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“BUT, I DON’T BELIEVE IT’S ABOUT RACE:” CHALLENGING FALLACIES OF RACE AND RACISM AMONGST EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS IN ONTARIO

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Abstract: There is the continued belief that children do not see race and that they are racially innocent. This belief is evidenced in early childhood environments and influences the practices of the instructors in these settings. However, research continues to show that children do see and react to varying markers of race. This research project focused on early childhood educators’ interpretations of children’s racially coded behaviours and interactions. The results revealed four central themes: racial evasiveness; racial dis-ease; parental role in promoting racism; and limited educational preparation. This study contributes to the growing body of research on children, race, and early childhood by examining how Canadian early childhood educators address race and racism in the classroom.

Despite the ample body of literature documenting children’s perceptions of difference, and racial difference in particular, a common assumption persists among early childhood educators and layperson alike: that is, children are “racially innocent” (Escayg, 2019c). Broadly construed, such a belief implies that racism, discrimination, and prejudice are not significant facets of a child’s life, yielding little or no influence on how they see, value, and respond to themselves and others. However, there has been ongoing research that challenges this conception and demonstrates that, because children learn about life from the messages and cues around them, they become racially aware (Husband, 2012; McCown, 2004; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 1996; 2001; Wright, 2011) and develop racial biases quite early (Aboud, 2003; Aboud & Amato, 2001; Cristol & Gimbert, 2008; Nesdale & Flesser, 2001;). One common explanation for the disconnect between teachers’ perceptions and children’s lived racialized experiences and actions, implicates the scope and content of their professional training programs. Indeed, early childhood teacher training—as well as the field of early childhood education—have yet to fully transgress the disciplinary boundary of child development (Ryan & Grieshaber, 2005; Soto & Swadener, 2002). The continued emphasis on child development, without equal consideration of other disciplinary perspectives, however, limits how pre-service educators conceptualize the teaching and learning process and how they interpret the meaning and realities of racism in the Canadian context—and in the lives of young children.

The lack of exposure to and practice with anti-racist pedagogy, combined with educators’ naïve views of children, result in classroom spaces that are neither inclusive nor empowering. More pointedly, such a classroom space, typified by the absence of discussions about race, racism, and curriculum, and that which fails to promote conversations about identity and equity (see, for example, Gaias, Gal, Abry, Taylor, & Granger, 2018), reinforces and normalizes White privilege, while supplanting more critically, racially just pedagogies. Accordingly, we argue for anti-racist teaching in early childhood education.

Recognizing the genesis of children’s racial self-identification and attitudes, and the ways in which children display their racial attitudes (for a review on Canadian children, see, for example, Escayg, Berman, & Royer, 2017), is central to cultivating particular elements of an anti-racist early years pedagogy: professional practices that not only support positive racial identity development, especially among children of color, but also those which assist young White children in dismantling nascent beliefs and or practices that stem from the myth of White superiority.

Drawing on the conceptual tenets of Critical Race Theory, this paper reports on Canadian early childhood educators' interpretations of children's racialized behavior in the classroom. We first begin by exploring the theoretical framework of the study, drawing specific attention to the theoretical constructs that are consistent with the goals of the study and the research design. To provide the appropriate contextual framing, however, we offer a discussion on race and racism in the Canadian context and the connections to the preparation of ECEs. In the remaining sections of the paper, we discuss the research design, findings, and implications for ECE education and in-service professional training.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory emerged out of the civil rights era and was developed by academics such as Derrick Bell (1987), Kimberlè Crenshaw (1995; 2011), Richard Delgado (1989), and Mari Matsuda (1993), to name a few. The theory was based on explicating the inherent relationship between race and racism and their embeddedness in laws and legal policies and which impacted the judicial decisions that were made. Further to this, critical race theory examines the way in which race, in conjunction with laws and legal policies, implants and maintains a hierarchy of White privilege. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) indicate that:

...critical race theory in education is a framework or set of basic insights, perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom. (p. 25)

According to CRT theorists, gender, class and other social identities are added sites of intersecting and overlapping oppression and marginalization and must be considered when examining social processes and experiences; such are foundational to the theory of intersectionality (Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, & Tomlinson, 2013; Crenshaw, 1989). Critical race theory draws from multiple disciplines such as women and gender studies, feminism, sociology, and law, and facilitates the use of multiple frameworks that allow for the examination of how race and racism structure social relations of power.

Critical race theory is based on five fundamental principles – racism is systemic, and not an historical practice but rather is an everyday reality for many racialized peoples; there is a hierarchy based on color that places Whites above people of colour; race is a social construction that is dynamic, and holds little scientific validity; different racial groups experience differential racialization which are also changeable; people live multiple identity lives and the intersections of the sites results in different experiences of life; the importance of counter-narratives that privilege the voice of those who have experienced oppression (Delgado & Stefania, 2001).

CRT, by drawing from the aforementioned multiple perspectives, provides a way of evaluating, analyzing, and interrogating the experiences of those who have been marginalized and challenges dominant, uni-theoretical analytical frames. In the context of this paper, CRT provides a method for examining race-based interactions through the analysis of responses, counter-narratives to the dialogues and a different lens through which we can unearth and examine the silenced racial dialogues (Delpit, 1988) of the participants. Recognizing the extent to which race is seen as a taboo subject, while race simultaneously pervades most of our interactions in society, CRT facilitates a removal of the mask of racial neutrality while allowing for the researchers to provide a more nuanced discussion of the data and analytical themes that have emerged.

One of the tenets of CRT is Whiteness as property. Dixson and Rousseau Anderson (2018), for instance, regard Whiteness as a form of property that assists in elucidating how White privilege, and its related advantages, structures the educational experiences and environments to which children are exposed in the U.S. context. It is important to note that critical race theory, including many of its foundational features, has not consistently been employed in the empirical work on children and race, or teachers' pedagogies in the early years setting. Further to this, CRT has gained limited traction in teacher preparation as a theoretical and applied perspective to highlight the continued saliency of race as being rooted in the situated knowledges, experiences, and activism of the oppressed. In this paper, therefore, we attend to these gaps by first, acknowledging the epistemological relevance and import of CRT in relation to addressing race and racism in the early years classroom; and by second, critiquing teachers' race-silenced practices in ways that not only dispel beliefs in "multiculturalism" and children's "racial innocence" but also prompt educators to evaluate their perceptions surrounding race, racism and children, as well as their own professional practice.

The main questions that guided this research are:

- 1) What are the perspectives of ECE personnel regarding race and racism in the classroom?

- 2) How do they attend to racial incidences in the classrooms?
- 3) To what extent have they been supported in developing their facility for understanding and addressing race in ECE environments?

Race and Early Childhood Education

Much of the research on children and race indicates that children recognize racial differences between the ages of two and three, although new studies have shown that such awareness may emerge as early as 6 months (Boutte, Lopez-Robertson, & Powers-Costello, 2011; Cristol & Gimbert, 2008; Jordan & Hernandez-Reif, 2009; McKown & Weinstein, 2003; Perlman, Kankesan, & Zhang, 2010). However, the central indicator of the research is that the children do not start attaching value to skin color differences until they are much older and have been socialized into believing the concepts that are attached to racialized bodies. One of the most prominent implications, however, is that children can be exposed to positive conceptions of race, potentially from six months to age five. ECE instructors play a seminal role in the lives of children during these early years and can significantly determine the messages that children are exposed to. This is an important consideration given the extent to which children learn their ideas based on their socialization (Lewis, 2001). In addition, the ECE classroom is the space where children will be exposed to higher levels of diverse racial groupings than within their individual family environment. As Aboud (2003) contends, children begin to display in-group racial preferences about age four, and the ways in which we prepare them to understand and engage with dialogues about race will determine their long-term engagements with the concepts and the material realities of race. This can also lead to children developing less discriminatory attitudes towards race and ethnic group preferences (Friesen et al., 2012).

The development of White children's racial attitudes also point to the need for anti-racism praxis in Canadian early childhood education. Aboud's (2003) research, for instance, indicates that White children develop in-group favoritism and out-of-group prejudice during these early stages of their development, and these attitudes impact upon the ways in which children interact across sites of difference. They are provided with very subtle and almost invisible messages about their social and racial location and those of others which will impact on their long-term understandings of race (Lewis, 2001). Jordan and Hernandez-Reif (2009) further state that during these years, children also begin to demonstrate preferences for skin tones and differential assessments of raced characters in stories, which needs to be examined, particularly since picture and story books are often used in ECE classrooms.

Racially coded messages are evinced in the ways in which race and racism are addressed in the context of the curriculum, the images that are depicted in the books, and the discussions about the characters in the books. Consequently, children learn about which races are represented in their books, which races are left out of their books, who gets to be the doctor and who gets to be the princess. Although young children may not be consciously aware of the racially coded messages they are receiving, they are exposed to very consistent patterns regarding racial inclusion, exclusion and notions of racial norms (Boutte 2008; Friesen et al., 2012; Lewis, 2001).

In addition, the manner in which the staff interact with children in the centres, respond to incidences that could be related to race, and the manner in which staff interact with each other, all transmit messages about race. The messages the children receive about race and racism, can be mediated by the interactions and the responses of the ECE staff to the children themselves and to the incidences that occur at the centres (Boutte, 2008; Wright, 2011). Early childhood educators (ECE) enter children's worlds in the earliest learning stages of their school-based journey of learning and it is in the care of ECE teachers, they learn through play and interactions, develop communication skills and figure out roles and patterns of behavior. In these spaces they often socialize with children from diverse backgrounds and learn some of the skills that will enable them to interact in positive ways with others.

Although the authors are cognizant of the primary role that parents play as early socializers, this paper will explore the ways in which race and racism are addressed in early childhood settings given the role that ECE's play in racial socialization of children during a critical developmental stage. At this juncture, however, we examine the contextual underpinnings of Canadian children's racial awareness.

The Canadian Context of Race

Race and racism are often regarded as anachronistic entities. Canada has historically and continues to be billed as a multicultural nation (Ash, 2004; Bannerji, 2000; Salojee, 2004). Discomfort with racial identification is very common within the Canadian context as there is the ongoing adherence to inclusion (Solomon & Daniel, 2007)

wherein discussions of race and racism are deemed to be the cause of significant discomfort, resistance and tears (Acapadi, 2007). There is the ongoing pattern of denying that race is a Canadian problem (Carr & Lund, 2007; Solomon & Daniel, 2007) and a failure to examine the links between race, Whiteness and power. Although there is increasing diversity in Canada and more interactions amongst groups, the seat of power has not changed, but rather has become entrenched to the point of invisibility, thus limiting people's capacity to 'see race' and the continued investment in colorblindness (Berman, Daniel, Butler, McNevin, & Royer, 2017; Dovidio, Gaertner, & Saguy, 2015).

From a biological perspective, 'race' has no scientific foundation and the existence of races has been scientifically debunked; however, people continue to believe in its existence and are impacted by what has been called 'the materiality of race' (M'Charek, 2013). Discussions of race or racism are seldom linked to concepts and applications of power unless it is being examined through a critical theoretical lens. The private conversations about race are typically highly superficial and simply replicate stereotypical tropes and in the public push to be 'politically correct,' there have been fewer opportunities to engage in much needed critical dialogues that can reduce the experiences of marginalization that children face. This push towards political correctness in public spaces has engendered the most virulent forms of racism underground, thus allowing racism to fester under the surface of society while maintaining the illusion of racial inclusion and multiculturalism. The election of Donald Trump in the U.S. and more recently Doug Ford as the premier of Ontario in 2018, has served as a trigger for the eruption of the racism that had gone underground.

Given the central role that ECEs play in the early development of children, as well as the prevalence of racism in the Canadian context, teacher education programs should adopt an integrated approach to curriculum such that throughout the program, students engage in substantive discussions regarding the systemic factors that lead to social inequalities. However, the lack of transparency regarding historical realities, and the continuing nature of oppression and racism, induce a form of racial blindness that allows for the continued resistance to seeing race or the long-term impacts of racism.

Method

The current paper is based on a larger qualitative research project titled *Can We Talk About Race* (CWTAR) (Berman, Daniel, Butler, McNevin, & Royer), which was developed to explore experiences of race and racism in early childhood education settings in Ontario, Canada. The participants included 17 ECE professionals including teachers (n=14) and managers and 26 children. There were 13 females and 13 males – 9 Whites; 3 Chinese; 3 biracial; 2 South Asians; 7 multi-racial (persons of color); 3 not identified, who ranged in age from 2.5-5 years.

A qualitative approach was selected for the study as it allows researchers to explore the relationship between theory and research, facilitates the interpretation of the social world, and explores the ways in which individuals negotiate their socially constructed environments (Bryman & Bell, 2016). The interviews with the instructors and the managers of the centers facilitated an examination of their understandings of race and racism in their work environment, the ways in which they negotiated race-based interactions; and the linkages or gaps between their preparation and their ability to deal with race and racism in ECE environments. The three main objectives of the research project were to: explore notions of race and racialization in ECE environments; evaluation of the feasibility of employing a single site research method; and to develop recommendations for integrating racial diversity into early learning environments. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted by one lead research and one research assistant. In the following section we will identify the themes and provide an analysis of the themes through the lens of critical race theory.

Data Analysis

Employing a critical discourse analytical approach, the researchers sought to explore the ways in which discourses of power are evidenced in the conversations of the participants (Bryman & Bell, 2016; Pacini-Ketchabaw, White, & Armstrong de Almeida, 2006). The transcripts were analyzed to identify the main themes, narratives and counter narratives to explore the ideas related to race and racialization in the centres. The analysis, therefore, examined three key areas: the participants' understandings of race and racism; the ways in which incidences of racism were addressed in the centres; and the extent to which they were trained and or prepared to address incidences of racism in their centres. In the following section we discuss four themes that emerged from the analysis.

Themes

Racial evasiveness: "Because I don't think it's really about race"

The participants identified scenarios in which the children engaged in behaviors which had clear indications of initial patterns of racial attitude formation and in-group preference. However, the instructors consistently denied that the patterns were based on race, first pointing out behaviors that were indicative of racial preferences, then indicating that the behaviors meant something else. This highlighted the contradictory and competing nature of the frames of reference which on the one hand hinge on the belief in children's racial innocence, and on the other hand, the recognition that the behaviors were problematic but participants were unsure how to address them. The following quote highlights both the denial of racism and the contradictions in the ECEs responses.

I've actually seen, well, I've seen some Caucasian children not want to have the Black baby which I find kind of interesting so, I don't know. If it's, that they don't, they don't like it as much, or they don't uh, identify with it, which is kind of interesting... We have lots of dolls outside and the Caucasian dolls get chosen first... Now mind you, some of the dolls, it totally depends but if it's an identical doll. You know, newborn ones there really isn't a lot of difference other than skin color...

The quote from the above participant highlights the inconsistencies in the ideas about race and racism amongst children in ECE classrooms which impacts on if or how the instructors address the issue. The participant identified the ways in which the children chose the Caucasian dolls, then expressed confusion regarding why the children gravitate to the Caucasian dolls given that the only difference is skin color. The instructor then indicated that she was 'sure it is not about race.' This type of inconsistency in the discussion related to race were evidenced amongst many of the instructors.

Interviewer: But do the kids talk about racial differences and if so what type of things do they say?

Participant: No I don't. I don't really see that. I mean if you're talking about race or color, I mean I think they can see a doll, like if a doll is – We have multicultural dolls here, maybe they'll say. "Oh this doll is Black" or "this doll is White" But in terms of understanding what that really means, I don't think they understand what that means I think they, they um they connect it with the colours, just colour... I think it is important to learn about, like cultures. I think for me it more about cultures than race, and understanding other people's upbringings and cultures and the way it was um, the way that they were brought up in terms of like, not really important that, you know colours and everything. (Participant 32)

Additionally, in situations where children made comments that were explicitly of a racial nature, the ECEs dismissed the incidences and in some cases would explain the behavior by blaming the parents. The ECEs indicated that the children may have been exposed to parents and or older siblings who had made racist comments and the children were simply repeating the information, but they did not understand what they were saying. Although the children were using the racial comments in a specific context, the ECEs remained wedded to the idea that children were innocent and did not see race. A more critical interrogation of the data, however, would prompt us to consider what perspectives ECEs employed in understanding and analyzing race and racism and to what extent they were supported in developing a critical analytical frame for interrogating incidences such as the ones cited.

We have an issue right now at (centre identified) but I don't think it's a racial issue. I don't really know (laughs) what it is. I think it maybe is just a preference. Because we have two staff in the toddler room and there's one little child and... when one staff is on early shift he keeps telling her that he doesn't like her. So he doesn't want to stay because he doesn't like her. Um, but again, I don't think it's racial. It's just his personal feeling. (Participant 42)

In the above quote the ECE was clear in stating that there was an issue and as well that she did not know what was the foundational basis for the issue, but she was clear that it was not about race; however, her laugh as she spoke of the incident can be understood as a nervous laughter that revealed more than it obscured.

Um, there was one incident that I can recall about race, about a child who, well a parent actually that came in and said that their child was upset the night before because apparently there had been – she had been playing with um, uh, another child in the classroom and wanted to be a princess. And the other child turned to her and said "Well princesses are not brown." And so that was a direct example... Yeah so we discussed, like we printed up some pictures, and um you know just, you know "Are you interested in seeing what real princesses look like?" and we

have a variety of princesses from around the world..um so the children were very interested in that play in terms of dressing up. (Participant 28)

Participant: If they bring up one difference, then I bring everything else into it. From small, like colour of eyes or hair to colour of skin, to abilities, different abilities, you know if a child is not verbal, stuff like that. So emphasizing how we can all be different, and still be people.

Interviewer: So have you ever had an experience where a child said something negative about um race? Or skin color, skin tone, every heard anything like that in fourteen years?

Participant: Not at the centre but my older one [child] did... her friend told her that all Chinese people are bad or something like that. So then I inquired..she did not have an answer. So I tried to, again, break the myth or whatever she was trying – Again talking about all the differences (and maybe she had one experience and then generalized). (Participant 30).

The challenge with these statements by the staff was that their own discomfort with the issues resulted in their silence and losing of critical opportunities to change the understanding of children regarding difference. In the first quote, for example, the participant indicated that this was not a race issue. In the second quote, the instructors spoke of showing pictures to the children, but there was no direct conversation about race. In the third quote, the participant indicated that if race did come up she talked about all types of differences including hair and eye colour. Therefore ‘difference’ becomes the all-encompassing term to speak about aspects of human identities, thus erasing the specificity of race. The assumption that difference in eye color can be equated with the experience of racism is a problematic response for an educator to make, thus minimizing the potential impact of racism. Children in ECE environments are exposed to a vast range of diversities and this could be an important space for challenging the emergence of stereotypes about race. Instead, the silence and or denials around race reinforced stereotypes and sent the message that these are not issues to be discussed, thus setting young children up to repeat the oppressions of racialized groups as they become older.

Racial dis-ease: ‘I am comfortable talking to children about race, but only if it comes up’

Another interesting pattern that emerged amongst the ECE instructors was the claim that they were comfortable talking to children about issues of race, while simultaneously claiming that the issue is never about race. They further indicated that they talk about it “if it comes up” which is not relevant because they learned during their schooling that “children don’t see that.”

Interviewer: But how comfortable are you talking about race with children?

Participant: Um. I’m quite comfortable if it comes up, because the, because I, it’s not that I know what to say, it’s just I think about what I believe, and I talk to other teachers and I know what, because we’ve spoken about race and ethnicity before. And basically we all have a similar understanding. And to tell a child, it’s like, I’m not going to tell you my opinion, I’m not going to tell you your opinion, I’m just saying, “This is what we believe.” It’s all about being nice to people, it doesn’t, when it comes down to it it’s like, it doesn’t matter what skin tone, it doesn’t matter what race, religion- ethnicity. I was going to say, because that was a course, Race, Religion and Ethnicity [laughs]. And um, yeah so speaking with children, it’s like, yeah the children don’t see that. When they talk about, when they see, I don’t know if you want to say differences, it’s about what the child does, that they notice is different. Nothing to do about their skin tone, that they’ll see (Participant 29)

This participant indicated that the response to conversations about race is the need to focus on ‘being nice to people’ which is a response that was replicated amongst other participants. However, simply being nice does not address the inequality or the negative effects of racism on children. Further to this, the participants’ focus on discussions of culture erases the salience of race. What is all the more revealing in the above quote is the statement that you cannot tell the children your ‘opinion’, while reinforcing to the children that they have to be nice to people, which in essence, is offering an opinion. Perhaps an even more compelling exegesis of the educators’ interpretation lies in how she de-emphasizes race as a salient, worthy topic. Specifically, you cannot have an “opinion” about a topic that is neither salient nor legitimate. Race, therefore, is rendered “invisible”, stripped of both its epistemological and experiential relevance. In effect, in erasing the salience of race, the ECE’s recreated and legitimized race-based oppressions for young children.

I have no hesitation because we’re just talking about um, treating each other with respect and being friends and that kind of thing. And I haven’t really run into children under the age of six being mean to each other because of their race... But so, yes, for children I don’t feel uncomfortable [talking about race]. (Participant 27)

This quote revealed a clear message – I can talk to kids because they do not understand race; however, the more problematic reading of this is that the instructor has little to no facility for dealing with race and racialization and thus is positioned to do more harm than good, particular for racialized children in her care.

The next participant's response highlights the extent to which race gets supplanted with culture and the ways in which the responses of the instructors minimize the importance of children's racial identity development and socialization.

Interviewer: Um, do you hear children, do you ever hear children speak about differences?

Participant: Yeah. And I think we do. I mean. We, we talk about it when we read stories. When we're talking about skin tones or what have you, right? We're all different and it's good to, good to celebrate that we're all different. We do that quite often, you know. We put out multicultural papers and maybe little people. And they may not pick one that resembles their skin color. So, they're picking what they want as a person and then that's great. So, then we kind of encourage that, you know? Being able to choose whatever you like and not recognizing just by your skin color or ethnicity.

Although the surface level of the conversation highlights the importance of allowing the children to choose different identities, the racialized children clearly exhibited a preference for the White dolls, and the White children either consciously or unconsciously, did not choose the Black dolls. The ECE instructors did not engage in an analysis of the connotations of those choices, minimized the potential impact of these behaviors amongst the children and failed to examine the extent to which those patterns of behavior amongst the children, re-centered Whiteness. This participant indicated that they 'encourage' the children to pick examples that do not resemble the children themselves because they "are picking the person they want to be and that's great," except for the fact that the racialized children are indicating at a very subconscious level a preference for Whiteness.

The responses of the participants underscore their inability to support the children in having appropriate conversations about race or facilitating the children's understanding of race and more importantly developing an appreciation for their own racial identities. The participants noticeably did not regard the ECE environment as a space that reinforced racist practices or attitudes, but rather located the race-based responses and behaviors of the children as having been influenced by the parents.

Parental role in promoting racism: "It comes from the parents."

The participants regularly attributed the children's attitudes toward race to their parents. The ECE instructors indicated that the language, attitudes and behaviors of the parents were primarily responsible for the ways in which the children learned about race and racism. In circumstances where they observed behaviors amongst the children that were indicative of racial in-group preferences, the parents were still blamed, although those situations were occurring during the times when the children were under their care. The ECEs still did not make a link between their interactions with and treatment of race and those of the children. Although the children are in their care for 8-10 hours a day, and during their most active learning periods of the day, the ECEs assumed no responsibility for the messages about race the children received or observed. There was no indication that their interactions, the behaviors that they condoned or minimized, the ways in which they exposed the children to discourses of race, or their failure to address interactions that were racially charged, played a role in what the children learned about race and racism.

The response of the following participant highlights the ways in which children can be passive learners of information regarding race from their parents. The subsequent excerpts from several of the ECE instructors highlight the extent to which they eschewed their roles in promoting negative attitudes towards race amongst the children and continue to assign responsibility to the parents:

Yeah I think a lot of it comes from the parents because they think, "Oh my child's in the back, they're reading a book, they're not listening to me." Well yes they are. They're on the subway, and if you say a comment, you're looking down, they can hear other people talking. And if there's a comment about somebody who's like, near them, that child picks it up and that child looks and puts one and one together.

Interviewer: So do you think that the parents then have, are the ones influencing children in terms of like their negative views about race or racism, or?

P: Oh yeah. I would say that even, cause if you think of like, if they're driving a car, and someone cuts them off. What's the first thing that comes out of their mouth? A slur. If the person is of a different ethnicity.

I: Mm hmm.

P: Except I've seen this before, even with my stepfather, like growing up. It's like he was very, very, very, very, like, every comment was just like, "That little-" And I'm like, "Who?" I'm looking around for this little person and it's like, who's he talking about? And I'm like, and when I was a little older and

it's like I realized, it's like, "Oh my goodness he's like really racist." [laughs] And I've told my mother and she says, "No he's not, he's not racist." And I'm like, "mom, every time he sees a Black person, this is what he says." (Participant 29)

The participant clearly highlights the extent to which the children can passively learn racially-coded messages, but does not claim any responsibility in the learning process. The participant continued the conversation as the interviewer asked additional probing questions:

Interviewer: Right. So do you ever hear children talking about differences between them? Like differences-

Participant: Very rare. It's funny how they don't really see differences in themselves, or in each other. Um, you, I think in all the years I've heard one comment about skin tone. And it just blew me away, I'm like what? When I heard it. And like, and the child had no idea what he said. Because it came from the parent.

Interviewer: Mm hmm. And what was that, if you wouldn't mind sharing the incident?

P: Um the, the comment was, "You can't play with-" He says, "I can't play with you." He goes, "Why?" "Because you're Black." And we're like, what? And I said to him, I was asking the child about that and I said, "What do you mean by that?" And I said, "Well what do you mean he's Black?" "Cause I don't know, my mommy said he's Black and I can't play with him." I'm like, whoa. So, yeah, so it had nothing to do with him. Like we're like, are you kidding? I was furious with that parent.

Interviewer: It was from the parent.

Participant: I was like, if the parent walked through that door, I don't know what I would have done. (Participant 29)

Although the participant expressed anger at the parent, there was no discussion of the way in which the staff members could have addressed the issue or the strategies they employed at the centres to address such incidences. Racism emerges as the issue that is either denied, dismissed or evaded. In the following scenario, the question regarding racial incidences and the management of them were posed to a supervisor:

Interviewer: Um so in your role as a supervisor, have you worked with staff where they have had something negative said to them about their race, or if children have had something negative said to them, um or families, since you also oversee OEYCs (Ontario Early Years Centres). Um and if so, how was the incident handled?

Participant: Ah years ago as a staff actually we had an incident where a young girl was um, actually her parents told her if she would eat chicken, she could be White. So the parents were sort of influencing that. But what was happening then, ah she was going into the centre and telling another child, who was Black- this child was East Indian- that she needed to eat chicken so she could be White, too. And those parents were very upset. So, we had to have a discussion with the children about, we just talked about skin tone, and you know what we eat doesn't change our skin tone. We talked about healthy eating and why we would eat that. We also had to have some conversations and a meeting with the parents on both sides. Um because the parents were really pushing. This is how they got her to eat at home. Yes. That was initially how we had heard about it. We had heard the parents say it to the little girl, like after that, in the morning, "Don't forget to eat your lunch, it'll make your skin White." Um and then she started saying things like in the bathroom, "Look at my skin, I'm Whiter than you" to the same little girl. So, it was sort of the two of them really talking about it. (Participant 36)

In the above participant response, the supervisor identified several aspects of race and racism they believed the parents taught their child and which the child had repeated while in the centre. It was interesting to note that the supervisor and the employees used this situation of anti-Black racism to talk about healthy eating practices rather than as an opportunity to teach the children about race and identity. The parents of the Black child, and the East Asian child, were clearly offended by the situation and as the supervisor noted they held a meeting with both sets of parents 'because the parents were really pushing' but failed to recognize the seriousness of the situation. The supervisor also failed to appreciate or acknowledge the way in which Whiteness was being identified as the ideal skin tone and the potential impact this ideology can have on racialized children who can internalize these messages.

Limited educational preparation: "None or very little discussion about race"

The participants overwhelmingly indicated that they were not exposed to content related to race or racism in their training. They stated that the curriculum focused more generally on the development of children and discussed strategies for working with children; however, the issues of diversity in general and race, in particular, were not included. When probing questions were asked in an attempt to further identify opportunities that they would have had in the field to address issues of race or field based professional development opportunities to support them in

developing strategies for working with racialized children or strategies for addressing incidences of racism amongst the children or the families, they again indicated that these options had not been made available to them.

In terms of my ECE diploma, I would say no. I'd say there was – yeah, I wanna say none or very little discussion about race. So then in the other side, through the master's program, there was quite a lot of discussion and um exposure to different theories... I mean the diploma program's set up to support people entering the field (Participant 28)

The above quote highlights several issues including the lack of training related to race. Namely, the fact that front line staff who have the most contact with the children tend to have the lowest educational levels (a two-year diploma) and would require an advanced degree to be exposed to advanced training and while they were responsible for an integral part of a child's development – their racial identity!

Another participant, who had years of experience in the field noted that in the cases where difference was discussed it tended to focus on children with special needs, which replicates the dismissal identified above. For example, some of the participants indicated that when race-based issues emerged, they tended to speak about children with disabilities as a form of difference. They tended to speak to the idea that everyone is 'special or different' which does not address the specificity of race-based discriminations. This pattern of response reinforces the idea that people draw upon their existing knowledge base to understand and make sense of new information or experiences. Thus, if we are expecting ECEs to address race-based issues, they need to be specifically taught about race—and racism. The homogenizing all of identities, without examining the particularities of racism, stands to re-center Whiteness in the early childhood classroom.

We're looking at between ninety and ninety-four [laughs]. Oh, so long ago [laughs]. Um I'm trying to think of the courses I had and... No there was nothing like that. I'm trying to think about the courses. The course was very um, very general. There was nothing about, I think the, there was a little segment on children with special needs. A little segment of, like of a class. Like one night. Yeah. So I'm thinking, and there was nothing about race or ethnicity- It was one night out of one course, it was part of one other course and it was like one night we talked about it. I think it was one night or two nights that it was spoken about, and we, I'm like, are you kidding me? (Participant 29)

I would say in college, no. I don't think there was any preparation at all... I think there was very little preparation to deal with families in general. Yeah. Um once we were in the centre, we did have policies in place, but I don't know in the early years there was a lot of training available... Um only in the past couple years have I actually been on the committee, so been able to do some of the training, and um come up- and we're planning more training for staff as well, to help them prepare. Cause you want to deescalate a situation and then get to the root of it. (Participant 36)

Building on the previous idea, it stands to reason that if the training and development is not made available to them during their course work or later during the field, these realities limited their development and awareness of strategies to effectively address race-related incidences. The ECEs are not made aware of the impact of racism both in the short and the long term in terms of the outcomes for children, therefore it is not surprising that their responses to race-related incidences would be muted, minimized or denied.

Discussion

The present qualitative study examined how Canadian educators addressed race and racism in the classroom. The four main themes that emerged from the response included denial of racism, comfort talking about race, but only if it comes up, parental role in teaching racism, and the limited to access to training about race and racism. While each of these themes represent a significant, unique body of data, a closer examination reveals specific internal continuities that coalesce around practices, processes and ideologies that characterize perceptions of race and racism in Canadian society. Indeed, consistent among participants' responses is an imaginative fiction of what constitutes racism and its continued significance, but which in turn, influences how they interpret children's racialized behaviour—and the need for anti-racist teaching. Multiculturalism discourses have had a significant influence on participants' vision of Canadian society as welcoming, inclusive, and non-racist. Yet, research along with lived experiences indicate otherwise (e.g., Bailey, 2016; Baker, Price, & Walsh, 2016; Codjoe, 2001).

The contrast between the reality of racism and participants' responses is quite telling, further revealing how racial discourse, and the inherent power relations, construct Canadian society as one which is bereft of racism. Furthermore, this image of innocence, one birthed through the convergence of power and hegemonic race narratives, can also explain the lack of curriculum in early childhood teacher education that specifically focuses on children and

race and anti-racist education. Racial discourse, then, is not limited to perceptions but rather, influences social institutions, and by extension, social practices. What makes the effect of denying racism or having a flawed perception of racism even more problematic, however, is that educators also hold similar naïve views of young children, and they are failing to address these issues during critical stages of learning and development.

While ECE instructors consistently denied that the children's behaviors indicated racial awareness, racism, or evidence of early racial attitudes, such responses stand in contrast to the empirical research which has shown that children develop racial in-group preferences quite early (Aboud, 2003), and the instructors' unwillingness to acknowledge this development serves to legitimize Whiteness as the norm. Further to this, the instructors are reinforcing the dominance of White children's perspectives while minimizing the impact of racism on racialized children. The participants engaged in a strategic or conscious erasure of race and employed this strategy to avoid talking about or dealing with race. This appeared to be a strategy that is similar to claims of colorblindness (Copenhaver-Johnson, 2006; Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2005; Farago, Sanders & Gaias, 2015; Husband, 2010; 2012) or color-evasiveness (Annamma, Jackson, & Morrison, 2017). This failure to address the racism experienced by the victims sends the message to racialized children that the differential treatment to which they are subjected is acceptable and sets them up for carrying the burden of the long term consequences of racism.

The instructors indicated that they were willing to address issues of racism but only in instances where the children initiated the discussion. However, given that they are reluctant to admit that there is racism in the classrooms, addressing it is deemed to be irrelevant. Similarly, to generalized societal sentiment, the ECEs regarded seeing and or naming race as a site of contention that can result in the disruption of social relations and they invest in the idea that the more acceptable option is not to address it.

In addition to emphasizing "reactive" strategies, the instructors also indicated that they were not trained to identify or examine race or to address racism in their classrooms. Early childhood educators' lack of professional training signifies a disturbing yet revelatory absence of anti-racist education in the structure and content of early childhood teacher education programs; such is not a novel issue. Indeed, although the literature on social justice and multicultural education in teacher education spans decades and continues to influence the field (e.g., Cochran-Smith et al., 2009; Nieto, 2000; Ukpokodu, 2007), scholarship that addresses Canadian early childhood teacher preparation (e.g., Escayg et al., 2017; Goldstein, 2001; Janmohamed, 2005), while sparse, not only sheds light on the limitations of such programs, but also accents the significance of an integrated, institutional anti-racism approach.

Concomitantly, a critical race theory analysis reveals how Whiteness as property is operationalized in Canadian early childhood teacher education programs. The power to determine what type of curricula is included in the program, and whose knowledges and perspectives are centered, all illustrate the discursive manifestations of property rights as tethered to Whiteness (Decuir & Dixon, 2004; Dixon & Rousseau Anderson, 2018). Furthermore, while the evocation of Whiteness can be traced to teacher education programs, as well as the broader Canadian society, the ramifications of such extend to the early childhood classroom: specifically, teachers are ill-equipped to protect racialized children impacted by racism. Given that the research indicates that children learn about racial markers quite early, the instructors are missing out on an important opportunity to interrupt the onset of early racial preferences. Their failure to respond to the incidences are based on their own unwillingness to or inability to address racism thus reinforcing the minimization of race in educational training programs.

In addition, the instructors contended that parents' messages about race was a significant contributor to children's racialized behaviour. These views are consistent with Allport's (1954) theory of racial prejudice, one which bears parallels to social learning theory. Specifically, he argued that children's prejudice was directly related to what they observed among parents (Levy & Hughes, 2009). Apart from Allport's contribution, researchers have proposed other theoretical orientations to account for how environmental influences, including parental socialization, influence children's racial identity development (for review, see Levy & Hughes, 2009). One of the most prominent theoretical works, however, is the socio-cognitive framework (Aboud, 2008). While such lens attribute children's racial attitudes to the interactions between environment and social cognitions, according to Aboud (2008), cognition remains the primary mechanism in which children interpret, assess, and employ racial beliefs. Parents as well as the broader social environment play a minimal role. Yet, from a critical race perspective, racial discourse not only structures a child's social world, but also impacts his/her racial understandings.

At a more micro level, for instance, the racial group to which parents belong and the people with whom they socialize in their private and public worlds, provide information to children about race. Many of the messages are subtle; however, they set the context and conditions under which children come to understand race. For example, if children only see members of a particular racially defined group in their homes, they can assume that these are the types of persons they can become friends with or alternatively, who they should not interact with (Pahlke, Bigler, & Suizzo, 2012). Although there are circumstances where parents will directly indicate to their children who they can and cannot interact with, in our present day of political correctness, it is unlikely that the majority of parents would

direct their children to espouse racist sentiments. The messages tend to be transmitted in much more subtle ways as indicated above. Therefore, who the children see their parents interact with, the manner in which parents speak about other racial groups, the types of stimuli to which children are exposed, all send very clear messages about race and racism that, although the child may be too young to articulate, their brains are coding these racial schemas that they will employ in their everyday worlds. The research also demonstrates that children whose mothers had cross-racial friendships, expressed lower levels of racial biases (Pahlke, Bigler, & Suizzo, 2012).

The ECE's, while highlighting the role of the parents in the racial socialization of children, failed to examine the ways in which the children would also mimic their behaviors and would make judgements based on the reactions of the staff. The ECEs in their role are engaging with children on a more consistent basis than the parents, but they failed to see that they were also responsible for racial socialization of the children in their care. To wit, while an ample body of literature exists on African American parents (see, for example, Priest et al., 2014), research focused on educators' racial socialization practices is sparse (for teachers' implementation of anti-bias curriculum, however, see Farago, 2017, and Vittrup, 2016). Canadian scholarship on parents' and teachers' approaches to discussing race and racism is also limited. Such an absence is problematic, and (perhaps even more telling of the ongoing prominence of racism in the early years field), especially when considering that "teachers' cultural or racial competence and ethnic-racial socialization practices can serve as protective factors for children of color in the face of bias and discrimination" (Farago, Davidson, & Byrd, 2019, p. 132).

Study Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Although the present investigation provides much-needed data on Canadian early childhood educators' professional practice, it is important to note that the limited sample size prevents generalizability. Furthermore, participants represented different racial backgrounds, and as such, a more detailed analysis of the relationship between teachers' racial identity and their perceptions of and support for anti-racism praxis is needed. Therefore, future research should examine the differences in how White Canadian early childhood educators and racialized early childhood educators conceptualize and apply anti-racism (if at all) in their teaching practice. A national study on enacting anti-racist pedagogy that includes educators from other provinces, with racial demographics similar to Toronto, Ontario, also holds the potential to substantially contribute to the Canadian scholarly literature. Another line of inquiry can focus on anti-racist training for early childhood administrators.

Conclusion

It is perhaps a truism to re-assert that children, like adults, are not "color-blind." Yet, despite the research findings disproving such a popular claim, parents, teachers, and other socializing agents continue to dismiss the multiple ways in which children interact with and reproduce the values of their social worlds. Racism remains a central feature of Canadian and American society. Recognizing that children are active agents who interpret and reproduce racist symbols, messages, and images through interaction with peers and adults, helps to dispel the myths concerning children's racial competencies and illuminate the lived, ongoing realities of racism. For while denial may obscure and secure a temporary allure, racism thrives in an environment of delusion, while simultaneously reproducing the existing power structures that privilege Whiteness. Central, therefore, to transforming the landscape of early childhood education in Ontario, is an anti-racist approach.

An anti-racist approach acknowledges the "real" effects of racism in the lives of racialized children, critiques institutional policies, and advocates for teacher education reform. In the context of teachers' pedagogies, an anti-racist educator is self-reflective, and creates a classroom environment that affirms children's intersectional identities, including their race, class, gender, and religious identity. An anti-racist early childhood educator incorporates discussions about racism in their teaching practices while encouraging children to recognize and critique structural/institutional inequities.

Ultimately, early childhood educators must reject the paralyzing practice of inertia which reflects unfounded optimism, reproduces inequities, and deprives children of the opportunity to experience classroom environments that inspire self-acceptance, and an aversion towards injustice. The journey towards effective anti-racism praxis, however, starts with self-awareness (Escayg, 2019a), which must by necessity include an analytical frame that privileges the realities of race, racism and practices of racialization. Courage, vulnerability, and persistence mark the steps of such a path, but the benefits of a renewed mind and a fortitude to challenge racial injustice far outweigh the costs. We hope all educators embrace a passionate pursuit of anti-racist pedagogy—for themselves and their students.

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