

Whiteness and Bodies Out of Place: A Critical Discussion of Early Childhood Educators' Regulatory Language Practice in a Danish Context

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ABSTRACT

This article sheds light on contemporary interconnections between colonialism, whiteness and notions of Danishness. It offers a critical perspective on the possible (side) effects of emphasising Danish language proficiency in everyday pedagogical encounters with racial-ethnic minoritised children. Taking on the notion of coloniality of power (Quijano, 2000), the article considers Denmark's colonial complicity and its present implications in today's social structures and, in particular, in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). The article is based on critical ethnographic fieldwork (Madison, 2020) conducted in a Danish ECEC centre. By theorising whiteness (Ahmed, 2007) in relation to ideals of Danish language proficiency and by drawing on postcolonial theory (Fanon, 1952/2021, 1967), the article investigates how a regulatory language practice performed by ECEC educators can be understood as normative whiteness affecting a group of three 4–6-year-old racial-ethnic minoritised children with Turkish backgrounds. The analyses show how the children navigate the white space of the ECEC centre by adjusting their bodies accordingly as they are rendered bodies out of place. Conclusively, the article points to Danish ECEC institutions as critical sites in the reproduction of colonial power structures.

Keywords: *Danishness; racial-ethnic minoritised children; coloniality of power; critical ethnography*

Received: August, 2023; Accepted: January, 2024; Published: March, 2024

Introduction

Critical discussion on colonialism and normative whiteness in Nordic education has burgeoned (e.g., Eriksen & Jore, 2023; Helakorpi, 2020; Fylkesnes, 2019). This article argues for Danish Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) institutions as critical sites in reproducing colonial power structures that foreground normative whiteness through the ideal of Danish language proficiency.

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Citation: Klarsgaard, N. N. T. (2024). *Whiteness and Bodies Out of Place: A Critical Discussion of Early Childhood Educators' Regulatory Language Practice in a Danish Context*. *Nordisk tidsskrift for pedagogikk og kritikk: Special Issue on Education and Coloniality in the Nordics*, 10(3), 99–112. <http://doi.org/10.23865/ntpk.v10.5879>

In Denmark and the other Nordic countries, a persistent self-image of innocence, often referred to as *Nordic exceptionalism* (Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2012), fails to acknowledge the extent of Nordic involvement in colonialism. Nordic exceptionalism promotes the Nordic welfare states as inclusive and free from the burdens of racism. It is blind to the normative whiteness produced as an effect of Eurocentric colonialism (Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2012). Contributing to Nordic exceptionalism in a Danish context is the fact that Denmark's colonial complicity can be considered relatively small-scale compared to other European colonial empires and that the Danish state divested itself relatively early of its colonies in Asia (in 1845) and the South Atlantic (in 1917; Jensen, 2018). Yet, Denmark's colonial complicity also involves the North Atlantic. For example, the Danish culture and language were imposed on the people of Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland) because of what was said to be an unselfish urge to 'modernise' Greenland in the 1950s and 1960s (Jensen, 2018).

The racial logics of superordination and subordination created during colonialism continue to shape Danish welfare work with its imagined Other (Padovan-Özdemir & Øland, 2022). Research has shown how the racial logics produced become prevalent during national economic crises (Keskinen et al., 2016), limiting universal welfare to certain kinds of citizens (Padovan-Özdemir & Øland, 2022). The Danish state has gone from inviting 'guestworkers' from former Yugoslavia, Turkey, and Pakistan to relieve the Danish labour shortage in the 1960s (Vertelyté & Staunæs, 2021) to tightening its asylum policy in response to the large influx of refugees in 2015 and 2016 (Etzold, 2017). Immigrants with non-Western backgrounds are positioned as an economic threat to the welfare state (Jensen et al., 2017). Danish public debates and right-wing parties' rhetoric on immigration, integration and nationhood tend to be dominated by 'us and them' categories, making cultural and social integration, a firm state policy from the late 1960s onwards, a question of cultural sameness and the Other's cultural capacity 'to harmonize their values with Danish values' (Jensen et al., 2017, p. 62). After the 9/11 attacks in the United States, having a Muslim background invokes a marker of difference ostensibly culturally incompatible with Danish values and Danishness (Vertelyté & Staunæs, 2021).

In Denmark and other Nordic countries, researchers have noted how ideas of nationhood, for example, Danishness, are tied to *whiteness* (Fylkesnes, 2019; Hummelstedt, 2022; Skadegård & Jensen, 2018). Whiteness is not reduced to phenotypical markers, but is broadly understood as a norm and a structural power position entailing the right to determine who is a true citizen contra a marginal one (Ahmed, 2007; Garner, 2014). Danish educational research (e.g., Vertelyté, 2022; Yang, 2021; Khawaja, 2015) has pointed to how race, ethnicity, origin, and language, rooted in ideals of whiteness, influence children and adolescents with racial-ethnic minoritised¹ backgrounds. The sense of belonging in educational settings for these children

¹ The term *minoritised* emphasises the processual and social construction of minority and majority, concerning relations of power and dominance, not quantity (Yang, 2021).

and young people is exposed to the notion of the Other, ‘to subjectivities of inadequacy, needing help and being tolerated’ (Helakorpi, 2020, p. 95). The – often referred to as – bilingual children are positioned as a source of concern and ‘an object of and a specific problem for education’ (Buchardt, 2019, p. 283).

This article argues for the need to look beyond Nordic exceptionalism and takes on Aníbal Quijano’s (2000) notion of *coloniality of power* (henceforth coloniality). Coloniality draws attention to how historical, political and racial logics constituting colonialism influence contemporary social power relations (Eriksen & Jore, 2023; Quijano, 2000). In this article, coloniality is a backdrop to understanding how Denmark’s colonial complicity in the South and North Atlantic and Asia (Jensen, 2018) continues to reproduce social power relations embedded in ideals of Danishness (i.e., whiteness). These social power relations influence welfare institutions (Padovan-Özdemir & Øland, 2022), including everyday pedagogical practices in ECEC institutions.

The article draws on postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon’s (1952/2021, 1967) understanding of language as an effective colonial tool for political and cultural domination and Sara Ahmed’s (2007) understanding of how colonialism makes the world white, affecting bodies and social spaces like ECEC centres. Based on observations from ethnographic fieldwork in a Danish ECEC centre, the article asks: *How can the ECEC educators’ regulatory language practice directed at three racial-ethnic minoritised children be understood as normative whiteness, and how does this practice affect the children’s positions as legitimate participants in the ECEC centre?*

Danish ECEC institutions: Politicised places for integration

As part of the state apparatus, Danish ECEC institutions play a significant role in matters of integration (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2017). ECEC institutions in Denmark are primarily state-funded and attended by most children aged from 1–6. The youngest children attend private family daycare or nurseries. The nurseries are part of ECEC centres which are also attended by 2–6-year-olds. ECEC centres are run by qualified teachers, trained at bachelor’s degree level, and by educational assistants with a shorter course of training in childcare.² The Danish Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (2024) regulates ECEC institutions, stating that they must promote children’s well-being, learning, development and education through safe pedagogical learning environments, supporting children’s interactions across differences related to social status, gender, and cultural background. In the legislation, it is emphasised that ECEC institutions must introduce the children to Danish traditions, norms and values. Danish is foregrounded as the primary language, although individual municipalities may make the primary language of an ECEC institution either English, German or French if it does not hinder integration (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2024). Thus, Danish language proficiency seems politically linked to the ideals of integration and Danishness (also see Jensen et al., 2017).

² Henceforth, I refer to teachers and educational assistants as ‘educators.’

In the wake of the ideal of integration, there has been a political push for enrolling racial-ethnic minoritised children in ECEC institutions as a response to so-called ‘parallel societies’ (Jensen et al., 2017). In a report from the former Danish Ministry of Economic Affairs and the Interior (2018), a parallel society is defined as a group of people of non-Western descent living physically or mentally isolated from Danish society in which they take little or no part. Parallel societies are recorded on a ‘ghetto list’ and are perceived as ‘challenging the cohesion of Danish society’ (2018, p. 1). Since 2019, all one-year-old children living in an area defined as a parallel society must be enrolled in an ECEC institution until a language assessment is made at the age of 2–3. Though the aim of this political intervention is said to ‘support the child’s *lingual*, social, individual and cognitive development and general democratic education’ (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2024, Section 44a, my translation and emphasis), it reflects relationships of dominance in society (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2017) and inevitably places racial-ethnic minoritised families, including young children, centre stage in the political, public and educational debate on how to be(come) Danish.

Theoretical perspectives

I approached the ECEC centre as a *place* for children (Gulløv, 2017) where pedagogical practices, cultural relations and processes of belonging are continuously constituted, negotiated and maintained. Research conducted by Danish anthropologists Laura Gilliam and Eva Gulløv (2017) examines the role of ECEC centres as educational institutions of the nation-state inscribed in historical, social, pedagogical and political conditions. These conditions include the racial logics of superordination and subordination created during colonialism, which are here understood through the lens of coloniality (Quijano, 2000). The concept of coloniality derives from a decolonial perspective and was first introduced by Quijano. He argues that Eurocentrism was universalised during colonialism and continues to shape societies globally through economic and political structures, imposing European cultural norms and values as normative and superior (Eriksen & Jore, 2023; Quijano, 2000). Drawing on Fanon (1952/2021), who emphasised *language* as an effective colonial tool for cultural and political domination, this article sheds light on how Eurocentrism extends to language ideologies and hierarchies politically linked to the ideals of integration, producing powerful visions of Danishness and national belonging also in ECEC centres.

Critical whiteness scholars, such as Ruth Frankenberg (1993) and Richard Dyer (1997), shift the focus from the racialised or colonised Other, analysing how whiteness is normalised within historical, political, legal, economic, and social structures. These structures, Frankenberg (1993) argues, are usually ‘unmarked and unnamed’ (p. 1), but work to (re)constitute the white norm as superior and a symbol of civilisation (Fylkesnes, 2019). From a postcolonial perspective, whiteness should be approached as a historicised construction (Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2012). Referencing the

influential work of Fanon, Ahmed (2007), whose research lies at the intersection of feminist, queer, race, and postcolonial studies, argues that histories of colonialism make the world ‘white’ (p. 153). According to Ahmed (2007), the repetition of historical, social, pedagogical, political and discursive [white] decisions made over time constitutes the ‘what’ that *spaces* take shape after. Thus, approaching the ECEC centre as a white space highlights how its institutional space is knitted into power relations produced through and by colonialism. These power relations are closely linked to notions of Danishness and ideals of whiteness, making the ECEC centre space ‘ready’ (Ahmed, 2007, pp. 153–154) for certain kinds of bodies.

Within feminist theory, *bodies* are considered differentiated rather than simply a given (as ‘nature’) (Ahmed, 2000, p. 40). To gain insight into how racial-ethnic minoritised children’s bodies are differentiated by whiteness, the article takes on the concept of *racialisation*, which illuminates processes through which phenotypical, cultural and language differences become significant matters of differentiation (Vertelytė, 2022). Approaching language differences as a significant matter of differentiation in ECEC centres relates to questions of whose children’s voices are being heard, silenced, considered (il)legitimate or turned into objects of surveillance (Vertelytė, 2022).

From a postcolonial perspective, emphasising Danish language proficiency as superior becomes a vehicle of the oppressing power in that it maintains lingual ideologies and racialised relations of domination rooted in colonial values (Fanon, 1952/2021, 1967; Padovan-Özdemir & Øland, 2022). Fanon (1952/2021) argued that to speak is to take on the culture implied by the spoken language and be estranged from one’s culture of origin. Thus, the role of colonial language can lead to subjugation and feelings of inadequacy (Fanon, 1952/2021). From a postcolonial perspective, Kjartan Belseth (2021) asserts that ECEC institutions can be colonising arenas for children who speak what are considered minority languages. Belseth (2021) found that children, with their bodily and non-verbal reactions, can challenge the colonising power held by educators to privilege some languages over others. These postcolonial perspectives on language and Ahmed’s work on whiteness, space and bodies allow for an analytical discussion of how racial-ethnic minoritised children navigate the white normativity of educators’ regulatory language practice, through bodily responses and how regulatory language practices affect children’s positions as legitimate participants in ECEC centres.

Methodological considerations

This article is based on 92 hours of critical ethnographic-inspired fieldwork (Madison, 2020) conducted in a Danish ECEC centre during the first three months of 2022. Critical ethnography explicitly questions institutionalised systems perpetuating injustices (Madison, 2020). Conducting participant observations (Fangen, 2010), my observational point of reference was not whiteness. Instead, I was curious to learn how differences related to social categories (e.g., gender, age, disability, and race)

were constituted in everyday pedagogical practices and embedded in relations of power and hegemonic norms. Thus, my observational gaze was guided by questions, such as ‘Which normative understandings seem to be negotiated by the educators?’ and ‘What regulating practices of which children are occurring?’

My presence in the field was inspired by the fieldwork method *deep hanging out* (Staunæs, 2003, p. 62). On average, I spent five hours per day in the ECEC centre, where hanging out allowed me to see, sense and participate in the locally situated practices, providing insight into what was and wasn’t said and done. I acquired insight into which of the children’s actions invoked specific looks and remarks and from whom. I conducted in-the-field conversations with the educators as part of the participant observations. These conversations were initiated by me or by the educators, who were curious to learn what I had observed. Though short and spontaneous, these conversations resembled research interviews as they contributed to situated knowledge about everyday pedagogical practices (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). Altogether, the observations and conversations sharpened my analytical attention to the often overlooked social, legitimised and institutionalised forms of participation hooked into societal structures. My field notes consisted of in-the-moment jottings and headnotes taken during the observations, including verbatim quotes and my feelings, reactions and reflections (Emerson et al., 2011). All field notes were elaborated on and systematised daily in a field journal before I left the ECEC centre.

Ethical considerations

My privileged position as a white female academic in her early 40s with a pedagogical background in ECEC allowed me to pass unnoted and move comfortably through the ECEC centre space. Thus, I built rapport with the educators, and they told me that I navigated their daily practices in ways that made me blend in. I found it natural to engage with the children, who often inquired about my peculiar habit of scribbling in a notebook. The children’s curiosity led to conversations that helped me build rapport with most of them.

The child who seemed most aware of – and also uneasy about – my presence was 5-year-old Hiba,³ one of the three racial-ethnic minoritised children in focus. On two or three occasions, Hiba disapproved of my presence by saying, ‘Go away’, which spurred me to also pay attention to her non-verbal reactions to my presence. For example, looking at me, Hiba once placed a plastic mattress in front of the door to one of the group rooms where she was playing with her friends. To me, this was Hiba’s way of defending her play zone, and I withdrew from the situation. Though Hiba seemed to accept my presence in all the observations mentioned in the following section, it would only be fair to question the ethics of writing about her. One could argue that the article’s focus on how interconnections between colonialism, whiteness and notions of Danishness affect Hiba and her friends is ethical because it

³ I have used pseudonyms when referring to the educators and children.

does not leave the colonial order unchallenged. However, writing from a position of white privilege, I cannot deny that this argument potentially springs from an unappealing desire to make myself and the research conducted ‘feel good, look good, and be seen as doing good’ (Andreotti et al., 2015, p. 29). Thus, in all fairness, one could also argue that the presence of my white and fluently Danish-speaking body has potentially contributed to maintaining the colonial order by subjecting Hiba and her friends to my observational gaze. The ethical arguments raised exemplify my complicity in present colonial complexities, which, according to Eriksen (2022), should not be avoided but used as a starting point for critical conversations challenging the colonial order.

This article does not aim to criticise the educators, who expressed good intentions of inclusion and integration. Instead, the article analytically targets the normative whiteness embedded in historical, political, and societal structures informing the educators’ regulatory practices.

Approaching the wonder of fieldwork

Robert Emerson et al. (2011) argue for directing attention towards what surprises, goes against one’s expectations or causes emotions, such as joy or discomfort, during fieldwork. Often, such moments are worth investigating because they represent something significant for the studied field. I illustrate below how a specific wonder, a curiosity, shaped my analytical approach to the fieldwork.

During the second week of fieldwork, I overheard the educators repeatedly ask three racial-ethnic minoritised children with Turkish backgrounds to speak Danish instead of Turkish. I wondered how it might affect the children’s sense of belonging in the ECEC centre to have their spoken language regulated. Concluding the fieldwork and entering the active analytical phase, the wonder generated by my observations of the educators’ regulatory language practice remained. It still glowed. Maggie MacLure (2010) describes the *glow* (p. 828) or the *wonder* (2013, p. 228) of data, referring to how a particular curiosity, (bodily) sensation or situated response can glow up, invoking wonder. Following MacLure, I let the glow of the wonder guide the initial analyses. I was curious to go beyond the educators’ regulatory language practice. During the fieldwork, the educators explained that they wanted the children to speak Danish as this was the shared language of the ECEC centre. Nevertheless, what informed their way of thinking? Tentatively, I activated whiteness as an analytical concept. I focused on positions of power in social relations (including spoken language) (Garner, 2007) rather than on phenotype when considering how the educators’ regulatory language practice could be understood as normative whiteness, and how this practice affects the three children’s position as legitimate participants in the ECEC centre. I turned my initial analytical attention to the educators’ actions rather than to their narratives about what they did. This choice was motivated by Steve Garner’s (2014) notion of whiteness as a way of thinking and doing. Subsequently, I turned to the framework legislation to see how the regulating practice

observed corresponded to or differed from the emphasised dominating political and pedagogical values.

The empirical observations of the three children's use of the Turkish language and the educators' regulation of this language use are used as *telling cases* (Mitchell, 1984, p. 239), meaning that the observations are 'lifted from the ongoing stream' (p. 237) of everyday pedagogical practices. The analyses made do not (intend to) offer a comprehensive perspective on the educators' regulatory language practices. Rather, the analyses offer situated insights into how interconnections between colonialism, whiteness, and notions of Danishness can manifest themselves in Danish ECEC institutions.

Inside the ECEC centre: The three children's use of the Turkish language and the educators' regulation

The ECEC centre was relatively newly built in a suburban area previously associated with families of racial-ethnic minoritised backgrounds and challenged socio-economic statuses. The construction of a large state enterprise nearby had attracted workers and middle-class families to the area. Inside the ECEC centre, a common room was furnished with a reading corner and a home corner, and it had doors leading to smaller group rooms used for age-divided activities in the morning and for free play during the rest of the day.

Though 15 countries were represented by the 32 enrolled children, most of them had a white majority background. The three children in focus all had Turkish backgrounds and were the second largest group of children. The rest of the children were born in or had parents from the Faroe Islands, Greenland, Iceland, Poland, Romania, India, the Philippines, Somalia, Lebanon, Iran, and Afghanistan. Of the seven educators working in the ECEC centre, five had a Danish white majority background. Two had a Danish minority background: one spoke Danish with an accent and another had dark-complexioned skin.

On one of my first days of fieldwork, Petra, an educator with a Danish white majority background, told me that the ECEC staff aim to include children from all cultures and support their play across cultural and lingual differences. She explained, 'That is why there is a rule in the ECEC centre that the children [with Turkish backgrounds] must speak Danish during mealtimes and when they play if non-Turkish-speaking children are participating' (field note).

Sometimes I overheard other children use phrases or words from their first language when they talked to themselves or wanted to make a point during a group activity. However, I never heard the educators ask these children to switch to Danish. Reasons for this might have been that the children were talking to themselves – as no other child in the kindergarten shared their first language – or they spoke in a widely recognised language, such as English. Petra further elaborated, 'However, I do understand the Turkish children's need to seek each other's company when playing because they share the same language' (field note).

Another educator, Laura, with a Danish white majority background, also seemed to understand the Turkish-speaking children's use of their shared first language:

At lunchtime, the eldest children sit around a table with Laura. At the end of the table, Hiba converses in Turkish with her friend, a 6-year-old boy named Eshan, who is sitting next to her. Laura says, 'Hiba, remember to speak Danish.' 'I speak Turkish,' Hiba replies. With a compassionate voice, Laura then asks, 'Why do you speak Turkish? Is it because some words are difficult in Danish?' In almost fluent Danish, Hiba confirms, 'Yes, it is hard to speak Danish.' Laura responds, 'I know. That is why we need to practice. Speaking another language is difficult' (field note).

The previous month I interacted with Hiba in the playground, where she positioned her use of the Turkish language in relation to being a Muslim and to her friendship with Eshan and Berna, a 4-year-old girl:

Hiba looks down at me from the top of the jungle gym and asks my name. Before I can answer, she asks me more questions, including my parents' names. I answer her question and ask her what her parents are named. Hiba tells me, adding, 'We are Muslims.' She explains that being Muslim means you speak Turkish, and adds, 'Berna also speaks Turkish, and another friend of mine, Eshan, also speaks Turkish' (field note).

From my observations, I learned that Hiba, Berna and Eshan enjoyed playing together, often behind closed doors, using their shared first language. I sometimes heard them say, 'No grown-ups allowed' while closing the door to one of the group rooms. The children also defended their play space against non-Turkish-speaking children by denying other children access to their indoor play zone or by playing in the playground's isolated corners. In such situations, the children's actions hindered their social interactions across cultural and lingual differences, as emphasised by the educators. The following observation illustrates how pedagogical attention was paid to the Turkish-speaking children's language and how it was regulated.

All the children were playing freely inside. Hiba, Berna and Eshan were playing in the home corner communicating in Turkish:

Berna and Eshan are on the floor alternately sitting down and rolling around, while Hiba is busy organising green and red vegetables on a tray. From a distance, Alia, an educator who speaks Danish with an accent, addresses Hiba: 'Hiba, you have to speak Danish.' At first, Hiba does not react but continues talking with her friends. Again, from a distance, Alia repeats, 'Hiba, I mean it. You must speak Danish.' The three children stop talking, and for a few seconds, their bodies are still. Then, Berna and Eshan withdraw to the furthest end of the home corner, away from where Alia is standing. Meanwhile, Hiba has stopped organising the vegetables and is sitting on a chair. Her body is barely moving, speaking no words. After a short while, she joins Berna and Eshan, and the three children resume their play, still communicating in Turkish. However, once heard loud and clear, their cheerful voices are now nothing more than quiet whispers (field note).

Based on the observations above, I will now analyse and discuss the educators' regulatory language practice and how it affects Hiba, Berna and Eshan's positions as legitimate participants in the ECEC centre.

The regulatory language practice as normative whiteness

The rule that the children must speak Danish during mealtimes and play when non-Turkish-speaking children are participating, together with the educators' language regulation of Hiba, Berna and Eshan, can be understood as a practice stemming from the everyday pedagogical emphasis on inclusion. Thus, the educators' attempt to create an inclusive environment is based on the belief that if everyone speaks the same language (Danish), all children can understand what is being said and participate in social and verbal interactions. Such an understanding aligns with what Gulløv (2017) found to be part of the civilising practices of Danish ECEC institutions: encouraging children to listen to each other while taking turns verbalising their sentiments. Though there is no direct correlation between political ambition and institutional practice, the educators' foregrounding of the Danish language can also be understood as a pedagogical practice closely linked to the politicised equation between integration and Danish language proficiency. This can be seen as an assimilation policy drawing on colonial dynamics related to the nation (Padovan-Özdemir & Øland, 2022) and, thus, as a practice of statehood (Garner, 2014), producing visions of belonging to the ECEC centre.

Why were Hiba, Berna and Eshan asked to regulate their use of Turkish when other children at the ECEC centre were not asked to do the same when speaking a language other than Danish? Audibility may be part of the answer. Hiba, Berna and Eshan's racial and religious visibility were not questioned, as in Iram Khawaja's (2015) study of ethnic minoritised youth in a Danish secondary school. Instead, the children's audibility disrupted the educators' ideal of the ECEC centre as a homogenous Danish-speaking context, thus challenging their ideas about integration. By maintaining the Danish language as the norm for social interaction in the ECEC centre, Hiba, Berna and Eshan's use of their shared first language was found to hinder their participation in and integration into Danish society. Correspondingly, in a Danish primary and lower secondary schooling context, friendship relations between racial-ethnic minoritised students were found to activate a matter of pedagogical concern about minority integration and, as such, require surveillance (Vertelyté, 2022).

To be (not) extended by the white space of the ECEC centre

In the ECEC centre, the educator Alia's surveillance of Hiba, Berna and Eshan and her reading of the children's Turkish-speaking bodies can be understood as a process of racialisation (Vertelyté, 2022). Alia's racialised reading of the three children's bodies seems informed by the ideal of Danishness (i.e., whiteness), operating as a normative touchstone for belonging in the space of the ECEC centre. The process

of racialisation is embedded in relations of power and dominance (Khawaja, 2015). Hence, Hiba, Berna and Eshan were hierarchised, silenced and Othered by the power of white dominance expressed through Alia's request to speak Danish. Hiba, Berna and Eshan were rendered bodies *out of place* (Ahmed, 2000, p. 39, 52; 2007, p. 159) in a place for children.

According to Ahmed (2012), spaces (e.g., the ECEC centre) we inhabit and navigate our lives through tend to offer fits to majority bodies while creating misfits with minority forms of embodiment. Further, Ahmed (2007) argues that 'to be not white is to be not extended by the spaces you inhabit' (p. 163). Due to their use of the Turkish language, Hiba, Berna and Eshan were not extended by the ECEC centre's white space. From their position as bodies out of place, the children were encouraged to perform self-surveillance as they were continuously reminded to switch from Turkish to Danish. Such encouragement from the educators reconfirmed the whiteness of the space while emphasising the argument that who can be extended by white space is not reducible to white skin but a socially constructed virtue (Ahmed, 2007). Thus, non-white bodies can (momentarily) be extended by white spaces if they inhabit whiteness to the degree that makes them invisible, for example, by speaking Danish. An example is the educator Alia who has taken on the Danish language, or what Fanon (1952/2021) calls the *civilising language* (p. 2). The normative whiteness works through Alia's non-white body as she asks the children to speak Danish. Suppose Hiba, Berna and Eshan adjusted to the lingual norm in the ECEC centre. Then, their non-white bodies would presumably become more legible and able to blend in and navigate invisibly (and inaudibly) through the ECEC centre's white space, by which they would be extended.

Navigating normative whiteness: The children's responses to regulatory language practice

In the observation from the home corner, the three children did not switch to Danish though asked to and thus did not adjust to the lingual norm. But maybe they did? As Belseth (2021) points out, children respond actively to their surroundings. After being asked to switch to Danish, there were a few seconds of silence before Berna and Eshan responded by withdrawing to the furthest end of the home corner, away from the educator, as they resumed their play, still speaking Turkish. Next, Hiba followed, and the children's voices could be heard as quiet whispers.

Analytically, the children's responses to Alia's request to speak Danish can be understood as a subjectification to or a rejection of the civilising language. The children's whispering voices can be seen as a form of subjectification because they internalised the space of whiteness and did their best to blend in. They acted according to the place offered to them by making themselves almost inaudible at the furthest end of the home corner. Simultaneously, their response can be understood as rejecting adaption to the civilising Danish language as they withdrew to the furthest end of the home corner and continued to communicate in Turkish, now in whispering voices,

attempting to avoid being a target for further social surveillance while still communicating in their shared language.

Similar opposition to adapting to the civilising language of Danish may have been at play when the children played behind closed doors, away from surveilling gazes, or what Ahmed (2007) calls ‘the hostile white gaze’ (p. 153), stating ‘no grown-ups allowed’, thus liberating themselves (momentarily) from the dominance of the coloniser (Fanon, 1967). Hiba, Berna and Eshan’s way of navigating the premise of normative whiteness knitted into Danish as the civilising language corresponds to Fanon’s understanding of how it feels to be the Other: ‘to always feel in an uncomfortable position, to be on one’s guard, to be prepared to be rejected’ (Fanon, 1952/2021, p. 57). In the light of Fanon’s theory, the three children were on guard, always prepared to be rejected (surveyed). Hiba, Berna and Eshan responded by steering towards each other and away from the acculturation processes. Whether the three children’s response was a form of subjectification or rejection, the continuous request to speak Danish silenced them. It truncated their entitlement to enjoy the ECEC centre’s play space freely, while sending them a message that their language is inferior. Thus, to pass as legible, legitimate and well-integrated participants, they must adjust their out-of-place bodies.

Summary and conclusion

Through the colonality of power (Quijano, 2000), this article looks beyond Nordic exceptionalism (Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2012) when discussing how ECEC educators’ regulatory language practice directed at racial-ethnic minoritised children can be understood as normative whiteness (Ahmed, 2007; Garner, 2014), affecting the children’s positions as legitimate participants in a Danish ECEC centre.

This article’s introduction showed how Danish ECEC centres, institutions of the nation-state, are inscribed in a politicised equation between integration and Danish language proficiency (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2017). Notions of national belonging and cultural sameness are expressed through assimilation policies which, the article argues, maintain racial logics of superordination and subordination similar to those created during colonialism (Padovan-Özdemir & Øland, 2022). This argument is taken on in the analyses of observations from a critical ethnographic fieldwork (Madison, 2020). The observations give insight into how a group of three 4–6-year-old racial-ethnic minoritised children speaking their shared first language, Turkish, were targeted by the understanding of integration as closely linked to Danish language proficiency, as the educators continuously asked the children to switch to Danish while expressing good intentions of supporting the children’s integration into Danish society.

Drawing on Fanon’s (1952/2021) understanding of language as an effective colonial tool for political and cultural domination, the three children’s responses to the educators’ regulatory language practice are analytically discussed as a subjectification to or rejection of Danish as the civilising language. Combined with Ahmed’s (2007)

understanding of how colonialism makes the world white, affecting bodies and social spaces, the analyses shed light on how the three children navigated the white space of the ECEC centre, which offers a fit to the white majority Danish-speaking children.

Seen through the lens of coloniality, the interconnections between colonialism, whiteness and notions of Danishness in the analyses is relevant to consider in the broader political and pedagogical debate on integrating racial-ethnic minoritised children. The analyses show how racial-ethnic minoritised children are rendered bodies out of place (Ahmed, 2000) and how educators become well-meaning accomplices in the reproduction of racialising and colonial structures.

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