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Not a Neutral Space: Early Childhood Education as a Site of Exclusion and Liberation

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Abstract

Research on exclusionary discipline often focuses on school-aged children (kindergarten to twelfth grade), overlooking carceral logics in early childhood education (ECE). This paper advances a conceptual understanding and policy-oriented analysis that situates exclusion in preschool, child care, and other ECE settings as systemic rather than individual, showing how surveillance, sorting, and regulation disproportionality affect young children. We demonstrate how diagnostic gatekeeping, inequitable access, and formal and informal removals are design choices embedded in systems that reproduce racialized and classed hierarchies. At the same time, ECE holds transformative potential. We highlight abolitionist and decolonizing approaches already in practice, including culturally sustaining and community-rooted models, healing-centered and trauma-responsive care, and reimagining classrooms as “homeplace” spaces of resistance and care. We conclude with recommendations for policy, research, and practice that reject surveillance and exclusion, expand access, and center family and community leadership. If exclusion begins before the pipeline, so must liberation.



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1. Introduction

Dominant scholarship and policy discourse on exclusionary discipline and the school-to-prison pipeline frequently situate the problem within kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12) school systems, focusing primarily on practices such as suspension, expulsion, and school-based policing (Gerlinger et al., 2021; Muñiz, 2021). While issues in this population remain critical, a growing body of evidence suggests that the conditions leading to exclusion and carcerality are present in systems that exist in early childhood education (ECE) settings, before kindergarten (Albritton et al., 2025; Bookser et al., 2021; Bryan et al., 2024; Ferrette et al., 2023; Zinsser et al., 2022). Recent evidence demonstrates how diagnostic gatekeeping, informal pushout, and other novel forms of exclusion operate within preschool programs, underscoring that exclusionary practices are embedded well before formal schooling begins (Bookser, 2025). By the time children arrive in elementary schools, many have already encountered processes of surveillance, sorting, and regulation in ECE settings such as preschool and childcare. These processes disproportionately affect young children who

are multiply marginalized by race, disability, class, language, and trauma histories. The underlying beliefs and structures that sustain exclusion, including racism, ableism, and settler colonialism, can be present within early learning environments and are not simply inherited from later stages of schooling. They are, in fact, legacies of organized attempts to consciously and subconsciously eradicate difference, even as Indigenous and culturally sustaining models point toward other possibilities (e.g., [Allen et al., 2021](#); [Tremblay et al., 2024](#); [Freeborn et al., 2023](#)).

As we write this in 2025, this analysis is grounded in a broader socio-political climate characterized by intensified efforts to dismantle equity-focused educational practices. ECE settings have increasingly come under scrutiny in this political moment, facing rising restrictions on culturally responsive pedagogy, public attacks on social-emotional learning, and renewed justifications for punitive discipline practices under the guise of safety or parental rights (e.g., [The White House, 2025](#)). At the same time, public narratives continue to frame ECE as a universally positive and developmentally appropriate intervention even as research documents pervasive patterns of preschool and childcare expulsion that disproportionately impact children of color and those with disabilities ([DuShane & Yu, 2023](#)). This tension obscures the material and ideological conditions through which ECE can operate as a site of social control and assimilation. While ECE is frequently romanticized as apolitical and inherently nurturing, it is deeply implicated in and culpable for the reproduction of racialized and classed hierarchies, particularly through institutional practices that discipline children, manage behaviors, and regulate access to care.

Even as exclusionary practices persist, the resilience of families and the commitments of the ECE workforce offer powerful starting points for envisioning liberatory ECE. Through a critical examination of the socio-political and historical conditions that shape ECE, this analysis highlights how surveillance, punishment, exclusion, and control (i.e., carceral logics) influence systems of access, belonging, care, and exclusion. Rather than positioning ECE as a neutral or universally protective space, this framework considers how ECE settings can operate as sites of institutional power and normative regulation. At the same time, it explores the potential to transform these environments through abolitionist, decolonizing, and justice-centered praxis. The strengths of ECE families and the workforce provide a foundation for imagining ECE environments beyond exclusion, and later discussion highlights how classroom practices can embody this vision. Engaging with the *Youth* Special Issue call, this paper conceptualizes ECE as a critical terrain for confronting exclusionary discipline and advancing liberatory educational futures. This paper advances the conversation on exclusionary discipline in three ways. First, it centers ECE as a critical space where carceral logics take root, extending the focus beyond K-12 schooling. Second, it situates exclusionary practice within the systemic inequities facing the ECE workforce. Finally, it advances an abolitionist vision for ECE, arguing for dismantling carceral logics and building an ECE system grounded in justice, care, and community.

Conceptual Framework: Power, Sorting, and Resource Distribution in ECE

This analysis is grounded in an ecological understanding of ECE as a complex system shaped by interactions among children, families, communities, educators, institutions, and the broader political and social environment ([Bronfenbrenner, 1979](#)). [Bronfenbrenner's \(1979\)](#) framework remains a cornerstone for examining how multiple, nested systems shape children's experiences and opportunities, and later elaborations continue to underscore its dynamic reciprocal nature ([Tudge et al., 2017](#)). Yet, as [Christensen \(2016\)](#) contends, ecological models often overlook how power circulates through these systems and how policies, professional norms, and cultural assumptions reproduce inequities even as they purport to support development. This multilevel interdependence is evidenced in empirical

work showing how contextual stressors, such as institutional fear and surveillance, heighten educators' punitive responses. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, preschool teachers' disciplinary decisions toward Black children intensified as external uncertainty and fear increased (Bookser et al., 2021), illustrating how ecological forces beyond the ECE setting reproduce exclusionary responses within it. Our nod to Bronfenbrenner, therefore, is both pragmatic and critical: we draw on the ecological metaphor to illuminate systemic interdependence while reorienting it toward questions of power, legitimacy, and control in ECE.

Educational decisions made in the early years, including referrals, evaluations, placements, and removals, are not simply technical responses to developmental variation. They are shaped by institutional values and broader social logics that determine whose needs are recognized, whose behaviors are tolerated, and whose families are deemed legitimate. Although ECE is often characterized as a space of care, its institutional structures and dynamics can, in some contexts, serve to regulate, segregate, and exclude. These dynamics are evident in patterns of early suspension and expulsion, the use of screening tools to label developmental differences that become a pathway to exclusion, the ongoing cultural mismatch between schools, school personnel, and communities, and the reliance on diagnostic frameworks to guide access to support services (Gilliam et al., 2016; Harry & Klingner, 2014; Running Bear, 2020; Skiba et al., 2006). Further, these practices should not be viewed solely through the lens of disproportionality. In many cases, they reflect the early operation of carceral thinking within educational systems. In this paper, we use the term *carceral logics* to describe the belief system and institutional practices that prioritize surveillance, punishment, exclusion, and control as necessary for maintaining safety and order in schools and shape early learning environments. In ECE, carceral logic appears when children are labeled as disruptive, when difference is treated as risk, and when removal is used as the primary response to nonconformity (Bryan et al., 2024; Giordano et al., 2025; Zinsser et al., 2022). These practices may seem routine, but they reflect institutional logics that pathologize differences and normalize exclusion. Carceral logics are not limited to formal policing or surveillance; rather, in ECE, they include embedded assumptions that behaviors must be "fixed," that order is achieved through adult control, and that exclusion is a reasonable response to noncompliance (Beneke et al., 2024).

Carceral logics in ECE emerge through practices that surveil children's behavior, frame difference as disruption, and remove children perceived to threaten institutional order. Concepts like developmental appropriateness, kindergarten readiness, or classroom harmony can sometimes serve as gatekeepers, determining who belongs and under what conditions. For example, when a child's behavior is labeled as "not appropriate" it may lead to exclusionary responses such as shortened school days or informal removal. This may not be solely because the child's behavior is unsafe or harmful, but because it disrupts institutional expectations of order and classroom management. Judgments about children's behavior are shaped by dominant norms that prioritize adult comfort over children's needs or rights. Within this context, trauma-informed care and infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH) frameworks offer critical insight into how emotional safety, relational trust, and caregiver responsiveness promote development (Horen et al., 2024). However, when applied without systemic critique, these frameworks can reinforce exclusion by framing children's behavior as disorder or delay, leading to increased monitoring or separation rather than changes to environments, structures, or policies (Boone Blanchard et al., 2021; Zulauf-McCurdy et al., 2024). While the intent of diagnostic and behavioral interventions is to provide individualized support, their implementation can be shaped by underlying bias or carceral thinking (Annamma et al., 2013). In such cases, they may inadvertently restrict children's access to inclusive learning environments

(Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016). This is particularly true for children whose development does not align with conventional norms.

This conceptual shift situates ECE within broader structures of power, sorting, and resource distribution that can shape institutional responses to children and families. It challenges deficit-based explanations of exclusion and calls attention to the institutional design of early learning systems that often reproduce social hierarchies. Educational responses to behavior reflect underlying assumptions about whose knowledge and ways of being are valued, whose presence is welcome, and who must be managed or removed. The broader structure of ECE in the United States remains fragmented, underfunded, and unevenly accessible, further stratifying opportunities for support and belonging (E. E. Davis & Sojourner, 2021; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021). Rather than centering disparities as the primary concern, this analysis foregrounds how institutional responses are shaped by history, policy, funding, and cultural expectations. A conceptual shift is needed to interrogate how ECE systems define risk, allocate support, and construct belonging, recognizing that these processes can either reproduce exclusion or advance liberation. Embracing this shift acknowledges that ECE is not a neutral space and positions it to fulfill its potential as a site for justice, healing, and collective care. As Boone Blanchard et al. (2021) emphasize, confronting inequities in ECE requires shifting the focus from changing children to transforming the systems and policies that shape their experiences. This reframing centers the responsibility for equity on institutions rather than on individual children and families.

2. Systemic Foundations of ECE Exclusion

2.1. Intergenerational and Structural Marginalization

Exclusion in ECE settings is deeply entangled with the marginalization of children and their families across generations. Long before a child enters a classroom, their family's access to early learning is shaped by intersecting forces such as poverty, housing instability, systemic racism, immigration enforcement, and the ongoing impacts of settler colonialism (Bulotsky-Shearer et al., 2025b; García & Weiss, 2017; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2025; Sandstrom & Huerta, 2013). These systemic conditions (i.e., poverty, racism, settler colonialism, immigration enforcement) do not exist in the margins of ECE; they are foundational to how eligibility, readiness, and fit are defined within the system. Nationally, only about 10% of eligible infants and toddlers are served through Early Head Start, and less than half of low-income three- and four-year-olds have access to high-quality preschool (Barnett et al., 2025; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021). Access to high-quality programs is even more limited in Tribal, rural, and under-resourced urban communities, where ECE “deserts” (i.e., severe shortage of ECE options) are common (Malik et al., 2018). It is important to acknowledge, however, that dominant measures of “quality” in ECE reflect racialized and classed assumptions, which means both access and the definition of what counts as “quality” must be interrogated (Iruka et al., 2022). These disparities reflect policy choices that underfund care infrastructure in marginalized communities while holding families to compliance-based standards. Instead of naming these conditions as a result of political and economic abandonment, ECE systems have frequently responded to these conditions through frameworks that individualize or pathologize families, avoiding engagement with the structural roots of inequity. Equity cannot be achieved through interventions that address only child-level outcomes while leaving systemic racism, ableism, and other structural forces intact. They argue for explicitly integrating anti-racists and anti-bias principles and practices into the design of ECE systems (Boone Blanchard et al., 2021). Minoritized children are often framed as at risk, and interventions target behavior rather than inequity. In this way, ECE becomes not a shield from systemic harm but a site

where that harm is reproduced through surveillance, categorization, and control. Zulauf-McCurdy et al. (2024) argues that anti-Blackness is not merely one of many biases present in ECE but a central mechanism through which inequities are produced and maintained. Using the R3ISE framework, they illustrate how anti-Blackness operates across historical, institutional, and interpersonal levels to shape the experiences of Black children and families in ways that constrain belonging and opportunity.

Federal and state policies have long reinforced these dynamics. Programs like Head Start were created with a dual promise: to promote young children's development and to intervene in cycles of poverty (Joshi et al., 2016; Zigler & Muenchow, 1992). While rooted in important civil rights gains, these programs have also functioned as tools of state oversight. Families are often required to participate in parenting programs, submit to home visits, and comply with shifting standards, while subsidies, quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS), and eligibility rules reward conformity to narrow caregiving models and penalize cultural variation. Scholars have noted that these definitions of "quality" are not neutral; they are rooted in a professional knowledge base that has historically reflected Eurocentric, white, middle-class norms (Durden & Curenton, 2021). For instance, subsidy access may require rigid work schedules or proof of employment, disadvantaging families with informal or nontraditional labor arrangements. QRIS operates as a systemic tool that privileges white, middle-class norms and devalues culturally sustaining practices such as communal caregiving, multilingual storytelling, and intergenerational learning (Romero-Little, 2010; Freeborn et al., 2023). As a result, programs and evaluators using these frameworks may regard families whose care practices fall outside these norms as deficient in their parenting, which can lead to lower quality ratings, denial of access to funding, pressure to alter caregiving approaches to "fit" program expectations. As such, for some immigrant families, undocumented parents, and those involved with the child welfare system, early education can feel less like an opportunity and more like an extension of state surveillance. This critique aligns with broader calls within the field to confront Eurocentric underpinnings of ECE quality standards and to center equity and diversity in both policy and practice (Alanis et al., 2021).

Native American families, in particular, have endured generations of state violence through forced assimilation, boarding schools, and the criminalization of Native parenting practices and serve here as a clear example of the conceptual framework used to interrogate ECE carceral logic (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2025; Romero-Little, 2010). One consequential example of how dominant definitions of "quality" marginalize families can be seen in the treatment of culturally sustaining caregiving traditions. Practices such as communal care, kinship ties, and non-Western understandings of development, are frequently dismissed or viewed with suspicion, despite evidence from Indigenous-led early years programs that such approaches are central to children's well-being (Freeborn et al., 2023; Moquino & Kitchens, 2021; Tremblay et al., 2024). Families who rely on extended kin networks or non-parental caregivers may be questioned or penalized under policies that privilege nuclear family models and require consistent participation from a single primary caregiver. In addition to caregiving practices, Native families who emphasize interdependence or language preservation may find their practices dismissed as "unstructured" or "noncompliant" with ECE classroom expectations. For Native children and families, these patterns cannot be separated from the historical trauma of the boarding school era, during which removal from family and community, corporal punishment, and military-style regimentation were used as deliberate tools of cultural erasure and assimilation (McCarty & Lee, 2014b). Further, these colonial logics persist, evident in the disproportionate suspension and expulsion of Native children; child welfare interventions in Indigenous communities; and the overidentification of Native children in special education categories such as learn-

ing disabilities and speech-language impairment, which can lead to segregated placements and reduced access to culturally sustaining instruction.

Education has long been used to enforce dominant cultural norms, contributing to intergenerational and structural marginalization. From its role in American colonization to other systemic efforts that have marginalized many other communities across generations, ECE settings and systems have often too often served to regulate rather than support. Families and children who fall outside white, middle-class norms are more likely to be referred to support services, subjected to behavioral screenings, or required to participate in interventions. These patterns create a system that not only reflects inequality but actively reproduces it. Early exclusion, therefore, is not merely about which children are removed; it is also about which families are welcomed, which are regulated, and which are told, in both subtle and overt ways, that they do not belong.

2.2. Diagnostic Gatekeeping

Diagnostic processes in ECE are commonly tools for support, designed to identify developmental needs and ensure appropriate services and specifically designed instruction are implemented. Developmental screenings, special education processes for obtaining an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP), a Section 504 evaluation, and behavioral observations are part of routine practice in many ECE settings. While these systems are intended to promote inclusion and instructional support, for decades, they have often served as early mechanisms of sorting (Powell, 2003). Labels are frequently applied through deficit-based frameworks that reflect institutional norms rather than holistic understandings of child development or recognition of contextual roots. Bookser (2025) examined how these diagnostic processes can become instruments of exclusion within the preschool ecology. They found that diagnostic actions such as referrals or evaluation are framed as supportive responses, yet they often result in exclusion from general education settings. As such, institutional interpretation of difference as disorder legitimizes removal rather than adaptation. Instead of functioning as a gatekeeper to resources, these diagnostic designations can lead to reduced expectations, segregated placements, and exclusion from general education settings (Harry & Klingner, 2014). This is true for children whose behaviors or communication styles fall outside of normative developmental expectations, especially when those differences are shaped by trauma, disability, or cultural variation (e.g., Bryan et al., 2024). For example, a bilingual child who code-switches between languages or uses nonstandard grammar may be flagged for a language delay rather than recognized as demonstrating linguistic flexibility. Or, a child who responds to stress with physical movement or verbal outbursts may be labeled “defiant” and routed into behavior intervention, rather than offered relational support. These practices reflect institutional interpretations of difference as disorder and too often remove children from inclusive settings rather than adapting environments to meet their needs.

The impact of diagnostic gatekeeping is not evenly distributed. Children of color, particularly Black and Latinx boys, are more likely to be referred for evaluations based on perceived behavioral concerns and less likely to be identified for early intervention services that emphasize strengths and developmental potential (Bryan et al., 2024; Harry & Klingner, 2014; Wright & Ford, 2016). Boone Blanchard et al. (2021) argue that early intervention and special education systems often reinforce deficit views by pathologizing children of color, locating problems within the child rather than confronting the systemic racism and bias embedded in eligibility processes. Native American children are disproportionately represented as learning disabled (Mouanoutoua, 2023). These referrals are often grounded in racialized and ableist interpretations of what counts as appropriate behavior, language,

or social interaction (Faircloth, 2015). Once labeled, these children are often removed from inclusive environments and placed in more restrictive settings under the assumption that they need to be managed or corrected (Ho, 2004). These decisions are framed as supportive but often reflect a system that uses perceived vulnerability to justify separation. National data show that young children with disabilities, particularly Black boys, are disproportionately placed in segregated preschool special education classrooms rather than supported through inclusive practices (U.S. Department of Education, 2025a, 2025b). This occurs despite clear evidence that inclusive settings produce better academic and social outcomes for most young children with disabilities (DEC/NAEYC, 2009; Strain & Bovey, 2011). Rather than challenging structural barriers, diagnostic processes can reinforce them, creating early pathways into exclusion and limiting opportunities for full participation in early learning. For instance, a three-year-old with a speech delay and a trauma history might be placed in a self-contained classroom based on disruptive behavior during circle time, rather than receiving speech therapy and relational support in a general education setting. The label becomes a justification for removal rather than a catalyst for inclusive planning.

2.3. Socioeconomic and Access-Based Exclusion

Access to ECE is often portrayed as expanding, yet it remains highly stratified by socioeconomic status. The cost of care, limited availability of subsidized slots, and complex eligibility requirements create significant barriers for families with low incomes and access to subsidized care varies by race, ethnicity, and state (Ullrich et al., 2019). Access is frequently determined by factors such as ZIP code, employment status, and immigration documentation, all of which are shaped by broader systems of inequality. For example, children in low-income neighborhoods are five times more likely to live in “child care deserts,” areas with insufficient licensed care slots for the population of young children (Malik et al., 2018). These conditions produce a layered system in which some children gain access to well-resourced programs while others are funneled into underfunded or unstable care environments, or excluded altogether. Chronic underinvestment in the ECE system has left families navigating a system where affordability and availability are deeply constrained. Recent national analyses show that child care costs consume a disproportionate share of family income, while educator wages remain among the lowest of all professions, perpetuating turnover and limiting program stability (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment & Child Care Aware of America, 2022). This economic instability compounds access inequities, particularly in communities already underserved by public investment.

Although “universal” pre-K is frequently championed as a public good, in practice it is far from universal. As an example, Latinx children are significantly underrepresented in publicly funded preschool programs relative to their population size, often due to language barriers, lack of outreach, and restrictive enrollment policies that require proof of employment or citizenship (U.S. Department of Education, 2025a, 2025b). In addition, in many states, universal pre-K fails to meet minimum standards for providing a high-quality program (Barnett et al., 2025). Enrollment often depends on residency boundaries, proof of work, or the ability to navigate burdensome application systems. Many of these programs do not provide transportation or only provide a partial day of services. Families most impacted by poverty and marginalization are least likely to benefit from these initiatives. Instead of leveling the playing field, the current structure of ECE reinforces economic and racial sorting, ensuring that access to opportunity remains unequal from the very beginning.

3. Informal and Formal Removal Mechanisms in ECE Settings

3.1. Informal Pushout

Informal pushout in ECE settings often occurs through quiet, bureaucratic, and seemingly benign interactions that result in children and families being encouraged to leave. Educators and administrators may call parents to pick children up early, suggest that a different program might be more appropriate, or imply that the child does not quite fit the classroom environment or that the program may be unable to support them adequately (Loomis et al., 2022; Murphy et al., 2024; Zinsser et al., 2022). Bookser (2025) provides evidence of how these informal mechanisms operate within preschool systems, identifying practices such as early release, disenrollment, and referral that function as novel forms of exclusion. These actions were often justified as supportive or necessary for safety and support but effectively removed children from learning environments. Such practices highlight what Allen et al. (2021) call for, moving beyond surface-level diversity efforts to intentionally cultivate anti-racist, for example, early childhood environments that resist exclusionary pressures. It also emphasizes that systems-centered responsibility is critical, not just child “fit” (Boone Blanchard et al., 2021). As Zinsser et al. (2022) document, teachers under emotional strain may frame young children as “not ready” or “not a good fit,” subtly pressuring families to withdraw rather than adapting the environment to meet children’s needs. These actions rarely appear in official documentation, yet they place immense pressure on families. Families from marginalized backgrounds are often made to feel unwelcome or unsupported (e.g., J. M. Davis & Hanline, 2018). The decision to leave is frequently presented as mutual or as being in the child’s best interest, which obscures the structural exclusion driving the process. In these conversations, families are often treated as if they lack expertise or authority, and their home environments are described in ways that emphasize perceived deficits (e.g., Morris et al., 2021). Rather than addressing how systems fail to meet the needs of diverse children and families, responsibility is shifted onto families to adjust or exit. For example, programs may repeatedly ask families to pick up their child early or suggest that a child’s behavior is incompatible with program resources, often without a comprehensive effort to provide support. Such practices effectively pressure families to withdraw without a formal expulsion (Zinsser et al., 2022, 2024). This informal removal process reflects broader patterns of exclusion and demonstrates how carceral logics can operate without any formal disciplinary action. Addressing these dynamics requires dialog and action across levels, including classroom practices, program policies, state regulatory systems, and policymaking, so that responsibility is not displaced onto families but assumed collectively within the structures that shape early learning.

3.2. Behavioral Control and Surveillance

Behavioral control and surveillance are common features of early childhood classrooms, although not supported as meeting recommended practices by professional organizations (NAEYC, 2019; DEC, 2014). Teachers report they are using tools such as clip charts, sticker systems, and color-coded behavior tracking to monitor and control children’s actions (O’Grady et al., 2024). These systems reward compliance and visibly mark those who deviate from behavioral expectations (e.g., Beneke et al., 2024), reinforcing hierarchies among children and shaping their understanding of what it means to be “good” in a school setting. Although such tools sometimes appear in parenting interventions, their use in classrooms functions differently, as public displays that normalize surveillance and control in place of relational trust. More concerning, however, are the uses of physical restraint and isolation, which persist in some ECE programs despite mounting evidence of their harm (Katsiyannis et al., 2017). Children who are perceived as unsafe, aggressive, or disruptive are more likely to be subjected to these interventions, even when their behaviors reflect

disability-related communication, trauma responses, or cultural expressions of emotion (Allen et al., 2022). These perceptions are not neutral. They are informed by implicit biases tied to race, disability, and class. The result is a system that punishes difference under the guise of order and safety. Rather than fostering emotional development and inclusive learning, these practices introduce children to behavioral control and surveillance as early conditions of participation in public education.

3.3. Zero Tolerance in Disguise

Suspension, expulsion, and other forms of removal in ECE settings are frequently presented as necessary actions. Even in states with suspension and expulsion limits in ECE, protections often apply only to state-funded preschool. Many private and community-based programs are excluded, and definitions of “suspension” and “expulsion” vary across states. Weak monitoring further allows practices to persist under other labels (Sneed et al., 2024). Indeed, recent survey research confirms that exclusionary discipline is not only widespread in preschool, but also community childcare programs, with over 60% of directors reporting suspensions and nearly 40% reporting expulsions in the past year (Giordano et al., 2025). As DuShane and Yu’s (2023) review shows, these practices have been consistently documented across two decades of research, with particular risks for Black boys and children with disabilities. In other words, programs and educators may avoid labeling a removal as suspension or expulsion, instead using other mechanisms such as citing classroom safety, suggesting that a child is not yet ready to participate in group learning, blaming families for a lack of support, or claiming the child’s ECE setting is not a good fit (Martin et al., 2017; Zinsser et al., 2022; Zulauf-McCurdy et al., 2024). These explanations rarely acknowledge the systemic factors that shape such judgments or the structural barriers that limit support options. What appears to be a child-centered or neutral decision is often a reflection of institutional discomfort with behavioral differences, cultural variances, or the perceived challenges of working with children whose development does not align with normative expectations.

The use of exclusionary discipline in ECE environments is not evenly applied. Research shows clear patterns of bias in how these removals are carried out, with disproportionate impacts on young children of color, children with disabilities, multilingual learners, and children who have experienced trauma (e.g., Brown, 2014; Bryan et al., 2024; Skiba et al., 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2025a, 2025b). These children are more likely to be viewed through a lens of risk rather than one of potential. Instead of investing in relationship-based supports or differentiated strategies, programs often default to removal as a tool of classroom management (DuShane & Yu, 2023). This response mirrors zero-tolerance practices in K–12 settings, where exclusion is used to control rather than to care. In ECE, where the promise is one of belonging, safety, and growth, these removals represent a profound contradiction. They signal to children and families that participation in public education depends not on the system’s ability to respond to diverse needs, but on the child’s ability to conform to narrow definitions of readiness and fit.

4. Carceral Logic in the Early Learning Lattice

The early learning lattice, a term used here to describe the interconnected web of early care and education systems, policies, and cultural expectations, functions not as a neutral structure for supporting development, but as a stratified system that regulates access, belonging, and opportunity. From child care subsidy rules to diagnostic labeling, classroom management strategies to enrollment priorities, children and families are funneled through pathways shaped by compliance, surveillance, and institutional definitions of readiness and fit. These pathways are not linear or universally accessible. They reflect system-based

decisions about who is served, how support is distributed, and what forms of care are recognized as legitimate.

Across this lattice, carceral logics operate subtly and pervasively. Studies of ECE practice reveal how disciplinary responses are shaped by institutional contexts, fear, and surveillance rather than by children's behavior alone (e.g., [Bookser et al., 2021](#)). Similar patterns appear in the diagnostic and bureaucratic processes that rationalize exclusion as developmental concern or family choice (e.g., [Bookser, 2025](#); [Zinsser et al., 2022](#)). ECE programs may track behavior in ways that reward docility and mark difference. Screening tools may flag bilingualism or trauma responses as delays. Policies may prioritize "workforce participation" over caregiving relationships, and eligibility systems may deny access to families who do not conform to nuclear, middle-class norms. What appears on the surface as developmental concern or classroom harmony often masks a deeper process of sorting, one that disproportionately disadvantages children who are Black, disabled, multilingual, or living with economic insecurity.

This paper has shown how early exclusion is produced and justified not only through overt punishment, but through systemic logics that normalize surveillance, conditional access, and conformity and shifts responsibility away from the institutions and onto the ECE workforce, families, and children. The lattice does not merely precede the school-to-prison pipeline. It is a foundational structure that introduces carceral thinking into children's earliest educational experiences, teaching them which bodies are welcomed, which must be managed, and which are positioned outside the bounds of care. In what follows, we turn toward abolitionist approaches to early childhood education that reject these conditions and imagine new forms of relational, liberatory practice grounded in justice, belonging, and collective care.

5. Toward Liberating ECE

In this section, exclusionary practices are examined in relation to the structural inequities that shape the ECE workforce, including low pay, high turnover, and limited access to preparation. These practices are framed as products of systemic conditions rather than as failings of individual educators. Despite the harms outlined throughout this paper, ECE holds transformative potential. Across the country, and especially within communities historically marginalized by race, disability, language, and poverty, many early childhood educators, caregivers, and community-based programs are already working to disrupt carceral logics. Some policy makers, leaders, and practitioners are not waiting for permission or reform. They are building classrooms rooted in care rather than compliance, challenging systems that normalize exclusion, and co-creating environments where all children can thrive. Liberating ECE does not begin from a blank slate. It builds upon generations of cultural resistance, ancestral knowledge, and everyday acts of care that have long existed within families and communities.

Abolition and decolonization in ECE require rejecting the premise that behavioral or developmental difference is inherently disruptive. It involves challenging the systems that punish children for nonconformity and instead investing in structures that sustain connection, healing, and collective well-being. It is not merely the removal of punitive and exclusionary practices and policies. It is the intentional design of new systems grounded in dignity, justice, and relational care. This shift is already underway, led by educators, organizers, activists, and cultural leaders who are cultivating early learning environments that resist harm and affirm life. The following subsections illustrate several foundational approaches that contribute to an abolitionist vision of ECE.

5.1. Culturally Sustaining and Community-Rooted Models

While abolitionist approaches seek to dismantle carceral structures in ECE, decolonization practices work to dismantle the colonial logics that have long defined educational systems, replacing them with models grounded in community governance, cultural survival, and self-determination. Movements to revise school logics through community-based schooling reaffirm identity, language, and belonging, positioning these as non-negotiable elements of quality and readiness. Liberatory early learning is deeply informed by culturally sustaining and community-rooted models that honor families and communities as essential holders and transmitters of knowledge (Lansing, 2017). These approaches resist deficit-based assumptions and assimilationist standards by centering identity, language, tradition, and place. They affirm that children do not enter ECE environments empty but already embedded in cultural and relational systems that support their growth (Garcia, 2022). Although there is limited empirical evidence directly comparing exclusionary discipline rates across program types, research does indicate that culturally sustaining, community-based programs emphasize relational trust, family partnerships, and holistic child development while reducing family-school conflict and promoting equity, which indirectly works against exclusionary logics (e.g., McCarty & Lee, 2014a; Moore et al., 2014). These orientations reduce the emphasis on compliance and control, suggesting the potential to disrupt exclusion, though further study is needed.

In Indigenous communities, for example, early learning is often grounded in relationships with land, ancestors, and kinship networks. Native-led early education programs, including many Tribal Head Start and language revitalization initiatives, structure learning around seasonal cycles, storytelling, communal responsibility, and spiritual grounding (Romero-Little, 2010). Others underscore that Indigenous co-developed early years programs exemplify how liberation can be structurally embedded in ECE programs serving Native children (e.g., Freeborn et al., 2023; Tremblay et al., 2024). Freeborn et al. (2023), for example, highlight how Indigenous families in urban contexts encounter assimilation pressures in mainstream programs, and why culturally safe, family-defined indicators of quality matter. In these spaces, readiness is not defined by compliance or academic precocity but by relational balance and cultural presence. Programs rooted in Diné, Pueblo, Apache, or other sovereign educational traditions reject the fragmentation of child development into discrete domains. Instead, they hold development as a holistic process that reflects interdependence, cultural continuity, and community well-being (Moquino & Kitchens, 2021). In similar ways, many Black-led early childhood programs and collectives are building liberatory models grounded in historical traditions of collective care and political education. These programs affirm racial identity, family histories, and cultural practices as central to child development. They create classroom cultures rooted in resistance to surveillance and harm, and offer children opportunities to engage in creativity, storytelling, movement, and critical questioning. Afrocentric ECE curricula, home-based learning collectives, and multigenerational care programs provide environments where Black children can flourish in ways not bound by dominant expectations of discipline or conformity.

Rather than being viewed as alternatives or exceptions, these culturally rooted models must be recognized as essential to building early learning systems that are genuinely liberatory. They demonstrate that abolitionist practice is not only possible but already happening in communities that have long resisted state control and deficit frameworks.

5.2. Healing-Centered and Trauma-Responsive Approaches

Healing-centered approaches to early childhood education offer powerful alternatives to punitive or behavior-focused models. Unlike trauma-informed frameworks that narrowly define trauma as individual injury, healing-centered engagement situates trauma

within collective, historical, and structural conditions. It focuses not only on mitigating harm but on cultivating joy, belonging, and community connection as essential dimensions of healing.

In the early learning context, healing-centered approaches reshape the emotional landscape of classrooms. Rather than interpreting behaviors through a lens of disorder or risk, educators are encouraged to see children's actions as expressions of unmet needs, stress, or attempts to regain connection. Co-regulation, emotional literacy, and consistent relational presence have become primary tools of guidance and support. When these practices are deeply embedded in the daily rhythms of a classroom, they replace control with curiosity and punishment with empathy.

These approaches also call for adult healing. Educators in healing-centered environments are supported through reflective supervision, wellness resources, and opportunities for emotional integration. The goal is not to train teachers to tolerate challenging behavior, but to create cultures where adults and children alike are able to show up with vulnerability and be met with care. Programs that center healing often draw on Indigenous, Black, and feminist traditions of community wellness and restorative justice. They acknowledge that harm cannot be prevented through surveillance alone, and that safety emerges through trust, connection, and cultural grounding.

Healing-centered models are particularly powerful in communities impacted by inter-generational trauma, systemic violence, and resource deprivation. In these contexts, early learning environments that prioritize healing can function as restorative spaces where children and families begin to experience what bell Hooks (1996) called "a return to the self."

5.3. *Rejecting Surveillance, Embracing Relationship*

Surveillance-based discipline practices are deeply entrenched in early childhood classrooms. Tools such as color-coded behavior charts, sticker systems, incident tracking apps, and public reward systems are widely used despite limited empirical evidence of long-term benefit and emerging research on potential harm. While few studies isolate the effects of these tools in early learning, qualitative and practitioner evidence suggests that universal, visibility-based approaches often function through public comparison rather than relational support (Brownell & Parks, 2021). Children come to read these systems as hierarchies of "good" and "bad" peers, shaping identity, belonging, and perceived worth within racialized and gendered discourses even when teachers express warmth and care (Brownell & Parks, 2021). Similarly, research on teachers' beliefs about social competence instruction shows that behavior-management practices are rarely implemented with reflective, individualized, and culturally sustaining intentionality envisioned by developmentally appropriate practice frameworks (Kim & Han, 2015). The use of these systems in classroom settings function less as supports for children's growth than as mechanisms for sorting and managing individuals and groups, reinforcing compliance as a primary marker of success. Their persistent use by the ECE workforce reflects not individual failings, but the constrained choices available to overworked, underpaid, and under-supported ECE workforce. They rely on the logic that children must be watched, tracked, and corrected in order to be acceptable. Research further shows that these practices disproportionately constrain the play and expression of Black boys in early childhood, for example, where normal variations in activity or emotion are framed as misbehavior subject to heightened disciplinary responses (Bryan et al., 2024; Zimmerman, 2024). The distinction, therefore, is not categorical but philosophical and implementation-based. It lies in whether structure supports belonging or enforces compliance.

The Pyramid Model offers a clear example of the shift from token-based, compliance-oriented management to system-level practices rooted in relationships and shared values.

As a tiered framework for promoting social-emotional competence and preventing challenging behavior (Fox & Hemminger, 2009), it demonstrates how structure can operate through reflection rather than surveillance. When implemented with fidelity, the Pyramid Model builds environments in which adult intentionality and systemic supports replace the need for externalized reward and punishment. In fact, recent evidence demonstrates that high-fidelity implementation of the Pyramid Model leads to significant reductions in challenging behavior and increases in children's social competence precisely because educators receive sustained coaching and environmental supports that strengthen responsive, preventative practice rather than external control (Bulotsky-Shearer et al., 2025a). In contrast, token-based and publicly visible systems may target children deemed "challenging," amplifying teacher bias and making perceived difference more visible to peers. These practices risk defining children by moments of noncompliance rather than by patterns of growth or relationship. Centered on coaching, reflection, and partnership, the Pyramid Model replaces visibility and control with trust and belonging.

Other relational frameworks reflect this same shift. Restorative circles, a practice drawn from restorative justice and Indigenous traditions, emphasizes dialog and community repair (Huang et al., 2023). IECMH-informed coaching integrates infant and ECE mental health principles into teacher support and reflection (Horen et al., 2024). Anti-bias curriculum frameworks center on equity and identity in early learning (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020). Each of these approaches become liberatory not through their structure alone, but through the intentional dismantling of deficit ideologies and the centering of children's full humanity. In these settings, educators are supported to reflect on their own implicit biases, to remain present in moments of emotional escalation, and to engage in guidance practices that affirm children rather than punish them. Relational discipline is not a soft alternative to control. It is a rigorous practice of attention, presence, and accountability. It acknowledges that real safety comes not from compliance, but from trust.

Building on this foundation, abolitionist early learning rejects the carceral belief that safety depends on compliance and control. It replaces surveillance with relationships. Instead, they redefine authority as relational, shared, and rooted in mutual respect. They build classroom communities where expectations are co-created, where emotional expression is normalized, and where repair is possible when harm occurs. Beneke et al. (2024) illustrate how dismantling carceral logics in the classroom can occur through intentional, community-rooted pedagogies that affirm children's identities, redistribute power, and create space for collective decision-making. While their work centers early literacy, the principles they outline are broadly applicable to early learning and underscore that abolitionist approaches can be embedded in daily practice. An abolitionist vision for ECE must also directly confront anti-Blackness and colonization of Native American child and family practices as a foundational structure of exclusion. For example, Zulauf-McCurdy et al. (2024) call for advancing equitable science and practice that centers the cultural assets of Black children and families while resisting the erasure of Black history and the normalization of racial harm in early learning spaces.

5.4. Reimagining Early Learning as Homeplace

The Black feminist scholar, bell hooks describes "homeplace" as a site of resistance and recovery, a space where Black families cultivated dignity, emotional well-being, and cultural integrity in the face of structural harm. Homeplace was not a retreat from the world, but a practice of building wholeness in a society committed to fragmentation. It was a political act grounded in care. Reimagining ECE as homeplace requires a fundamental reorientation. Rather than viewing classrooms as preparation for school systems that demand conformity, we can envision them as spaces of refuge and relational power. Homeplace classrooms are

rooted in affirmation. They are spaces where children are not judged against developmental checklists, but welcomed as full people with stories, identities, and needs that matter. In this vision, homeplace is made visible through multilingual signage, family photos, communal storytelling, sensory comfort, and emotionally responsive teaching. It shows up in environments where difference is not corrected but celebrated.

Homeplace is not a metaphor. It is a design principle and a daily practice. It is present when a child is allowed to cry without being removed, when a caregiver's knowledge is trusted, and when a teacher chooses to sit beside rather than stand above. Homeplace is not nostalgic or idealized. It is a critical intervention in a system that often sees young children through the lens of risk and disorder. It insists that children, especially those who are Black, Indigenous, disabled, multilingual, or living with poverty, deserve to grow in spaces that protect their wholeness. This vision is not speculative. It is already alive in many early childhood programs, including Native language nests, culturally sustaining family childcare networks, Black-led community schools, and trauma-responsive early learning centers. These spaces demonstrate that abolition is not only the refusal of harm, but the presence of love, care, and imagination. They remind us that early learning can be a site of justice from the start.

6. Conclusions

Exclusion does not begin with suspension. It begins with the belief that access must be earned, that belonging is conditional, and that certain children must be managed or removed in order to preserve order. These beliefs are not inevitable. They are shaped by systems that reward compliance, pathologize differences, and normalize control. As this paper has argued, these carceral logics take root long before a child enters the K–12 system. They are embedded in the early learning lattice, shaping decisions about who is welcome, who is labeled, and who is pushed out. Just as early childhood systems can reflect carceral values, they also carry the possibility of embodying liberatory ones (e.g., [Allen et al., 2021](#); [Boone Blanchard et al., 2021](#)). If the structures of early learning can be used to surveil, categorize, and exclude, they can also be used to affirm, protect, and transform. In every setting where a child has been told that they are too much, there is potential for a classroom where they are held with care. In every policy that defines worthiness through readiness, there is the opportunity to redefine readiness through relationship. Carceral and liberatory logics are not fixed outcomes. They are choices that are made visible through our practices, policies, and beliefs. To build abolitionist early childhood education, action is needed across multiple domains:

Policy must shift to eliminate practices that tie access to surveillance, compliance, or diagnostic gatekeeping. Funding models should reward inclusion, cultural responsiveness, and family leadership rather than narrow definitions of quality or school readiness. Eligibility systems should be redesigned to expand access rather than ration care. Discipline and removal policies must be replaced with structures that prioritize relationship, regulation, and repair.

Research must reorient toward structural critique and community knowledge. Rather than focusing only on disproportionality or individual child outcomes, research should examine how systems are designed, whose knowledge is legitimized, and what possibilities exist beyond dominant developmental paradigms. This includes documenting liberatory practices already in use and elevating Indigenous, Black, and culturally grounded epistemologies as central to the field.

Practice must be reimagined to center care, connection, and collective well-being. Educators and programs must be supported to move away from compliance-based models and toward healing-centered and relational approaches. Professional development, coaching,

and consultation should be grounded in abolitionist principles that affirm the dignity and humanity of all children. Families must be recognized not as subjects of intervention, but as co-creators of inclusive, liberatory learning spaces.

This paper locates carceral logics within ECE, reframing exclusion as beginning not with suspension or expulsion, but with conditional belonging. By naming how these logics are embedded in the ECE lattice and by offering an abolitionist framework for policy, research, and practice, the paper aims to advance new directions for transforming ECE systems. If exclusion begins before the pipeline, then liberation must begin there as well. Early childhood education holds the potential to become a place where justice is not postponed but nurtured from the very beginning. By choosing to hold liberatory logic across policy, research, and daily practice, we bring into view a future where care is unconditional, belonging is guaranteed, and every child is met with the unwavering belief that they are already enough.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

CEC	Council for Exceptional Children
DEC	Division for Early Childhood
ECE	Early childhood education
IECMH	Infant and early childhood mental health
IEP	Individualized Education Program
IFSP	Individualized Family Service Provider
NAEYC	National Association for the Education of Young Children
NCES	National Center for Education Statistics
NIEER	National Institute for Early Education Research
OCR	Office of Civil Rights
QRIS	Quality rating and improvement systems

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