practical example of the lived materiality of this refusal are the multiple sophisticated plurilingual language practices families told us about. If, as Garcia et al (2021) write, discrete and bounded languages do not simply exist as neutral objects but rather are “*brought into existence* through sociopolitical forces” (p.208), the language practices described in this community quietly yet powerfully unravel this boundedness. This refusal takes work, both in the sense of the practical and emotional parenting tasks described above, and also ideologically in the sense of keeping in view a vision of childhood and selfhood that stands counter to hegemonic ideals of the (white, western, monolingual) child as transparent, agential and innocent.

Our findings demonstrate the limitations of a view of early childhood education grounded in ‘a constant sense of urgency’ and ‘one right way’ (Okun, 2021) and Eurocentric views of the child as individually self-determining and incapable of encountering difficult knowledge (Robinson, 2013). Firstly, this perspective marginalises the rich home literacy practices that nurture plurilingual, globally connected and spiritually engaged children, and secondly, it has the effect of flattening or deadening the shimmering variability, complexity and aliveness of what it means to be a young child growing up in a northern English town.

We argue for a capacious, less certain, lexicon of childhood and home literacies practices in northern English communities (and more broadly). As Souto-Manning and Yoon (2018, p.49) write, “it is unlikely that the dominant language will have the breadth and depth to acknowledge, name, and explain worlds beyond the one it privileges.” We need a new language of description, one that upends Eurocentric assumptions about the desirability of communicative transparency, individualistic self-determinism and innocence / obliviousness. As scholars of early childhood literacies, we need to explicitly call for and work towards an

expanded lexicon as a counter to the dominance of tropes of early childhood which exclude many children from the category of ‘proper’ childhood and discount so much of the love, care and education that is already happening in culturally diverse family homes.

Tembo and Bateson (2025) consider how adults in early years settings might contribute to the reproduction or disruption of over-represented colonial forms of childhood play. They write,

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.....people can (and children do) emphasise the depth, dynamics and power of oral and other forms of indigenous communication.

Tembo and Bateson, 2025, p.115

The critique of “singularity (the tacit or explicit affirmation of ‘one right way’)” here strikes us as especially important for researchers and educators wondering about implications for their own practice. Whilst there is nothing inherently wrong with a white, monolingual childhood, to suggest this is the *only*, the *correct* or the *best* way of raising young children in England, is an example of white supremacy in action. Tembo and Bateson’s (2025) emphasis on uncertainty and the humility of not-knowing calls after Glissant’s (1997) view of Relation as respect for the Other without ‘full transparent understanding’ being a prerequisite for that respect. Glissant writes “To feel in solidarity with him or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him.” (1997, p.193). Thus, Glissant indicates that transparent knowing should not be a pre-condition for honouring another’s being-ness. We do not need to gather the facts and evaluate the (home literacy) practices of those who live different lives *before* respecting that difference. Or as Quashie (2022, p.108) puts it “worth is a human legacy”.

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