

Multiculturalism and diversity are not synonymous with anti-racist education

Claudine Lam¹

Abstract: Across the Australian early childhood landscape there is a tendency for educators to veil discussions about race through the lenses of diversity and multiculturalism, falling short of addressing pervasive racism. Consequently, a more focused anti-racist education model is needed given the rise of racism and ‘othering’. Within the context of this research, teaching practices utilized by participants drew primarily on discourses of multiculturalism, premised on the shared understanding that it was important to teach about differences through similarities. Participants also identified that policy documents and professional development opportunities reinforced approaches to diversity and multiculturalism that emphasized inclusion, tolerance and acceptance, rather than addressing and disrupting discourses of race and racism. Three core tenets of Critical Race Theory illuminate how an over-reliance on discourses of multiculturalism amplifies the challenges of creating and delivering curricula that explicitly name and recognize race; a prerequisite for engaging with anti-racist endeavours. Moreover, discourses of multiculturalism are synonymous with discourses of colour-blindness, which is problematic because both engender an ‘us’ and them ‘binary’. Underpinned by Eurocentric ideologies, this binary normalizes the fabrication of a colonized racialized ‘other’. Accordingly, this paper argues that in order to reimagine and *realize* anti-racist pedagogy in early years education we must first recognize, disrupt and decolonize how the power inherent within Eurocentric discourses operates to silence and oppress those who are perceived as the colonized, racialized ‘other’. Only then can we critically examine diversity and discourses of multiculturalism in ways that genuinely generate and sustain opportunities and spaces for anti-racist teaching and learning.

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Introduction

This paper examines the aspect of my Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), Education research which investigated how economic migrant women of colour early childhood (EC) educators in Australia, explored and engaged with discourses of race and racism in their teaching practices. This included exploring concepts of diversity, multiculturalism, culture or skin colour. For example, when teaching about diversity all participants emphasized integrating celebrations and learning experiences that recognized and honoured the cultural backgrounds of the children and families enrolled in their EC services. This was reflective of the participants’ assertion that beneath the skin we are all the same, and their subsequent tendencies to rely on discourses of multiculturalism to teach about diversity and difference. Historically, due to the limitations of global north epistemologies (referring to a Western orientation of knowledge), the scholarship of women of colour EC researchers wrote about the intersection of multilingualism and multiculturalism (Souto-Manning, 2009; Viruru, 2001). This provided a valid and intentional entry point for examining how engagement with race and discourses of racism in EC are veiled through a lens of diversity. This approach positions those who are ‘different’ as ‘other’, framing them within deficit-based perspectives. Highlighted in this research was the normalization of English as the dominant language, emblematic of a mechanism for dismissing and erasing languages of marginalized students (Saavedra, 2011; Soto, 2002). The location of power within the English language personifies how dominant Eurocentric

¹ Melbourne Polytechnic, Higher Education Directorate, Bachelor of Education, Melbourne, Australia, e-mail: claudinelam@melbournepolytechnic.edu.au, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1557-4395>

ideologies can weaponize white privilege to strategically regulate language development and learning.

Similarly, scholarship pertaining to diversity and difference asserted, that if left unexamined, discourses of multiculturalism are problematic because they can re-centre whiteness in ways that dismiss power dynamics that establish and maintain racial inequities (Boutte et al., 2011; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Berikoff, 2008). Intrinsic to this was the grounding of discourses of multiculturalism in developmental norms that “act to form and regulate meanings and understandings of diversity, [and] difference” (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2007, p.225). The subsequent homogenization and designation of racialized minorities as ‘other’ makes visible how discourses of multiculturalism can covertly uphold deficit-based perspectives when measured against the standard of whiteness.

This is further complicated by the circulation of discourses of colour-blindness within discourses of multiculturalism. Colour-blindness can be defined as “the belief that racial group membership and race-based differences should not be taken into account when decisions are made, impressions are formed or behaviours enacted” (Apfelbaum et al., 2012). Premised on the ideals of meritocracy, objectivity and equality, discourses of colour-blindness de-centre and neutralize issues of race and racism by discounting the material impacts of racial inequities experienced by racialized identities (Rideaux & Pérez, 2020). The refusal to acknowledge racial differences is established and maintained through racialization (Wolfe, 2016), a process that relies on “a binary positioning that locates power and agency within the colonizer and designates the colonized as a racialized ‘other’” (Lam, 2024). Grounded in Eurocentric ideologies that privilege particular ‘truths’ about race to perpetuate white supremacy, the colonized, racialized ‘other’ is ascribed minority status due to their deviation from dominant white hegemonic culture (Hollinsworth, 2006; Leonardo, 2014; Mills, 1997; Wolfe, 2016). Accordingly, EC scholars of colour have interrogated how inherently colonial power dynamics embodied by Eurocentric ideologies, and enacted through discourses of multiculturalism, consistently normalize and (re)produce deficit-based perspectives of students and educators of colour who are positioned as the colonized, racialized ‘other’.

Contextualizing Critical Race Theory

Given the over-arching focus of my research was the participants’ lived experiences of race and racism, I deployed Critical Race Theory (CRT) because it prioritizes naming and foregrounding race, confronting and addressing racism and recognising the lived experiences of colonized, racialized ‘others’ (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT is underpinned by assorted core tenets that have been adopted and customized in flexible ways to theorise diverse experiences of racialisation and discourses of racism (Gillborn, 2014). Central to my research data analysis and interpretation were five CRT core tenets; whiteness as property, the permanence of racism, social construction thesis, counter-narratives and the transdisciplinary approach. However, within the context of this paper, only three of these were pertinent to making visible the intrinsic ambiguities of discourses of multiculturalism. Accordingly, a summary of the key points pertinent to whiteness as property, the permanence of racism and the social construction thesis (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) is provided below.

Whiteness as Property

This core tenet is grounded in legal interpretations that position whiteness as a visible and tangible form of property (Harris, 1993) that sanctions and normalizes whiteness as an assemblage of ideas, beliefs and values inherent within white supremacist ideologies (Lam, 2024). Consequently, whiteness as property produces and sustains racial hierarchies because power is located in the universalization of white identity and whiteness. One significant way that whiteness as property is actualized in education is through majoritarian narratives that centre to the voices and experiences of white people (Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Solórzano & Yosso, 2016).

The Permanence of Racism

According to this core tenet race is a biological, social and political construct that homogenizes racial categories and hierarchies that situate racism as endemic in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Racism subsequently, strategically privileges whiteness by denying or concealing the material impacts of racism

on racialized bodies (Leonardo, 2013). The denial of racism obscures the unearned advantages acquired due to white privilege, status and power and this can be actualized in education through discourses of colour-blindness that neutralize and depoliticize race and discourses of racism (Boutte et al., 2011; Rideaux & Pérez, 2020; Taylor, 2022).

The Social Construction Thesis

The social construction thesis is reflective of scientific paradigms that position race as a fixed and static biological 'truth' that affords essentialization and categorization of racial groups. This engenders a dominant/minority binary that perpetuates racial inequities by masking white power, privilege and status (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2016; Sleeter, 2017). The incumbent claims of objectivity, equality, neutrality and colour-blindness actively refute historical contexts of oppression. One way that social construction thesis is actualized in education is through the persistence of deficit-based perspectives of children, families and educators of colour (Lam, 2024).

These CRT core tenets show discourses of multiculturalism as synonymous with the fabrication of a colonized, racialized 'other' which engenders approaches to teaching about diversity that authorizes learning about, and celebrating, differences through similarities. Consequently, the over-reliance on discourses of multiculturalism in EC education operates to censor and nullify power relationships to deny, avert or veil the circulation and impacts of discourses of racism. This paper, therefore, interrogates how discourses of multiculturalism govern and restrict how anti-racist pedagogies can be (mis)understood and (mis)enacted in EC education.

Method

A critical qualitative methodological framework was implemented to seek in-depth, individualized individualized participant responses. This approach legitimizes the pluralities of lived experiences by recognizing the dynamic ways individuals engage with the world (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). To do this, it draws on participatory methods. Critical qualitative methodology asserts that research is a political practice and, as such, acknowledges, centres and validates individual lived experiences while taking into consideration shifting and diverse social, historical and cultural contexts (Cannella et al., 2016). Intrinsic to participatory approaches is the potential to create spaces for resistance to dominant discourses, and the impetus for generating transformative power for marginalized groups (Liamputtong, 2013; Pasque & Pérez, 2016). Approval for this research project was granted by the University of Melbourne's Human Ethics Committee.

Participants

The seven participants - Bel, Em, Ingrid, Lane, Maeve, Marie Antoinette and Sara (*These names are pseudonyms chosen by the participants or the researcher*) - were recruited using purposive snowball sampling based on eligibility criteria. Each identified as economic migrant women of colour, had completed a Bachelor of Education and were working in a sessional kindergarten or a kindergarten program within a childcare setting. The participants originated from Asia, Africa and North America with between two and twelve years' experience working in the EC profession.

Data collection

The data for this research were collected using walking interviews (WI), Photovoice (PV) and critical group discussions (CGD) across a six-month, five-stage cycle. Walking interviews afford participants multiple choices about location, route, pace and opportunities to lead the direction and flow of the interview. The flexibility and open-endedness of WIs centres the lived experiences of the participants which can subsequently, "generate richer data, because interviewees are prompted by meanings and connections to the surrounding environment and are less likely to try and give the 'right' answer" (Evans & Jones, 2011). Photovoice is a community-based participatory research methodology grounded in feminist and critical education theories enabling the capacity to confront and challenge social justice and equity issues (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Molloy, 2007; Peabody, 2013). PV as a methodology is an iterative cycle

that invites participants to take photos related to the research phenomenon, document their understanding and then share their narratives with other participants in a critical group discussion (CGD). The inclusion of individual and collective perspectives can provide an impetus for the development of critical awareness that can empower marginalized communities to advocate for, and realize social change (Bowers et al., 2020; Peabody, 2013; Pérez et al., 2016). Due to the focus of my research on shared narratives, I positioned CGD as a third method. Not only did CGDs afford participants opportunities to give voice to their own experiences, they were able to hear the stories of others. This enabled the participants to identify and discern similar shared experiences of oppression, creating a deeper understanding and connection with others who have been marginalized (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Molloy, 2007; Pérez et al., 2016).

Intrinsic to each data collection method are varying degrees of choice and multi-modal ways for the participants to engage with and share their lived experiences of race. Not only does this empower participants as experts of their own lived experiences, it has the capacity to put the participants at ease and establish and nurture trusting and respectful relationships (Hein et al., 2008; Pasque & Pérez, 2016; Pérez et al., 2016). Given the potentially traumatic, erasive and/or violent experiences the participants may have had with racialized oppression, these data collection methods were compatible and congruent with the research context. When coupled with CRT, resonant with the research focus, these complementary data collection methods afforded the examination of the role of power, the importance of centring lived experiences and the unique understanding of race and discourses of racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2016; Taylor et al., 2009). Drawing on these data collection methods also enhanced the validity of the findings because there were multiple sources of data that produced richer and more detailed narratives about individual lived experiences (Higgins, 2014; Jones et al., 2008; Miles et al., 2014).

Data analysis

The data was analysed using inductive coding protocols, congruent with the understanding that qualitative research locates data analysis as a multi-layered analytical spiral that attends to multiple stages of data collection (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). This approach enabled continual revisiting of the data to understand and represent it from diverse perspectives, augmented by Saldana's (2016) two stage cycle coding. The first cycle of coding was deliberately broad, simple and direct in order to identify emergent themes, and researcher-constructed categories were generated according to the CRT core tenets (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The second cycle utilized axial coding which required a more in-depth engagement with the synthesis and integration of the categories identified and developed in stage one, to expand new theories (Grbich, 2007; Saldaña, 2016).

Validity and reliability

Data triangulation, member checking and context-rich descriptions were implemented to establish the internal validity and rigour of the research (Miles et al., 2014). Transcriptions of individual WIs, CGD, the PV tasks, as well as the created artefacts, were included in data triangulation. Member checking provided participants the opportunity to review, clarify, edit or delete any misrepresentations. The use of multi-layered, reiterative coding protocols further legitimized the analysis and interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2013; Liamputtong, 2013). My own positionality as a settler migrant woman of colour generated ongoing reflexivity to enhance trustworthiness, as I was highly cognisant of how my own experiences as a racialized individual might bias the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). While shared membership of a group can enhance validity, it can also elicit other inherent biases. To attend to these issues I engaged Patton's (2002) triangulation method, to heighten research transparency, accuracy and reliability.

Findings and Discussion

All participants relied heavily on discourses of multiculturalism to inform their positioning of children and families, as well as the design and delivery of curricula. Accordingly, this discussion provides an analysis of the participant data using the CRT core tenet social construction thesis to interrogate how discourses of multiculturalism have become synonymous with diversity in EC. In doing this, it critically examines how the teaching practices, curricula development, selection of learning resources and

professional learning inform the ways with which race and racism are(not) engaged with in EC spaces. Finally, it draws attention to the contradictions and tensions of an over-dependence on discourses of multiculturalism and how these can hinder anti-racist endeavours.

Recontextualising Discourses of Multiculturalism in Early Childhood

The three CRT core tenets whiteness as property, the permanence of racism and social construction thesis are interconnected, circulating in mutually reciprocal ways. Accordingly, data analysis and interpretation drew on the assertion that whiteness as property and the permanence of racism are embedded within the social construction thesis and actualized through racialisation. The homogeneity established through racialisation operates to establish an 'us' and 'them' binary that attributes an archetypal, fixed identity to any given culturally diverse group (Berman & Paradies, 2010; Cruz, 2012; Srinivasan, 2012). Subsequently, those positioned as 'them' are assigned minority status and designated as the colonized, racialized 'other' when measured against those positioned as 'us', who embody all aspects of white privilege, status and power (Said, 2003; Smith, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Premised on this understanding, discourses of multiculturalism are problematic because they do not recognize or account for the circulation of power inherent within Eurocentric ideologies, that silence and oppress those who deviate from dominant white hegemonic discourses (Boutte et al., 2011; Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2007).

Discourses of Multiculturalism in Practice

When prompted to identify the concepts and images that came to mind when asked how their lived experiences informed their teaching, all of the participants' responses conflated race with diversity and multiculturalism. Central to these responses was the understanding that embracing diversity and multiculturalism meant accepting and respecting everyone irrespective of difference, with an emphasis placed on acknowledging any differences by learning about similarities. This was exemplified by Ingrid's data (see Figure 1: Ingrid's Artefact: watercolor painting experience).

Figure 1

Ingrid's artefact: Water colour painting experience



Yeah, so my point is, sometimes people reject each other. They think 'You are totally different from me.' But actually we all have something in common... And some people reject another group because maybe, you are Asian, you are Black. But maybe many, many years before your ancestor have some you know, have some genes coming from Africa. Or coming from Asia. So my point is, in my teaching I want children to know like, yes, from what we look like, we are all different, but we are the same, we are connected. And we have something, things common inside (Ingrid, W15)

When Ingrid showed me her artefact, she asked me what colour I was looking at and when I replied white, she explained that her painting had stayed white even though she had added four brushes of black paint. Ingrid used this interpretation to argue that even when children and adults are different, "*we are the same, we are connected. And we have something, things common inside*". A second example shared by Ingrid was reflective of her desire to offer children multiple choices as part of incorporating discourses of multiculturalism into her teaching.

It's not specifically about race you know, [but] understanding different things... And they're sort of like getting really intense and sort of like, starts to you know, argue. So, I intervene explaining 'You know the tree doesn't have to be one shape. And you can think about it and look outside from the window. Do our trees look the same in our yard?...some of them only have leaves. And even leaves, they have round and they have thin and they have prickly.

So it doesn't have to be only one tree. He can have his own idea about what a tree looks like and that doesn't mean he is wrong. And it doesn't mean you're wrong. You can have your own idea too'. So that's like an example of how I try to you know, support them to be more open and more tolerant to differences. (*Ingrid, W13*)

Interpreting Ingrid's use of trees as a metaphor for race and her intention to "*support them to be more tolerant to differences*" through the permanence of racism and the social construction thesis, made visible the contention that children need to be taught how to be inclusive and tolerant because diversity is implicitly equated with a colonized, racialized 'other'.

The rationalization that teaching children about difference through recognising shared common characteristics is congruent with how and why discourses of multiculturalism are routinely implemented and applauded in EC. Understanding difference through sameness is founded in the prescribed goals of the seminal anti-bias curriculum, (Derman-Sparks, 1989) which remains an intrinsic aspect of contemporary EC frameworks and literature (Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority, 2012; Australian Government Department of Education, 2022; FKA Children's Services Inc., 2017b; Miller & Mascadri, 2016). Furthermore, this approach to diversity and difference is indicative of requirements of EC educators to attain cultural competency skills and utilize multiculturalism to foster and promote inclusion, tolerance and acceptance (Ho, 2010; Moreton-Robinson & Nicoll, 2006; Saltmarsh, 2010). Drawing on discourses of multiculturalism to teach about differences through similarities was an approach shared by all of the participants when designing and delivering EC curricula. This was most effectively epitomized by data related to celebrations in EC and the development of learning experiences and resources.

Celebrations in Early Childhood

The incorporation of celebrations is a foundational component of discourses of multiculturalism that has a long history in the EC profession. Drawing on celebrations to value and promote diversity was a strategy shared by all of the participants and exemplified in the following data from Bel.

You know, ay, however, like if there's Chinese New Year...I will acknowledge most of the celebrations that I know personally. And if I know, if any of the parents talk to me, then I invite the parents. Yeah, I invite the parents to celebrate and come in and share what they know. And, I do tend to say when I present the program, I do not say, personally I change the word celebrating, and I prefer to choose the word acknowledging. Ay, I feel like it is respectful for me to say, 'I'm acknowledging Ramadan instead of saying we celebrated Ramadan.' Because I feel that, I feel like who am I to say I'm celebrating Ramadan with my group? No, and you know, I'm not celebrating Chinese New Year. I'm acknowledging Chinese New Year. And ah, I think that makes a difference. It makes a difference to me. And then I feel like I've broadened their minds and ah, and see different perspectives. Because every country celebrates differently you know? (*Bel, W11*).

Bel was invested in embedding diversity into her curriculum through different celebrations across the year. This was important to her because she believed celebrations acknowledged and respected different cultural contexts, encouraged families to participate and contribute and, created a sense of belonging for children and families from diverse backgrounds. This is not surprising given that the integration of celebrations to teach about diversity is strongly recommended through Australian EC professional development literature and EC frameworks (Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority, 2018; Australian Government Department of Education, 2022; Baldock, 2010; FKA Children's Services Inc., 2017a; Miller & Mascadri, 2016).

The Development of Learning Experiences and Resources

The emphasis placed on teaching about diversity through discourses of multiculturalism is authorized by EC frameworks and Australian EC professional development literature (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022; Dau & Jones, 2016; Mundine, 2010; Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2006). Accordingly, EC educators tend to design and deliver curricula that includes conventional resources that align with cultural competency skills required to foster and promote inclusion, tolerance and acceptance of diversity. This can often engender tokenistic practices intended to teach about diversity through experiences such as; festivals, national dress, music, food and celebrations (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2016; Miller & Mascadri, 2016; Scarlet & Fargher, 2016). Analysing this through the lenses of social

construction thesis and the permanence of racism draws attention to how, the conflation of race with diversity condones and perpetuates an absence or avoidance of explicit discussions about race and racism. This is amplified by the (mis)conception that the material effects of racism can be overcome or eliminated by bringing people of diverse backgrounds together through understandings of commonality (Berman & Paradies, 2010; MacNevin & Berman, 2017; Sims, 2014).

This was illustrated by learning experiences that Maeve and Lane shared when describing how their lived experiences informed their teaching practices. Maeve insisted that it was important to include regular planning that taught about diversity, and she described one of her preferred experiences in the below data.

That's why I put a new program up. That we're gonna talk about where we are from. Where are we from? So what I'm gonna do, I'm gonna get all of them to sit down in a circle. I'm going to make the circle a bit closer. Get all of us to lie down on our tummy and stretch our arms and I'll take a photo to see the difference between our skins...So we're gonna talk about, we all come from different countries. We all have different eye colour, different hair colour, different skin colour, but guess what? We all have two eye, one nose, one mouth, two arms, two legs...We all human beings. We all the same but we look different (Maeve W14).

While Maeve's experience is teaching the children about people from different parts of the world, and this could potentially be valuable, there is no explicit discussion about why people are different and the implications of being different. Coupled with the location of difference in countries outside of Australia, this experience not only positions those who are diverse as 'other', it avoids any discussion about racialized identities and the power that produces racial inequities.

Lane was similarly diligent about intentionally teaching diversity in her curriculum and one of her favoured experiences was inviting children to create self-portraits using skin-coloured paper and paints.

But like the one with the darkest, I think my Sri Lankan boy probably has the darkest skin and I don't think he actually went for the darkest, um colour...So he chose this brown which I felt was pretty accurate and then ___ here, who's Macedonian, he chose the one that I was thinking that the Chinese kids would choose (Lane, W15).

Reflecting on the way children engaged with this experience, Lane elaborated that many of the children did not choose materials that matched with their physical appearance. This led her to question whether the intended goal of promoting authentic understandings of diversity was being realized with the children.

Contradictions and Tensions

Lane's reflection on authenticity illuminates the potential for tokenism that arises when implementing discourses of multiculturalism to teach about diversity and difference. Without critical awareness of, and critical engagement with the circulation and impacts of race and racism, concepts of inclusion, tolerance and acceptance may teach children, families and educators to subscribe to, and perpetuate, white cultural norms. In other words, drawing on discourses of multiculturalism to teach about diversity is not synonymous with anti-racist education. This tension was captured in the following data from Lane.

And it got me thinking sort of much more about how I can teach, 'cos I do think it's important to teach about race and ethnicity and culture overtly, in a sense. Because um, you know valuing it is important and when we just try to sort of paint everybody in this broad 'Oh we're all just humans' you know, we're losing all this rich culture and difference that is good...But how do I teach that explicitly without being like 'And she's got brown skin and he's got...' you know? (Lane, W15).

Lane's realisation that "*valuing it is important*", and "*it's important to teach about race and ethnicity and culture overtly*" implies that she recognizes that existing approaches to teach about diversity are ineffective for exploring "*rich culture and difference that is good*". Ingrid also remarked that teaching about diversity was often shallow. Her comment "*we're sort of stuck there and don't know how to dig deeper or follow it up*", infers an understanding that learning about diversity in more authentic and explicit ways is a prerequisite for disrupting tokenistic curricula.

And um, in terms of inclusive, other cultural elements, it's sort of yes, some simple things definitely happening. For example, greetings in different languages and um, talk about different food and festivals. But it's just, we're sort of stuck there and don't know how to dig deeper or follow it up. Yeah. So yeah. We just don't know if that really makes

sense in other children's experiences or yeah. I believe it makes a difference because children sort of like, when you ask them how to say, for example, hello in Chinese they will respond 'Ne-how' or something. That definitely makes, yeah, it makes an influence in their experiences. Yeah but we just don't know how, how deep or long it can make. It's sort of like, stay there, and yeah. I sometimes want to make it deeper, more meaningful, but I just don't know how. (Ingrid, W16)

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These data from Lane and Ingrid provide tangible examples of how, even when there is an understanding that current approaches to teaching about diversity are inadequate, EC educators are uncertain of how to implement discourses of multiculturalism in ways that don't perpetuate tokenistic curricula and learning resources.

'Othering' Learning Resources

Another contradiction to emerge from the data, was an inclination for the participants to 'other' the children in their programs. This was contradictory, because despite expressing a discomfort with being 'othered' themselves, the participants homogenized children based on their cultural characteristics and physical appearances. The essentializing of particular groups based on assumed shared and fixed characteristics permeated their curricula design and delivery and influenced their choice of learning resources.

Bel's description of how she included dark-skinned dolls and Australian flora and fauna in her program to promote Indigenous perspectives provides a meaningful example. Drawing on prescriptive representations to "include Indigenous culture" is congruent with the positioning of Indigenous people as the colonized, racialized 'other'. This not only reinforces deficit-based stereotypes, but it is emblematic of hierarchies of racism because despite her own traumatic experiences of being 'othered', the way Bel perceives and teaches about Indigenous culture is complicit with 'othering'.

And ah, since I started here there's a room that I have, the educational leader has, I said to the room leader, '...I would really want you to include Indigenous culture. We are mandated by the department.' I knew she wasn't comfortable, you know. And I said, you know, 'I'll give you some books, read about it and...' Last week she actually said, "Bel, I'm going to set one up.' Which she did. She didn't do like, she started and then she came to me and she said, so there is a Korean girl, she said, 'Oh I just feel uncomfortable and the doll is scary.' And I'm like 'What are you talking about?' She's like, 'They look scary Bel. Come and look.' So I went and then you know, I added some gumnuts and Australian animals and added some books and stories to it, and it looked much better. And then you know, they felt more comfortable. So it's just that fear of the unknown (Bel, W14).

Using children's books to teach about diversity was another commonly used resource that three of the participants identified as part of their curricula toolbox. Lane in particular incorporated high-quality books to broaden the way she explored diverse cultural backgrounds in her teaching experiences. Resonant with this, Lane chose *I'm Australian too* (Fox, 2018) to represent how her lived experience of race informed her teaching practices (see Figure 2: PV image – Children's Book).

Figure 2

PV Image-children's book



Um, the text is rhyming and every page is about a child that's from a different background, where it be...She's got an Indigenous family, she's a family from China, family from like Syria. And she actually says like 'We left a war' and things like that. Like she doesn't gloss over. And the last page is actually a child in a detention centre with big walls around and she says something like, 'I'd love to be Australian too if you let me in.' Like, it's not, she's not mincing words. (Lane, WI5.)

Premised on the contention that we are all Australian, this children's book emphasizes teaching difference by identifying the shared commonalities of the characters, which at a superficial level appears reasonable. However, a deeper reading of the book reveals that the different cultural groups are essentialized based on narrow stereotypical traits such as appearance, language, food, religion, clothing and country of origin. The covert positioning of these cultural groups as colonized, racialized 'others' also fails to distinguish between the varied lived experiences of different groups of women of colour, such as Indigenous women, economic migrant women of colour or asylum-seeker women of colour.

The Homogeneity of Early Childhood Professional Learning

The failure or inability of discourses of multiculturalism to explicitly recognize and attend to race and challenge and disrupt discourses of racism, is further exacerbated by the homogeneity of EC professional learning. Four of the participants pointed out that professional learning is consistently delivered by white scholars, educators, researchers and consultants.

I feel like a lot of the PD I go to these days is just re-hashing the same thing. I don't feel like there's a lot of new stuff out there and they get the same people like ____ and ____ and they are running a racket...That is the problem. They are women of a certain class...It's all the same and they are on everything. It's like there's no other people (Lane, WI4)

Lane felt very strongly about the absence of women of colour presenters, and the privileging of what she perceived as, a white saviour approach that continued to frame cultural diversity and multiculturalism from a deficit-based perspective. Critical theorists argue that when children, families and educators of colour are persistently seen as deficit, they are more likely to be perceived as disadvantaged and at-risk (Alemán & Gaytán, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2016; Sleeter, 2017). Juxtaposed with the CRT core tenets the permanence of racism and the social construction thesis, the homogenization of professional learning as authorized and regulated by government bodies (Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority, 2018; Australian Government Department of Education, 2022), personifies the majoritarian narrative conforming to white norms (Gillborn, 2016; Horsford & Grosland, 2013; Solórzano & Yosso, 2016; Taylor et al., 2009). Ingrid also recognized that there was an absence of specific support for EC educators of colour in professional learning and resources.

Mmm...I feel like...I feel like I'm more um, like a learner, but the sense of educator of colour is not that obvious in these situations. If like I feel really, really uncomfortable and awkward as an educator of colour, like they are so different from me, I don't think it's a good thing...Mmm...I think maybe professional development sessions can talk about how educators of colour can you know, embrace and bring their cultures into their practice more (Ingrid, WI4).

Ingrid's comment "*the sense of educator of colour is not the obvious in these situations*" implied that there is paucity of professional learning that explicitly attends to race. When coupled with Ingrid's recommendation that "*maybe professional development sessions can talk about how educators of colour can you know, embrace and bring their cultures into their practice more*", it becomes evident that professional learning specifically tailored for EC educators of colour is unavailable.

Implications for Anti-Racist Education

When read together, the data pertaining to how the participants' lived experiences of race and racism informed their teaching practices, has highlighted that analysis through the intersection of the permanence

of racism, whiteness as property and the social construction thesis, makes visible and problematizes, an over-reliance on discourses of multiculturalism to teach about diversity and difference. Consequently, premised on the establishment of homogenized categories, the construction of a colonized, racialized 'other' framed within a deficit-based perspective, becomes synonymous with diversity. According to critical race theorists, discourses of multiculturalism therefore, deny or reject how power operates within the social construction thesis to depoliticize race and racism, and silence and oppress those who deviate from dominant white hegemonic discourses (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Leonardo, 2014; MacNevin & Berman, 2017; Milner & Howard, 2013). This is not surprising given dominant Eurocentric discourses sanction the deployment of 'othering' to reproduce the circulation and impacts of race and discourses of racism, in order to maintain white power, privilege and status. CRT also draws attention to the complex and contradictory ways that the lived experiences of participants informed how they engaged with, adopted and denied the circulation and material impacts of race and discourses of racism.

An over-reliance on discourses of multiculturalism also offers EC education a cautionary tale about integrating and enacting anti-racist education. Practices, curricula, learning resources and professional learning that remain unexamined and static, will not create tangible and lasting change for children, families and educators of colour. In order for change to be realized through anti-racist education, it is imperative that EC educators begin to take race seriously, because a failure to acknowledge that racial categories exist and that they are imbued with inequitable power dynamics, means that anti-racist education cannot be authentic and meaningful. Three significant steps that can be taken to advance anti-racist education include; centring the voices and lived experiences of EC educators of colour in academia, practice and professional learning, speaking back to the EC profession and exploring diverse theories of social change (Lam, 2024). Moreover, anti-racist education cannot be realized without naming race, recognizing the circulation of discourses of racism and examining the power dynamics that maintain racial inequities and hierarchies.

Conclusion

This paper interrogated how the participant data showed an awareness that discourses of multiculturalism were the default position of EC educators, and that if unexamined, they do not produce any tangible and lasting changes to the circulation and impacts of race and discourses of racism. The CRT core tenets provided a justification and framework for interrogating how and why discourses of multiculturalism continue to be extolled in EC education. The failure to challenge, disrupt and decolonize deficit-based perspectives of children, families and EC educators of colour illuminates the need for intentional, anti-racist policies, professional learning, curricula and practices that embrace the voices and lived experiences of women of colour to strengthen and enhance purposeful and impactful enactments of anti-racist education.

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