Early Child Development and Care

The Black baby doll doesn

The Black baby doll doesn't fit the disconnect between early childhood diversity policy, early childhood educator practice, and children's play

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Background

The C _ __ _ A _ . ? (CWTAR) study is an ongoing research project based in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. The project includes the following research questions: What strategies or materials do ECEs use to discuss (or not discuss) race with children? What discourses about race and racial identities are employed by ECEs and by children? How does race factor into children's play? Who benefits from the use of certain discourses, and who is disadvantaged? Some of our project goals include: How can we best foster conversations about 'race' in early childhood settings? How can we support early childhood teachers in fostering these conversations? How can we best support children's positive identification with 'race'? Data collection included interviews with 17 professionals in the field of early childhood education and care, including ECEs, centre managers, and administrators at a variety of sites; interviews with 21 children aged 2.5–5 years who attended one particular childcare centre; participant observation with 12 children in a combined preschool/kindergarten class from that same child care centre. On the parental consent form, parents were asked "how would you identify your child's ethnic identity(ies) and/or race(s)? Answers included: East Asian and Caucasian; Caucasian; Goan & Punjabi/South Asian/Brown/Person of Colour; Egyptian, Coptic, Orthodox, Visible minority; White; Scottish/Chinese; Caucasian, he is not aware of his ethnic identity, maybe Irish; White, Jewish; ½ European and ½ Afro-Trinidadian Canadian; White; Canadian Serbian; Chinese; White; We usually don't think in those terms about our children; White with a bi-racial mother; Latin; Caucasian, Italian-Brazilian; Taiwanese; Chinese; Asian; A mix of Armenian, Koptic, Lebanese, Jordanian. Early childhood professionals filled out a demographic form prior to the start of the interview. They were asked to answer eleven questions including their race. Of those who responded, one person identified as Black, one as Brown, one as Filipino, Eight as White or Caucasian, two as South Asian, one as Italian, one as mixed, and one as Hispanic. One melting pot, one Canadian, one Caucasian, one former Yugoslavian/Bosian, one Fillipino, one Sri Lankan, two Italians, one of African Descent, one English, one English/Italian/Native Canadian/Scot, one Caribbean. A content analysis of 12 policy documents was also undertaken. These documents include provincial and municipal legislation, as well as centre-based policies specific to the sites in our study.

The theoretical frameworks that undergird our study are Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Post-Structural theory.

Critical race theory

CRT originated in legal studies and is based on the premise that race is a social construct, race-based belief systems make up all parts of our social life, and that the approach to race by (the dominant) society is colour blindness, or the idea that race does not matter (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). When used in education, CRT scholars examine the ways in which racism is practised across institutions by looking at the power structures embedded in educational policies and practices. According to CRT, these power structures are based on white privilege and further marginalize people of colour (Milner, 2013). Generally, CRT has not been employed by researchers in the field of ECE (see MacNaughton & Davis, 2009 for a notable exception), although attention to issues of 'race' has been taken up in anti-bias, anti-racist and postcolonial approaches to ECE curriculum (see Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2014 for a review and discussion of these approaches as they connect to children's play).

Post-structural theory

We draw on the work of MacNaughton, Davis, and Smith (2010), who in turn draw on Foucault (1972), and assert

Discourses of 'race' like all discourses, are inherently linked with power/knowledge relationships. Knowledge is constructed within and through privileged powerful dominant positions, and those enacting and embodying these dominant knowledges are accorded power and privilege … We contend that young children enact, produce, and perform their subjectivities from the shadow of 'race' discourses that circulate within and around them … . (pp. 136–137)

In short, children are active agents who draw on the discourses available to them in the historical, social and political context in which they live. The discourses they draw upon may be observed in their play.

A note about the term diversity

The term 'diversity' appears frequently in early years policy documents and in various forms in discourses on 'race' and difference. Children's author and illustrator Maclear (2016) has noted how often the term 'diversity' is used in the world of children's literature world without agreement about its meaning. Maclear describes a number of ways the term is employed, including 'backdrop diversity' in which 'difference is portrayed as non-threatening and universal' (para. 9); and 'encyclopedic diversity' which depicts 'a glorious array of costume, décor, landscape, homes, to represent worldliness and/or cosmopolitanism'

education and refer to physical objects in the room, or to music. These guidelines are quite specific and often include precise quantities of 'diverse' objects that should be present in the classroom. For example, 'Two or more books which include diverse people/cultures are accessible'

Barron (2009) has also pointed out that the broader structures and practices of the classroom can exclude children who are racialized or members of non-dominant cultural groups. For example, a dramatic play centre that is set up as a type of store or cultural institution that is familiar only to White children serves to marginalize children from other social groups, who may lack the insider cultural knowledge required to know what is 'supposed to happen' in such a setting. The presence of stan-dalone objects in the play space (e.g. an 'ethnic food' on the shelf or a costume in the dress-up box) does little to mitigate this exclusion. Educators may further contribute to this marginalization by expecting and promoting particular roles and types of play in the space, whether intentionally or not.

We also know that young children notice race and other forms of difference, and that without explanations from adults, children form their own conclusions (often biased and inaccurate) about observable social groups (Farago, Sanders, & Gaias, 2015). We can expect that in an environment in which 'diverse' images and artefacts abound while planned and spontaneous discussion about these materials is absent, children will construct their own meanings about both the materials and the social groups to whom these materials 'belong.' We can also expect that these meanings will reflect the dynamics of power and oppression at work in classroom social interactions, and in the larger society (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). In the next section, we share some examples of children's play with 'diverse' materials that seem to support this view.

Observations and discussion

After approval from the University's Research Ethics Board, participant observation was conducted by three research assistants in a combined preschool/kindergarten classroom at an urban childcare centre that identifies itself as following a play-based curriculum. The centre has obtained AQI scores in the 'meets expectations to exceeds expectations' range for the previous two years, indicating that the classroom in which observations took place contained all the required 'diverse' materials. Each of the research assistants had worked in the field and they were registered with the College of ECEs, as is required in the province of Ontario. One of the researcher assistants was employed as an ECE at the observation site, but did not work in the classroom where participant observation took place. Observation sessions lasted two to three hours each for a total of 29 hours and took place several times per week over the course of two months. The goal of the observations was to locate and map the dynamics of 'race' across a group of children (MacNaughton & Davis, 2009, p. 44). We looked at patterns of play, peer interactions, and social relationships. We paid attention to characters specific children played/took up, areas where children were playing, who directed the play, who led and who followed, who had an active role, and the props or physical objects used in the play and how they were used.Information about the children's age and the descriptions of racial identity were provided by parents during the consent process (the latter was noted previously). The observations are analyzed in keeping with ideas drawn from CRT and Post-Structuralism.The researcher ('MM') in all episodes is the first author.

Episode one

Sarah (age 4, Egyptian) and Ruby (age 3.5, half European and half Afro-Trinidadian) were playing in the dramatic play centre. Ruby was holding a White baby doll while Sarah was holding a Black baby and rummaging through a basket of clothes. She uncovered a White baby in the clothes basket, picked it up and dropped the Black doll on the floor. Sarah told Ruby the babies were hungry and needed to be fed. The two girls laid their babies on the table and pretended to feed them carrots; they did not pretend to feed another Black baby that was also lying on the table. Ruby and Sarah then brought all three dolls from the table to an empty bookshelf adjacent to the dramatic play centre, and said they were putting the babies to bed because they were sick. They placed the two White dolls together on one shelf and the Black doll on another shelf. I pointed to the Black doll and asked why that baby was sleeping by herself; Ruby responded, 'She didn't fit.' Sarah soon announced that the babies were awake. Both children picked up a White doll and left the Black doll on the shelf. While the children selected some new clothes and began dressing their dolls, I pointed to the Black doll that was still lying on the floor, where Sarah had dropped it earlier. I asked, 'Whose baby is this?' Sarah replied, 'I dunno. I'm not having that one.

In this episode, the two children seemed to be exhibiting a clear preference for White dolls over Black dolls, particularly Sara who appears to be the leader in this play episode. This preference echoes the finding from the classic doll study conducted by Clark and Clark (1939) over 75 years ago where children when presented with the choice of White or Black dolls, and regardless of their own 'race,' overwhelmingly selected White dolls. As Grieshaber and McArdle (2010) suggest, both children, including Ruby who has Black family members but who seems to be picking up on messages Sara is communicating of the desirableness of White skin, are reproducing discourses of race and power relations in their play.

Episode two

Sarah was playing independently at the dollhouse. She had three White female dolls, two of which were blonde and very fair-skinned while one had brown hair and a slightly darker skin tone. Sarah put all three dolls on to a bed in the dollhouse and brought another doll into the room. This doll was a male with dark brown skin, wearing a long white robe and a red and white keffiyeh head scarf. I asked Sarah who all the dolls were. She told me the two blonde dolls were the mom and the baby, and the brown-haired doll was the sister. She then told me the brown-skinned male doll was the witch, and that 'She is mean to them.' She told me, 'The witch made them all dead because she kicked their heart.' We then had the following interaction:

MM: How can you tell that she's a witch?
S: She's mean.
MM: What about how she looks? Is there any way we can know she's a witch?
S: She's brown.
MM: What does that mean?
S: My mom says brown in Spanish is lo-kee. Lokee lokee lokee. Like Goldilocks.
MM: Oh. Is Goldilocks brown?
S: No, she's White.

In this episode, Sarah chose a brown-skinned doll to play the role of a scary antagonist who harms the White dolls. Sarah herself identified the character's brownness as a way of knowing he is a witch. Interestingly, Sarah consistently used female pronouns when talking about this doll, perhaps because she interpreted its long robe as a woman's dress. Sarah's response, 'My mom says brown

to borrow elements from Japanese and Chinese history and culture (e.g. ninjas, samurais, names such as 'Master Wu' and 'Chen'). It is arguably quite problematic for children to have access to these play materials, which depict stereotypical representations of Asian people and culture, without any critical discussion initiated by teachers. Of course, we cannot be certain that no such discussion ever took place; however, as we discuss shortly, ECEs working at this site who participated in interviews indicated that very few intentional discussions about race ever occurred with the children.

Social exclusion episodes

During participant observation sessions, several instances of social exclusion during which racial dynamics could have been at play were observed. Because some of the children involved in these episodes did not have parental consent to participate in the research, these incidents cannot be discussed. During participant observation research in an American preschool class, Park (2011) noted that initially, 'It was difficult to assess whether there was a racial or ethnic component to specific exclusionary behaviours … No child ever explained a conflict in racialized terms or used racial epithets.' (p. 408). However, when Park (2011) analysed children's friendship networks and overall patterns of social interaction, she found clear evidence of children racially segregating themselves, as well as disproportionately high rates of social exclusion experienced by children of colour. Such an in-depth analysis of children's social behaviour was not possible in the CWCl(25C7nc1,)]TJculture

Discussion and recommendations

A growing body of research lends support to the idea that young children are aware of 'race' and reproduce existing power dynamics in their play and social interactions. Researchers from the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States, Canada, and elsewhere have written about ways to work with issues of racism in early childhood settings, particularly through anti-racist approaches (e.g. see the work of Janmohamed, 2005; MacNaughton & Davis, 2009; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Berikoff, 2008). Yet, many ECEs persistently adhere to a 'colourblind' ideology (Boutte, Lopez-Robertson, & Powers-Costello, 2011), avoiding any discussion about race due to a belief that their students are too young to understand bias. Very few ECEs interviewed for the CWTAR study indicated that any race-related incidents ever occurred in their classrooms, or that children used racially or culturally 'diverse' play materials in any problematic ways. Yet, within just seven sessions of participant observation, significant evidence that the children have a clear understanding of racial categories, exhibit a

Observing children's play

Pacini-Ketchabaw (2014) asserts that '[e]ducators need to become vigilant to how racist and gendered discourses might creep into children's conversations in play encounters' (p. 73). As discussed earlier, it can be difficult or impossible to categorize individual episodes of play or social interaction as incidents of racism (Park, 2011). However, by observing and analysing children's behaviour over time, patterns may emerge that suggest that children are actively constructing their own understanding of race, and that these understandings play a role in organizing children's social interactions and their preferences for and use of play materials. As discussed previously, in interviews conducted as part of the CWTAR study, most ECEs reported that children's play and social interactions were seldom if ever influenced by 'race' or racism. We suggest that without intentionally and systematically observing and analysing children's behaviour over time, it is easy to overlook 'race' as an influencing factor in the classroom, particularly for White teachers who do not feel the impact of racism on their daily lives.
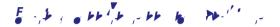
We propose that ECEs would benefit from taking on the role of close observer of children's play, in order to examine more intentionally how children are using materials in the classroom and to consider racialized patterns in friendships and social exclusion. This focused observation and analysis of children's behaviour could produce greater awareness of children's understanding of 'race,' and enable ECEs to develop intentional plans to address issues of 'race,' difference and bias in the classves3(392n43outsidena395)2s22

range of teacher pedagogical positioning in play: teacher proximity to children's play; teacher intent is in parallel with the children's play; teaching is following the children's play; teachers are engaged in sustained collective play with groups of children; teacher is inside the children's imaginary play. She asserts that

> [w]hen the teacher is part of the imaginary play, she/he has an opportunity from inside of the play, to develop the play further, introducing complexity and I would suggest genuinely using learning goals that are detailed in curriculum to help solve the tensions in imaginary situations. (p. 1812)

We suggest that teachers purposefully engage with children in their play in order to extend and challenge their understandings and use of particular play materials that are linked to 'race' gender, and other differences.

A fourth recommendation for practice is for ECEs to develop and implement strategies to foster children's positive identifications with race. Here, clearly, authentic diversity of classroom materials is important: all children should see themselves represented and reflected in many positive ways throughout the classroom environment. However, as we have argued, the diverse classroom environment must be thoughtfully constructed and accompanied by ongoing discussions and interventions if it is to be effective. Children's author and illustrator Myers (2014) has argued that books should function as mirrors, reflecting children's lived experiences, but also as maps that offer expansive imaginative possibilities for the future. Myers draws attention to the scarcity of books that fulfil this need for children of colour; he notes that characters of colour, when they appear at all, are most often found in historical tales of slavery and civil rights, or as background characters in someone else'e322Tm0Explici3.2(06os)-eac211(go304((wabo1.9.5(e)]TJ3/T1_10)]3241.6730Td1(

et al. (2015) note that the available literature on bias reduction interventions in early childhood suggests the need for lessons to explicitly address racism; 'positive talk focusing on treating others kindly and fairly is not enough' (p. 51).

Boutte et al. (2011), Husband (2012), and others who take an anti-racist approach to early education advocate using books and other media to provoke discussion about race; they also emphasize the importance of explicitly naming and interrogating incidents of racism in order to counter the development of stereotypical beliefs and bias, and to provide young children with tools to challenge discrimination and inequity when they encounter it.

For this teaching to be effective, it is critical that educators engage in a continuous cycle of self-reflection and focused, thoughtful observation of children's play and social interactions, and make use of opportunities to be inside children's play. Farago et al. (2015) caution, 'Teachers have to be vigilant that the messages they intend to send children are what children take away' (p. 51). Observation of children's play can provide educators with useful information about the social climate of the classroom and the children's current understanding of 'race,' and enable them to plan appropriate interventions, and moving inside children's play can enable such intervention or understand of children's understandings to occur spontaneously. Ongoing self-reflection is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of one's teaching, strengthen one's awareness of how race and other forms of difference influence classroom dynamics, and continually improve intentional teaching strategies.

Summary and conclusions

In the preceding analysis, we began by examining how one policy document addresses (or does not address) 'race' and difference in early learning and care environments by critiquing the multicultural approach taken by the AQI (City of Toronto, 2016), in which stocking the classroom with a prescribed number and type of diverse artefacts is positioned as sufficient. Our thoughts about the inclusion of diverse materials in the classroom align with those of one adult participant in the CWTAR study who stated, 'I think that they're good but they're a place to start, they're not the place to end. And I think the other thing is you can have a very toxic environment systemically and you could have those [diverse materials]' (P35, Black female, age 51). Evidence from the children's play episodes and interviews with early childhood professionals discussed earlier support this idea. We have seen how children exhibit preferences for White play materials, demonstrate understanding of racial categories, and engage in the ongoing construction of meaning around 'race' and difference as they play. We have also seen how ECEs often fail to consider the influence that 'race' exerts on children's play and the social life of the classroom. In addition to the recommendations for pedagogical practice outlined above, we offer a final and essential proposal: the reconsideration and revision of early years policies. We assert that a new policy approach is necessary to better support practitioners to create environments that foster the development of positive racial identities and to confidently engage children in meaningful dialogue about 'race' and other forms of difference.

Just as general messages of fairness and kindness are not adequate to teach anti-racism to young children, vague guidelines about inclusion and cultural sensitivity are not adequate to counter racism at the institutional level. The policy approach currently taken by the City of Toronto is built upon an assumption that status quo early learning environments are culture-free, and can be made inclusive by the addition of 'ethnic' materials. This multicultural approach serves to validate and preserve Whiteness as the dominant and invisible cultural force, and does little to support ECEs and children to recognize and challenge bias and exclusion (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2014). We further suggest that this approach is perceived by many ECEs as 'one more thing' to be added to an already overwhelming workload. ECEs and childcare managers face considerable pressure to meet increasingly stringent provincial and municipal guidelines in the name of accountability. They are also required to complete significant amounts of daily documentation of individual children's experiences and group programming, while also attending to the hands-on care and education of young children. It is also important to acknowledge ECEs' ongoing struggle for professional status and recognition; at present, many