Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Early Child Development and Care

ISSN: 0300-4430 (Print) 1476-8275 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gecd20

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

Maggie MacNevin & Rachel Berman

To cite this article: Maggie MacNevin & Rachel Berman (2017) The Black baby doll doesn't fit the disconnect between early childhood diversity policy, early childhood educator practice, and children's play, Early Child Development and Care, 187:5-6, 827-839, DOI: 10.1080/03004430.2016.1223065

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2016.1223065

EARLY CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND CARE, 2017
VOL. 187, NOS. 5–6, 827–839
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2016.1223065

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

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

Maggie MacNevin and Rachel Berman

School of Early Childhood Studies, Ryerson University, Toronto, ON, Canada

ABSTRACT

This article explores how multicultural policy approaches, which mandate the inclusion of culturally and ethnically 'diverse' play materials in early childhood classrooms influence the pedagogical practice of educators and, in turn, children's play and social interactions. Using data collected through participant observation of children's play in a preschool/kindergarten classroom, interviews with early childhood professionals, and document analysis of a particular early years policy, we highlight the shortcomings of the focus on physical materials as the primary strategy for addressing 'race' and other forms of difference in early childhood education. Assumptions about children's play are examined and critiqued, with examples of children's play episodes provided to emphasize how play reproduces systems of power and oppression present in the broader social context. A number of recommendations are offered for both professional practice and the reconceptualization of early childhood policy.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 1 June 2016
Accepted 8 August 2016

KEYWORDS
Diversity; early childhood education; play; policy; race

Introduction

In the city of Toronto, Ontario, Canada declared in May 2016 as the most multicultural city in the world by the BBC, licensed childcare centres are expected to stock their classrooms with a variety of 'culturally diverse' artefacts, including art materials, dolls, play food, dress-up clothing, musical instruments, display photos, recorded music, and books (City of Toronto, 2016). However, the same policy documents that mandate the inclusion of racially and culturally diverse play materials are virtually silent on the topic of how race, ethnicity, culture, and other dimensions of difference should inform teacher–child interactions or the development of curriculum. In this paper, we look at how 'race' and racial identity are (or is not) taken up in early childhood policy documents in Ontario, examine and critique a number of assumptions that underlie these policies, particularly regarding beliefs about play and development. We discuss observations of children's play in an early learning centre in order to provide some examples of social interactions and the use of play materials in a classroom containing the legislated diverse artefacts. We also consider statements made by early childhood educators (ECEs) that demonstrate a disconnect between what teachers believe children understand about 'race' and what children are demonstrating in their play. Finally, we provide some recommendations for early childhood policy and practice to move beyond the current focus on physical environments and towards a deeper engagement with issues of 'race' and difference in the social life of the early childhood classroom.

CONTACT Rachel Berman rcberman@ryerson.ca School of Early Childhood Studies, Ryerson University, Toronto, ON M3B 2K3, Canada

Background

The larger study

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

Theoretical framework(s)

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

Critical race theory

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

Post-structural theory

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

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

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

A note about the term diversity

The term 'diversity' appears frequently in early years policy documents and in various forms in discourses on 'race' and difference. Children's author and illustrator Maclear (2016) has noted how often the term 'diversity' is used in the world of children's literature world without agreement about its meaning. Maclear describes a number of ways the term is employed, including 'backdrop diversity' in which 'difference is portrayed as non-threatening and universal' (para. 9); and 'encyclopedic diversity' which depicts 'a glorious array of costume, décor, landscape, homes, to represent worldliness and/or cosmopolitanism' (para. 10). We argue that there is a common unsaid discourse connecting the many nuanced employments of the term 'diversity': things or people that are 'diverse' are non-white. We believe that this common meaning is generally understood by ECEs and administrators, who are well aware of what needs to be on the bookshelf or in the dramatic play centre in order to comply with regulations requiring these areas to include diverse materials. Because we will be discussing the impact of these same policy regulations, our use of the term 'diversity' in this article can also be understood to mean 'non-white.' However, our goal in critiquing these (supposedly apolitical) multicultural policies is to push for the field of early childhood education to move towards a model of critical diversity, a model that 'does not only work at the level of representational inclusion, rather critical diversity asks some difficult questions about inclusion and what inclusion signals and or means in each context' (Walcott, 2011, p. 3).

Analysis

The analyses in this article include a focus on (1) the city of Toronto's *Early Learning and Care Assessment for Quality Improvement* document, hereafter referred to as the AQI, (2) Observations of children's play (3) Excerpts from interviews with ECEs.

Analysis of the early learning and care assessment for quality improvement

The AQI

> prescribes clear expectations, service standards and guidelines for all child care providers who have a service contract with the City. It also serves as a self-evaluation and planning tool for child care operators, and educators … The assessment measure uses the program, environment and interactions collaboratively to advance quality in child care. (City of Toronto, 2016)

Childcare operators in Toronto, where the CWTAR study took place, must meet the expectations set out in the AQI in order to secure municipal childcare funding. Because the results of annual inspections are published and made available to parents (i.e. potential clients), operators are additionally motivated to obtain a score in the 'exceeds expectations' range.

In the analysis of the AQI document, as with all documents analysed in the larger study, the frequency and context of use of the following terms were noted: *culture, gender, race, ethnicity, diversity, gender, disability*. Truncated search terms were used in order to capture variations of each term, for example, *rac** for *race, racial, racism, racist* and so forth. Analysis of the AQI found that all uses of the terms *cultur*, rac*,* and *ethnic** are in keeping with multicultural approaches in early childhood

education and refer to physical objects in the room, or to music. These guidelines are quite specific and often include precise quantities of 'diverse' objects that should be present in the classroom. For example, 'Two or more books which include diverse people/cultures are accessible' (p. 15) and 'There are at least three dramatic play accessories that are culturally diverse' (p. 21). Other guidelines such as 'Educational play materials may include dolls with different skin tones, *ethnic foods*, wooden dolls reflecting diverse people' (p. 7, emphasis added) and 'Two or more displays include cultures/races. May include people from different races or cultures, international flags, language displays' (p. 8) imply the existence of neutral play materials that are free from any ethnic, racial, or cultural association. This finding aligns well with the perspective of Critical Race Theorists who have argued that Whiteness is normalized to the point of invisibility (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997). Furthermore, the terms *cultur**, *rac**, and *ethnic** were entirely absent from all AQI guidelines addressing teacher–child interactions. Taken together, results of the analysis of the AQI reflect a belief that an appropriately 'diverse' and inclusive early learning environment can be achieved solely through the addition of culturally, racially, and ethnically diverse (i.e. non-White) play materials to a neutral, culture-free space that is presumed to exist.

Notably, this emphasis on physical objects as a means to achieving a 'culturally diverse' environment was also reflected by ECEs who participated in interviews as part of the CWTAR study. When asked how 'cultural diversity' was reflected in their classrooms, participants frequently and eagerly described play materials such as skin-tone markers and paints, racially diverse dolls, dramatic play props from a variety of cultures, and books depicting diverse people. These adult participants rarely discussed ways in which race/ethnicity/culture influenced social interactions or programme planning in the classroom, which given the focus of the AQI is perhaps not surprising. More will be said about this shortly.

This emphasis on 'multicultural' artefacts, found in the AQI (and many of the other policy documents we analysed), and reproduced in practice by ECEs in the CWTAR study, coupled with the near-absence of race/ethnicity/culture in guidelines around social interactions, programme planning and curriculum, creates a context in which children may find themselves surrounded by 'diverse' artefacts without being given any opportunities to talk about 'race' and difference with teachers and peers. Park (2011) observed a similar disconnect in her study in an American preschool classroom, and noted, 'It was unclear … what the mere presence of difference in the perceptual realm, unaccompanied by explanation and dialogue, was teaching students about the politics or *meaning* of difference in the larger society' (p. 406, emphasis in original). Park (2011) goes on to ask, 'Is it sufficiently beneficial for multicultural images to simply be absorbed by children?' (p. 406).

As we consider this question, we also need to consider what processes are assumed to be at work when children play. Grieshaber and McArdle (2010) note that the field of early childhood education has long accepted the taken-for-granted idea that play leads inevitably and predictably to positive development. These authors describe how, for example, children are assumed to automatically gain communication and negotiation skills through dramatic play with peers. They assert, 'There is no consideration of the type or appropriateness of the skills that are gained as a result of engaging in play. Instead a blanket assumption gives the impression that whatever the skills, they will be advantageous' (p. 7). We suggest that a similar assumption underlies the emphasis on 'multicultural' artefacts in early years policy; that is, the belief that playing with these materials will necessarily result in an appreciation of difference and a preservation of the non-biased worldview children are often simply assumed to innately possess.

Grieshaber and McArdle (2010) are critical of the discourse that play is natural and always beneficial to all children. They argue instead, 'Much play in early childhood settings reproduces the status quo. That is, it reproduces what exists in terms of relations of power about "race"; gender; social, economic and cultural capital; ethnicity; heteronormativity, and proficiency with English' (p. 75). These power relations are continually at work during interactions in the early learning environment and exert a strong influence on children's play: who gets what roles, who has access to preferred materials and spaces, and how conflicts are resolved.

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

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

Observations of children's play

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

Episode one

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

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

Episode two

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

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

In this episode, Sarah chose a brown-skinned doll to play the role of a scary antagonist who harms the White dolls. Sarah herself identified the character's brownness as a way of knowing he is a witch. Interestingly, Sarah consistently used female pronouns when talking about this doll, perhaps because she interpreted its long robe as a woman's dress. Sarah's response, 'My mom says brown in Spanish is lo-kee. Lokee lokee lokee. Like Goldilocks' is quite intriguing. It is possible that at home, Sarah heard something about Brown people that she did not fully understand, hence her use of the nonsense word 'lokee.' She seems also to be aware of a connection between brown skin and the Spanish language. In her final statement, she demonstrates awareness of racial categories and a confident knowledge of the Whiteness of a fictional character, Goldilocks. This play episode provides compelling evidence that children do indeed attach their own meaning and form inaccurate conclusions about racialized groups (Farago et al., 2015) and reproduce these biases in their play (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010).

Episode three

Marko (age 3, Serbian Canadian) was playing at a table with two other children. There was a large quantity of Lego on the table, as well as a few mini skateboards. Some of the Lego appeared to belong to a set and had accessories that looked to be inspired by Chinese dragon boats. I noticed one of the Lego figurines had a highly stereotyped Chinese appearance: conical hat, slanted eyebrows and a long moustache, and a shirt with what appeared to be Chinese characters on it. Marko picked up another figurine, which also had many stereotypically Asian markers. This one had a red hat with horns, traditional Japanese wooden sandals, a sword in its hand and nunchucks in its belt. Marko told me, 'This guy's a ninja.' I asked him, 'How do you know he's a ninja?' Marko responded, 'I just know. He's the best ninja in the whole world'.

The first author was surprised to observe the presence of what she judged to be stereotypical and racist toys in the classroom. She later learned that this Lego is part of a product line called Lego Ninjago, which is also connected to a children's television show of the same name. Marko was likely familiar with this product line, hence his response 'I just know. He's the best ninja in the whole world.' There is a mythology created around this product and its characters that seems

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

Social exclusion episodes

During participant observation sessions, several instances of social exclusion during which racial dynamics could have been at play were observed. Because some of the children involved in these episodes did not have parental consent to participate in the research, these incidents cannot be discussed. During participant observation research in an American preschool class, Park (2011) noted that initially, 'It was difficult to assess whether there was a racial or ethnic component to specific exclusionary behaviours … No child ever explained a conflict in racialized terms or used racial epithets.' (p. 408). However, when Park (2011) analysed children's friendship networks and overall patterns of social interaction, she found clear evidence of children racially segregating themselves, as well as disproportionately high rates of social exclusion experienced by children of colour. Such an in-depth analysis of children's social behaviour was not possible in the CWTAR study due to time limitations on participant observation and because only about half of the children in the classroom had consent to participate in the research. Nevertheless, as the three brief episodes selected for discussion in this paper demonstrate, there is evidence that children in this setting were actively constructing meanings around 'race' and difference as they played; we would not be surprised to discover racialized patterns to friendship networks and social exclusion in this or any classroom.

Excerpts from interviews with ECEs

ECEs in our study often described potentially racialized behaviour and provided alternative explanations and motivations for this behaviour as is apparent in the following quotes. As with our observational data, our analysis of the interview data drew on the tenets of CRT and Post-Structuralist ideas. Adherence to a colourblind discourse is apparent in each of the following interview excerpts. When asked if she noticed any patterns in the formation of children's friendship groups, one participant responded

> So it may look like those groups have formed, but I don't know that they've done that intentionally or if it's just the demographics of the area … Um I wouldn't say that they're particularly picking out somebody of the same race as them, it's just something, who has something similar to them. (P36, White female, age 43)

Another participant suggested that friendship groups that appear racialized in fact form due to language preferences: 'Right, but it's just the comfort of the language that sometimes we see, I won't even call it segregation but they're in their small groups and the children are comfortable playing with each other' (P39, South Asian female, age 54). A third participant noted, 'I noticed I had some children [at the childcare centre] that wouldn't play with other children because their parents didn't want them playing together. Now, was it race? I don't know' (P37, White female, age 53). When asked how children respond to the required 'diverse' materials in the classroom, one participant stated,

> So I think the children respond to them, I mean they play with it and I don't know that they're necessarily picking out their own cultures and stuff. In books I've seen them point to pictures of things that they have in their home and stuff like that, but I don't think they like fight over a specific doll of their ethnic background or anything like that. I think they just, they just use them. (P36, White female, age 43)

Discussion and recommendations

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

Two conclusions seem warranted. First, simply providing children with racially and culturally diverse materials in the classroom is not sufficient to nurture positive racial identity development or to challenge biased and stereotyped beliefs and prepare children to confront racism and other forms of oppression when they encounter it. Thus, we agree with Lane (2008) who argues that such play resources need to be accompanied by discussions with teachers. Second, ECEs are not always aware of their students' knowledge about race and the ways in which children use this knowledge in their play and social interactions. Following are some recommendations for policy and practice. Although they are specifically geared towards ECEs working in an Ontario context, we assert that they are relevant for those working in other contexts as the discourse of colourblindness continues to dominate the field of early learning and care throughout North America (Boutte et al., 2011) and elsewhere. Additionally, while the need to address 'race' and racism in a highly multicultural city like Toronto may be obvious, Derman-Sparks, Ramsey, and Edwards (2006) note that it is no less important to do so in more racially homogenous contexts. The following recommendations are geared towards ECEs already working in the field, although certainly many of these recommendations are valid for pre-service programmes at Colleges and Universities as well.

Self-reflection

ECEs may avoid discussing race and bias with young children for a variety of reasons. They often report a lack of confidence in their abilities to appropriately engage children in these discussions, and may fear offending parents or creating and instilling biases in their students (Farago et al., 2015). These authors also note that White teachers, who have the privilege of maintaining a colourblind ideology, may not believe that racism and discrimination are particularly salient or contemporary topics. For these reasons, an important starting point for engaging meaningfully with these issues in early childhood education is ongoing self-reflection by educators. This may be particularly important for White teachers who may seldom have had occasion to think about the ways in which their Whiteness influences their beliefs and practices in the classroom. This is a recommendation that can easily be incorporated into existing policy documents that govern early childhood education. In Ontario, the provincial document *How Does Learning Happen?* (Government of Ontario, 2014) already focuses significant attention on self-reflection by concluding each of four sections on learning foundations with a series of reflective questions for educators. These questions often invite teachers to examine their beliefs and biases: 'Which policies and practices may be barriers to establishing relationships and ensuring the meaningful participation of all children? Of all families?' (p. 28); 'What environmental factors may be causing stress for children? What changes can be made to reduce stress for *all* who use the space?' (p. 34). However, without explicitly naming and interrogating race and racialized beliefs, these questions are not sufficient to interrupt the colourblind ideology held by many ECEs.

Observing children's play

Pacini-Ketchabaw (2014) asserts that '[e]ducators need to become vigilant to how racist and gendered discourses might creep into children's conversations in play encounters' (p. 73). As discussed earlier, it can be difficult or impossible to categorize individual episodes of play or social interaction as incidents of racism (Park, 2011). However, by observing and analysing children's behaviour over time, patterns may emerge that suggest that children are actively constructing their own understanding of race, and that these understandings play a role in organizing children's social interactions and their preferences for and use of play materials. As discussed previously, in interviews conducted as part of the CWTAR study, most ECEs reported that children's play and social interactions were seldom if ever influenced by 'race' or racism. We suggest that without intentionally and systematically observing and analysing children's behaviour over time, it is easy to overlook 'race' as an influencing factor in the classroom, particularly for White teachers who do not feel the impact of racism on their daily lives.

We propose that ECEs would benefit from taking on the role of close observer of children's play, in order to examine more intentionally how children are using materials in the classroom and to consider racialized patterns in friendships and social exclusion. This focused observation and analysis of children's behaviour could produce greater awareness of children's understanding of 'race,' and enable ECEs to develop intentional plans to address issues of 'race,' difference and bias in the classroom. In Ontario, this recommendation aligns well with the goals of the College of Early Childhood Educators' (CECE, a professional regulatory body) Continuous Professional Learning programme. Participation in this programme is currently voluntary for registered ECEs; it 'supports RECEs in meeting the expectations outlined in government legislation and College by-laws, policies, practices and programs' (CECE, 2015a). Participants in the programme complete a reflective self-assessment in order to create professional development goals based on the CECE's Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice (CECE, 2011), and then develop a plan of action to meet their learning goals. One suggested course of action is for ECEs to undertake 'professional inquiry/action research' (CECE, 2015a). Assuming a researcher's stance in the classroom may enable ECEs to question their own taken-for-granted beliefs about children's play and to consider alternative interpretations of behaviour. This professional learning would strengthen educators' competence in the following standards of practice: 'Observe and monitor the learning environment' (CECE, 2015b, p. 10) and 'Support children in culturally, linguistically and developmentally sensitive ways' (CECE, 2015b, p. 8).

Of course, ECEs do engage in observation of children's play on a daily basis, but this is typically done from a developmentalist perspective with the intention of assessing individual and group learning. Campbell and Smith (2001) highlight the importance of using alternative theoretical perspectives to produce multiple readings of children's play, in order to uncover themes of power and inequity that otherwise go unnoticed. These authors also recommend working with another teacher to simultaneously record and observe a play episode and then compare and critically analyse each other's description and analysis of the play. They suggest teachers ask, 'What personal and professional knowledge has enabled each person to record, see, and understand the play in a particular way? What personal and professional investment does each person have in the different ways of seeing and understanding play?' (pp. 99–100). By viewing children's play through a lens informed by CRT and working collaboratively with colleagues, ECEs can better see and understand the ways 'race and racism' operate in children's play.

Getting inside children's play

In addition to observing children's play, Fleer (2015) makes the case that although the dominant approach to children's play is that adults position themselves outside children's play for it to be considered 'legitimate,' adults need not be passive observers of children's play, but can instead be partners. Through her research, where she examines the role adults take in children's play within play-based early childhood settings, she developed a typology of play pedagogy that shows the

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

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

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

Fostering positive identifications with race

A fourth recommendation for practice is for ECEs to develop and implement strategies to foster children's positive identifications with race. Here, clearly, authentic diversity of classroom materials is important: all children should see themselves represented and reflected in many positive ways throughout the classroom environment. However, as we have argued, the diverse classroom environment must be thoughtfully constructed and accompanied by ongoing discussions and interventions if it is to be effective. Children's author and illustrator Myers (2014) has argued that books should function as mirrors, reflecting children's lived experiences, but also as maps that offer expansive imaginative possibilities for the future. Myers draws attention to the scarcity of books that fulfil this need for children of colour; he notes that characters of colour, when they appear at all, are most often found in historical tales of slavery and civil rights, or as background characters in someone else's story. We suggest that this idea can apply not only to books but also more broadly to the entire classroom environment. It is critical that the early learning environment be one in which children of colour see myriad possibilities for their place in the world, currently and in the future, rather than seeing themselves as colourful additions to a predominantly white world. Dramatic play props, wall displays, art materials, puzzles and cognitive materials: everything in the room should be thoughtfully chosen and employed not only to meet policy requirements for representation, but also to provide a landscape of positive identities for children.

Explicit teaching about 'race' and racism

A final recommendation for practice is for ECEs to engage in teaching and dialogue regarding 'race' and racism. ECEs in the CWTAR study most often identified books and discussion about fairness, sameness and kindness as their primary or sole strategy for addressing difference in the classroom. For example, 'I would make it a general thing … reading books … and making ideas or games that we can play together showing that everyone's the same and we can be all, be all friends' (P34, Italian female, age 37); and

> [The book] just talks about differences but it's all the same … Like it's a funny book that I have big ears for example, and I can move them around, or I have big eyebrows I can put up and down. Right, so it doesn't specifically talk about particular race, it just talks about differences, and teaching children we are different but we are still the same. (P31, White female, age 42)

This is likely a confounding lesson for children whose own experiences in the classroom and the larger world tell them that racial differences in fact matter very much. We also question the effectiveness of books that employ what Maclear (2016) refers to as 'allegorical/parable diversity.' She notes, 'These books tend to tackle "prejudice" by taking a disarmingly whimsical and/or symbolic approach' (para. 6). There is little research to support the effectiveness of these types of interventions. Farago

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

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

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

Summary and conclusions

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

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

ECEs do not have the benefit of institutional support that is required to engage in meaningful professional development. It is therefore imperative that policies be reconstructed to make this work clearer, easier, and more meaningful, not harder.

Rather than simply adding more guidelines to existing policies to address race in the classroom, these policies should be reconstructed to authentically incorporate multiple perspectives and practices, and informed throughout by the central tenets of CRT. A thorough discussion of this considerable task lies beyond the scope of this article. However, we will conclude by offering some thoughts about the connections among policy, pedagogy, and children's play.

Our interviews with ECEs in the Toronto area provided evidence of the influence that policy has on practice. Most participants described a similar approach to incorporating ethnic and cultural diversity in the classroom, and this approach mirrored the requirements of the AQI: the addition of non-white dolls, art materials, books, wall photos, music, costumes, and play food to the existing environment. Of course, educators are free to take up a deeper engagement with issues of 'race' and difference, and some do. However, while policies continue to send the message that providing children with the required number of diverse play materials is a sufficient response to the question of difference, it is unlikely that we will see the majority of ECEs take on the challenging recommendations for practice we propose in this article. The policy focus on diverse materials reinforces the false assumption that children's play is naturally free from bias and stereotyping and is always beneficial to all children (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). Current policies thus fail to consider the complexity of children's play and do not support ECEs to consider the ways in which children's play reproduces larger social systems of power and oppression. In such a climate, we would not expect most ECEs to have the pedagogical tools to intervene and respond appropriately to children's racialized play and social behaviour; in fact, data from interviews with ECEs in the CWTAR study supported this expectation. We acknowledge the efforts made by ECEs to provide optimal care and education to young children in often challenging working conditions, while we call attention to the urgent need for action at the level of professional practice and, crucially, in the realm of policy. As Walcott (2011) argues,

> multicultural policies produce a kind of diversity that reproduces the historical legitimacy of the institutions in question without having to address the deeper structures of their orientation. Representational inclusion, both numeric and otherwise is valued at the expense of more thorough institutional questioning and rethinking. (p. 2)

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada's Insight Development Program [grant number #430-2014-00889].

Notes on contributors

Maggie MacNevin completed her B.A. in Child and Youth Studies at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and has been working as an early child educator since 2008. She has worked in preschool education, family resource, and most recently as a toddler teacher. She earned her Master of Arts in Early Childhood Studies at Ryerson University in 2014. Maggie currently lives in Toronto and works as a part-time instructor in the School of Early Childhood Studies at Ryerson.

Rachel Berman earned a Ph.D. in Family Studies at the University of Guelph, in Guelph Ontario, Canada in 2000 and joined the School of Early Childhood Studies at Ryerson University in Toronto, Ontario that same year. She haspublished in the areas of methods of inquiry, mothering, and perspectives of children and youth, and is the editor of *Corridor Talk: Canadian Feminist Scholars Share Stories of Research Partnerships*published by Inanna Publications in 2014. She teaches courses on social research with children, theoretical frameworks for early childhood studies, and the history and philosophy of early childhood education.

References

Barron, I. (2009). Illegitimate participation? A group of young minority ethnic children's experiences of early childhood education. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, *17*(3), 341–354.

Boutte, G. S., Lopez-Robertson, J., & Powers-Costello, E. (2011). Moving beyond colorblindness in early childhood classrooms. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *39*(5), 335–342.

Campbell, S., & Smith, K. (2001). Equity observation and images of fairness in childhood. In G. S. Cannella & S. Grieshaber (Eds.), *Embracing identities in early childhood education: Diversity and possibilities* (pp. 89–102). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

City of Toronto. (2016). *Preschool early learning and care assessment for quality improvement: Guidelines*. Retrieved from http://www1.toronto.ca/City20Of20Toronto/Children's20Services/Files/pdf/O/Operating20criteria/oc_guidelines_preschool.pdf

Clark, K. B. & Clark, M. K. (1939). The development of consciousness of self and the emergence of racial identification in Negro preschool children. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, *10*, 591–599.

College of Early Childhood Educators. (2011). *Code of ethics and standards of practice: Recognizing and honouring our profession*. Retrieved from https://www.college-ece.ca/en/Public/Pages/professionalstandards.aspx

College of Early Childhood Educators. (2015a). *Continuous professional learning program: Portfolio handbook*. Retrieved from https://www.college-ece.ca/en/Members/Pages/CPL-Program.aspx

College of Early Childhood Educators. (2015b). *Self-assessment tool*. Retrieved from https://www.college-ece.ca/en/Members/Pages/CPL-Program.aspx

Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (1997). *Critical White studies: Looking behind the mirror*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2012). Introduction. *Critical race theory: An introduction* (2nd ed., pp. 1–14). New York, NY: NYU Press.

Derman-Sparks, L., Ramsey, P. G., & Edwards, J. O. (2006). *What if all the kids are White? Anti-bias multicultural education with young children and families*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Farago, F., Sanders, K., & Gaias, L. (2015). Addressing race and racism in early childhood: challenges and opportunities. *Advances in Early Education and Day Care*, *19*, 29–66.

Fleer, M. (2015). Pedagogical positioning in play – teachers being inside and outside of children's imaginary play. *Early Child Development and Care*, *185*(11–12), 1801–1814.

Foucault, M. (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge*. London: Tavistock.

Government of Ontario. (2014). *How does learning happen? Ontario's pedagogy for the early years*. Retrieved from: http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/childcare/HowLearningHappens.pdf

Grieshaber, S., & McArdle, F. (2010). *The trouble with play* [ebook version]. Berkshire: Open University Press.

Husband, T. (2012). "I Don't See color": challenging assumptions about discussing race with young children. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 39(6), 365–371.

Janmohamed, Z. (2005). Rethinking anti-bias approaches in early childhood education; A shift toward anti-racism education. In G. J. Sefa Dei & G. Singh Johal (Eds.), *Critical issues in anti-racist research methodologies* (pp. 163–182). New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Lane, J. (2008). *Young children and racial justice: Taking action for racial equality in the early years: understanding the past, thinking about the present, planning for the future*. London: National Children's Bureau.

Maclear, K. (2016, March 1). *What we talk about when we talk about diversity*. Retrieved from http://kyomaclearkids.com/what-we-talk-about-when-we-talk-about-diversity/

MacNaughton, G. & Davis, K. (2009). *"Race" and early childhood education-An international approach to identity, politics and pedagogy*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

MacNaughton, G., Davis, K. & Smith, K. (2010). Working and reworking children's performance of 'whiteness' in early childhood education. In M. O'Loughlin & R. T. Johnson (Eds.), *Imagining children otherwise: theoretical and critical perspectives on childhood subjectivity* (pp. 135–155). New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Milner, H. R. (2013). Analyzing poverty, learning, and teaching through a critical race theory lens. *Review of Research in Education*, 37(1), 1–53.

Myers, C. (2014, March 15). The apartheid of children's literature. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/opinion/sunday/the-apartheid-of-childrens-literature.html?_r=0

Pacini-Ketchabaw, V. (2014). Postcolonial and anti-racist approaches to understanding play. In L. Brooker, M. Blaise & S. Edwards (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of play and learning in early childhood* (pp. 67–78). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Pacini-Ketchabaw, V. & Berikoff, A. (2008). The politics of difference and diversity: From young children's violence to creative power expressions. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, *9*(3), 256–264.

Park, C. C. (2011). Young children making sense of racial and ethnic differences: A sociocultural approach. *American Educational Research Journal*, *48*(2), 387–420.

Walcott, R. (2011, June). *What's art good for: Critical diversity, social justice and future of art and culture in Canada*. Speech presented at the Canadian Public Arts Funders Strategic Development Meeting on Equity, Edmonton, AB. Retrieved from http://www.cpaf-opsac.org/en/themes/documents/WhatsArtGoodFor-RinaldoWalcott-June2011.pdf