Examining Whiteness in a Children’s Centre

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ABSTRACT This article utilises critical whiteness theory to explore the ethnic discourses observed in a children’s centre in South London. Whilst critical whiteness has been used as a framework to understand race, racism and multiculturalism in a number of settings, including education, there are few studies that have sought to understand ethnicity in early year’s contexts in this way. A key focus of the research was to develop child focused methods that captured the perspectives of three- to five-year-olds on ethnicity through photo-elicitation and walking tours. The article explores the multiple ways that whiteness was performed, constructed and deconstructed by the parents, young children and staff in the centre. The article concludes that further explorations of whiteness in early childhood settings are needed in order to develop strategies that will help to produce a version of whiteness that can play a role in the struggle against racism and offer more multicultural early years and family support provisions.

Introduction

The research described took place in a Sure Start Children’s Centre in London. Sure Start centres (now Children’s Centres) were introduced in the United Kingdom (UK) in 1997 by the New Labour government as part of their agenda to tackle child poverty and social exclusion. The centres were intended to improve the life chances of children less than four years of age through early intervention. The centres provide a range of core services including early education and care, family support, primary community health services, and outreach services (Clarke, 2006).

A review of the literature that explored ethnicity in Sure Start centres found ethnicity was often neglected in the planning, provision or evaluation of services (Lloyd & Rafferty, 2006; Craig et al, 2007). This seems to have occurred due to a number of factors. For example, some centres seemed to maintain a philosophy that providing a ‘colour blind’ service would be the most equitable model. However, in reality, such a format meant that the needs of many minority groups were overlooked. In other centres, a failure to employ ethnic minority staff or have appropriate translation services was identified as the reason for the failure to attract or meet the needs of minority groups (Craig et al, 2007). There are also reports that services which ‘targeted’ ethnic minority families were delivered in ways that essentialised ethnic groups and homogenised their needs (Avis & Chaudhary, 2008). Conversely, other research has found such services to be effective at including and meeting the needs of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) families (Lloyd & Rafferty, 2006; Osgood & James, 2005). The research on Sure Start centres has, however, not focused specifically on how such services construct white identities, how they provide for white families, or how discourses of whiteness influence the provision of the services; any more than is the case for black identities.

The original intention of the research from which this article is drawn was to discover how well the Centre’s policies and practices served the local ethnic minority population. However, whilst revisiting the data, the word ‘white’ dominated much of what had been written and transcribed. ‘Whiteness’ in the Centre appeared to shape much of what was said and done about
race and ethnicity. Consequently, this article addresses a reanalysis of the data examining whiteness as the primary focus.

Whilst there have been a few discussions of whiteness in the wider early childhood literature (e.g. Goldstein, 2001; Skattebol, 2005; Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006; MacNaughton & Davis, 2009), as Robinson and Jones Diaz (2006) argued, children’s experiences of ethnicity and whiteness have not been the primary focus. From a critical white perspective, studies have tended to focus on minority racial and ethnic groups, thereby ignoring whiteness. This arguably has allowed whiteness to be maintained as the normalised and oppressive racial identity against which other ethnicities are judged (Delgado and Stefancic, 1997; Nylund, 2006). In this article, we explore how a critical engagement with whiteness can open up spaces for emancipatory interventions with young children and families.

**Conceptual Framework**

This article uses the theories and concepts of critical whiteness theory to scrutinise events that occurred in the Centre. Critical whiteness has been largely influenced by critical race theory, cultural studies, and postcolonial studies, and such disciplines share as key ambitions the exploration of identity, ethnicity, race, (post) colonialism, power and subjectivity (Nylund, 2006).

Critical whiteness is underpinned by three main beliefs:

1. The category of ‘whiteness’ is a social construction rather than a natural biological category (Leonardo, 2002). The term ignores the fact that at a certain time and context, there are multiple ways of being ‘white’ which are affected by factors like class, race, ethnicity, gender, nation, generation, age, ability and sexuality (Nylund, 2006).

2. Whiteness is an invisible and oppressive centre: a social norm that is parasitically attached to layers of hidden privileges. A primary goal of whiteness studies is to illuminate ‘the everyday, invisible, subtle, cultural and social practices, ideas and codes that discursively secure the power and privilege of white people’ (Shome, 1996, p. 503). Whiteness has become the norm as it ‘draws much of its power from “Othering” the very idea of ethnicity’ (Gillborn, 1996, p. 488).

3. Lastly, whiteness can be deconstructed and remoulded to open up new anti-racist approaches and work towards social equality (Gillborn, 1996). As Owen (2007, p. 205) asserted:

   Whiteness, understood as a structuring property of the social world can, however, be exposed, challenged, resisted and disrupted. And this is precisely why a greater degree of clarity is necessary concerning what whiteness is and how it functions in the reproduction of the system of racial oppression.

Ethnicity can be viewed as a referent for acknowledging ‘the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated and all knowledge is contextual’ (Hall, 1996, p. 29). Using the term ethnicity in this sense, allows us to see whiteness, not as a static, biological category (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998), but as a form of postmodern ethnicity transformed alongside the ever-changing tides of history, power, culture, economics and politics (Hall, 1996; Giroux, 1997).

In the context of this study, race is viewed as a social construction where people who share the same phenotypical appearance (for example, skin colour) are placed into different categories by society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Lee, 1985). Race is not fixed as these categories can be changed or abandoned by society when required, for example, Irish people ‘becoming white’ (Ignatiev, 1995). Ethnicity goes beyond physical appearance to acknowledge ‘the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity’ (Hall, 1996, p. 29).

The role of discourses in postmodern thinking (Foucault, 1971, 1979) is acknowledged in our understandings of race and ethnicity. There are many different discursive ways of thinking, speaking or writing about race and ethnicity. The different power levels associated with these different discourses affect which we see as ‘true’. For example, the historical power imbalances between white and black people mean that negative stereotypes about black people are believed by many. However, as power and discourses change within contexts, a person’s ethnic and racial identity can be subjected to change. ‘Whiteness’, therefore, is also seen as fluid and dynamic, subject to discursive change within the contextuality of knowledge and power and how it intersects...
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with other identity features (for example, gender, sexuality, class and nationality). Working with these understandings of race, identity, ethnicity and whiteness, we reveal the different ways in which whiteness was performed, constructed and deconstructed in the Centre.

Participants

The Centre was located in London in the UK and had a high minority ethnic population of 32% in the local area, compared to 7% across England and Wales (National Statistics, 2006). Black British and black ‘other’ groups (as defined by the census classifications) were particularly represented. The immediate local area was also home to a large Portuguese community and many of these families accessed the Centre. Participants in the study comprised parents (n = 12, all mothers) and children (n = 9, 3 boys and 6 girls), as well as early years and family support staff (n = 8, all female).

Methods

A critical perspective presupposes that the full meaning of experience can never be truly known, either by those experiencing it or by the researcher; language is always ‘slippery with meaning’ (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002, p. 102). For this reason, both observation and interview methods were used to collect data. Both methods allowed access to some of the multiple truths that were constructed in the Centre. Participant observations took place five days a week (for three to five hours a day) over a three-month period. Observations were conducted in the day care provision of the Centre and in various open access sessions (e.g. mother and toddler groups, postnatal classes, baby clinics, and parenting classes). Verity (lead author) chose to reveal her identity and became involved in the activities of the Centre in an attempt to reduce the power differential between researchers and researched. The status of the researcher as onlooker or participant changed throughout the research. At times she would sit outside the group and watch events unfold; at other times she would be playing with the children and talking to groups of parents as and when they seemed comfortable with this. This alternation between involvement and detachment allowed her to gain eclectic perspectives and more of a first-hand understanding of what it felt like to be involved in the activities of the Centre (Patton, 2002).

Interviews with parents and staff were in a semi-structured format to allow participants to construct their own truths within the interviews as much as possible. Many of the parents in the Centre had English as a second language and a number of the interviews were short as they were restricted by their English language capabilities. Ideally interpreters would have been used to enable participants to respond in their preferred language. This was not possible due to time constraints and the expertise of the bilingual staff was not sought for interviews for ethical reasons. It is not seen as a coincidence that much of the rich, open discussions about race and ethnicity came from white and English speaking participants. Moreover, Verity’s identity as a white, British researcher could legitimately have affected what participants felt they could say.

Interviews with children were adapted in order to allow them to share their views and experiences more effectively. This involved children (aged three to five) taking Verity on tours of the Centre and using her digital camera to record what they liked, did not like, where in the Centre they felt good, and where they did not. The photographs were later used to prompt and direct an interview and responses were recorded and transcribed. This adaptation of the traditional interview method was chosen as more suitable for the developmental age of young children, relying less on linguistic ability as a communication device. Photo-elicitation was also generally less intimidating for the children as it did not take the question–answer format of a traditional interview (Clark-Ibanez, 2008). There were, however, several children in the Centre reluctant to take part in the photo-elicitation interviews. It seemed to be the more confident and verbally mature children who were eager to take part in the research. Therefore, this method was not suitable for accessing the voice of every child and this challenged whether pre-existing power differentials affected whose voices were fore-grounded or silenced in the research (MacNaughton, 2005). There was little that could be done during the research to counter this, however, as it was felt to be ethically inappropriate to further encourage the children to take part in the research. The difference in adult
versus child status may also have led some children to feel that they had little or no choice but to participate.

Written informed consent was collected from the parents and staff. Where participants could not understand the consent forms or research request letters, the help of bilingual staff was sought. For children, verbal consent from them was negotiated before ‘walking tours’ began, as well as before the follow up interviews commenced. Consent was also sought from their parents. Pseudonyms have been used for all the participants.

Analysis

The data was subject to a critical discourse analysis that involved taking the everyday language or discourse ‘as a starting point in the process of marking the territory of whiteness and the power relations it generates’ (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995, p. 265) through deconstruction. Deconstruction (Derrida & Caputo, 1997) is a critical tool used to expose the multiple meanings and contradictions perpetuated through language (MacNaughton & Williams, 1998). The process involves critically taking apart the normalising discourses that construct knowledge of identities, including those operating in everyday life, in order to examine them. This deconstruction began with locating discourses of whiteness through and within multiple readings of the data gathered. The values and assumptions constituted within these discourses, how subjects are positioned within these discourses, and who is empowered and disempowered within them, were then examined. Throughout the analysis, we acknowledge there are multiple ways in which one can read the texts.

Results and Discussion

The deconstructive analyses according to an analytical framework of critical whiteness are presented under three broad headings explored below.

The Naming and Privileging of Whiteness

The following vignettes show instances where children used the different racial appearance of the dolls that were available in the Centre to construct and communicate their understandings of whiteness:

(a) Tyra (black/English) is taking Verity (VC) on a walking tour of the Centre, she leads her to the home corner where she points excitedly to the basket in which a selection of dolls are kept:

Tyra: Get me a baby so I can take a photo!
VC: Which baby would you like?
Tyra: The white one!
(Verity handed her a black doll; to see what she would do)
Tyra: No, a white one! (she puts the doll on the floor) That’s not a white one!

(b) During her walking tour Mary (white, English) had taken a photograph of each of the dolls individually (black, Asian and white). During the interview, Verity laid all these pictures alongside each other on the table and asked Mary to point out her favourite.

VC: Which one is your favourite baby?
Mary: Annabelle!
VC: What does Annabelle look like?
Mary: White

These examples of interactions with the children appear to echo the findings of other research (although these were predominately from North America and mostly dated), that has discovered that both black and white children often prefer to play with white dolls (Criswell, 1937; Horowitz, 1938; Brand et al, 1974; Aboud & Skerry, 1983; MacNaughton, 2005). The pioneers of ‘doll studies’ were Kenneth and Mamie Phipps Clark (1939, 1940, 1950) who conducted a variety of studies using black and white dolls to ascertain information about children’s racial attitudes and identities. They found that both the black and white children identified themselves most with the white dolls and
preferred the white dolls. Clark and Clark concluded that this demonstrated that black children were suffering from negative racial identities as a result of the poor attitudes towards their racial group that they had absorbed from society. Tyra’s behaviour can be understood through this analysis. Hooks (1992) argued that black people develop specialist knowledge of whiteness as a result of their exclusion from it. Through wanting to play only with the white doll we could argue that Tyra displayed a sophisticated knowledge of the level of privilege white skin affords; she wants to associate herself with this power and distance herself from the ‘blackness’ of her own skin. Such findings have been reported in other studies with young children (e.g. Ebrahim & Francis, 2008, reporting a study in South Africa). Mary (despite being white herself) also displayed her knowledge of the power of whiteness. The doll’s whiteness is the most salient attribute of Mary’s description. Through naming whiteness she changes its position from an invisible, neutral centre and exposes the elevated power.

Since the majority of doll studies were carried out, their reliability in showing children’s racial attitudes and identities has been critiqued. For example, Katz et al (1964) found that the race of the experimenter had significant effects on the children’s selection of dolls. It is possible that Tyra and Mary provided a socially desirable response for Verity as a white person believing that she would want them to prefer the white dolls and this was, in fact, not at all indicative of their own attitudes. If this was the case, this still suggests whiteness was a salient factor in the two children’s lives: the whiteness of Verity’s skin could have influenced the behaviour of the children.

Chin (1999) argued that the manufacturing of ethnically diverse dolls is, in itself, an attempt to mount a challenge towards whiteness as a norm and an attempt to transform children’s understandings of race. She argued that ethnically diverse toys are made and provided in early childhood environments under the belief that their presence will have a positive effect on children’s ethnic identities. She asserted that this is naive as it neglects to understand the complex social, political and historical issues that affect children’s experiences and opinions of themselves. Likewise, we posit that the presence of dolls of different appearances in the Centre did very little to challenge children’s perspectives on race because they had already learnt from people, rather than inanimate things, that whiteness offers advantage. Therefore, attempts to deconstruct this discourse of whiteness as superior need to be carried out by people as well, and this could start with critical dialogue and discussions in the Centre.

The privileging of whiteness was also demonstrated by other children in the Centre who drew upon the multiple ways in which one can display and perform whiteness (Hage, 1998). For example, many of the children in the Centre had English as a second language, yet ‘other’ languages were seldom heard, except occasionally from the staff. The following vignettes show children’s reluctance to speak in languages besides English:

Mai-Li (Chinese) and Verity are playing in the home corner. Mai-Li is picking up plastic fruits and proudly naming them (in English). Verity asks her if she can tell her the name of a banana in Cantonese (her first language) she shakes her head and replies, ‘poo poo’.

Miriam (white, Portuguese) is sitting at a table counting out beads. Verity asks her to count them in Portuguese, she shakes her head and continues to count in English.

It is possible that these children were displaying their knowledge of Verity as a native English speaker. They saw little point in speaking to her in their preferred languages because they knew she would not understand. However, it is also possible that these children were ‘accumulating whiteness’ (Skattebol, 2005, p. 95). Hage (1998) argued that whiteness is a social practice that can be (partially) performed by anyone to accumulate capital that is valued within a white hegemony. Hage further suggested that the accumulation of whiteness as capital is reliant upon successful displays of ‘being white’.

Whiteness is an ethnicity, made up of cultural and linguistic dimensions, as well as physical appearance. The concept and privileging of whiteness as a skin colour can change in different contexts. The white English identity seemed to be promoted above other white ethnicities. This conclusion was supported by a statement from a member of staff in the Centre regarding language use by the children:

I think it’s actually a good thing if they don’t speak other languages while they’re in the Centre they really just need to learn English. (Jenny, white/English, original emphasis)
The propagation of the discourse in which the cultural features of whiteness, most notably the use of English language, were held in highest regard was dependent on the compliance of both the white majority and the ethnic minority children in the Centre. The official language or standard variety becomes the language of hegemonic institutions because the dominant and the subordinated group both misrecognise it as a superior language (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004, p. 124).

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Anna (black, Ghanaian) is playing in the home corner. She has collected sand from the sand pit and water from the water tray and has mixed them together in a plastic saucepan which she is stirring over the play cooker.

VC: What are you making Anna?
Anna: Fou-Fou!
VC: What’s that?
Emily (practitioner, white/English): Do you mean food? Can you say f-o-o-d?
VC: Are you making food? Is it some soup?
Anna: No! *fou-fou!*

Upon reflection on the field notes, Verity discovered that, contrary to her and Emily’s assumptions, Anna was actually describing ‘Fou-Fou’, a traditional Ghanaian food.

Frankenberg (1997) referred to whiteness as an ‘unmarked marker’ (p. 16). This describes the way whiteness is upheld as a normative category from which we compare other racial groups in terms of their deviance from the social norms (Hartigan, 1999a).

Whiteness, as a set of normative cultural practices, is visible most clearly to those that it excludes and to those to whom it does violence. Those who are securely housed within its borders usually do not examine it. (Frankenberg, 1993, pp. 228-229)

Emily and Verity did not stop to question whether their assumption that Anna might be trying to say ‘food’ was correct; their interpretation of Anna’s comments was entangled with whiteness and their knowledge of ‘normal’ white, social practices and linguistic norms and lacked cultural competence. The false interpretation of Anna’s words arose not only from a failure to interrogate whiteness, but also from ignorance of Anna’s culture which did not configure as ‘culturally responsive teaching’ (Gay, 2000, p. 1). Culturally responsive teaching is pedagogy that uses the experiences and characteristics of ethnically diverse children to teach them more effectively. As Goldstein (2001) argued, however, most white teachers have not been taught to see themselves as white or see the fact that they are white as important in their teaching.

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The children are using old magazines to make collages. Nadia (black/English) is using photographs from an old toy catalogue to make her collage. On examining her collage, Verity notices that she has only selected the black children and the black dolls in the catalogue for her collage. In order to gauge whether this was intentional or not, she points to a picture of a white child playing with a white doll and asks Nadia if she would like to use the photo for her collage. She angrily pushes the picture away and shakes her head. She is frowning and looks cross and uncomfortable at the suggestion.

In the black imagination ‘whiteness’ is often associated with terror and cruelty (hooks, 1992). It is possible that it was this image of whiteness that prompted Nadia’s behaviour. In Cohen’s (1993) study of white British youth, he recorded how the white boys in his study both admired and attempted to emulate the street style of the black boys, but at the same time feared them. Perhaps Nadia’s reaction to the white children in the photographs was similar to the reaction in Cohen’s story. Nadia can recognise the oppression and the power of whiteness, but, although she would desire to be elevated to the power stronghold that whiteness has false claim over, she fears whiteness for the feelings of subjugation it rouses within her.
Another possible explanation can be found in social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) which claims that individual’s need to develop an attachment to a group in order to maintain a sense of well-being. If an individual belongs to a minority group held in disregard by a majority group, they may employ various strategies to improve their self-concept. One of these strategies includes reversing the negative values assigned to the low status group so they are perceived as positive. Perhaps Nadia was using this strategy in her rejection of the white faces. Arguably, her knowledge that blackness is subsumed by whiteness in society, leads her to inverse the binary of black/undesirable versus white/desirable.

We could similarly argue that Nadia’s exclusion of white faces was not based on her feelings of negativity towards white people, but based on her positive feelings towards black people. In the 1970s, researchers, such as Hraba and Grant (1970), started to discover a reversal of the previous findings of researchers that black children preferred white dolls (Clark & Clark, 1940) to black children preferring to play with black dolls. The researchers explained this by the emergence of the post-civil rights black consciousness movement, which celebrated blackness as a social and political phenomenon.

One could also argue that the black children and black dolls were chosen because they were simply more familiar to Nadia as a black child. Chin (1999) discussed how the black children in her study braided their white Barbie’s hair in order to increase their familiarity and bring them into their own worlds. Perhaps Nadia excluded white faces in her collage because she could engage more imaginatively with the black faces in the photographs. Interestingly, Nadia’s behaviour was at direct odds with the behaviour of the other children in the Centre who chose only to play with white dolls. Through displaying this behaviour, Nadia arguably demonstrated that there are ways of challenging dominant discourses of whiteness. Insights such as this present possible opportunities for educators to discuss and critically assess race issues with young children, helping them to explore their feelings of ambivalence or admiration towards whiteness.

Staff in the Centre were also eager to share their stories of instances where they felt that they or their children had been rejected on the grounds of their whiteness:

At first the children didn’t like her because she was a different colour; they didn’t play with her.
(Carmen, white, Maltese, mother)

Racism doesn’t always happen like you think ... I can tell you growing up as a white girl on this estate ... expect to be abused verbally and physically by black girls ... and if you get a black boyfriend! Well expect to be attacked! (Fiona, white, English, mother)

Carmen and Fiona’s comments could be seen as attempts to deny white privilege and maintain white domination by reversing previous conceptions of white against black racism. This is explored by Gresson (1993) who proposed a new movement in identity politics, in which white people portray themselves as the victims. He argued that white people attempt to recover their white domination by inventing black and other non-white people as the new oppressors. He suggested that white people identify non-whites as individuals who undermine their progress by exploiting white guilt about white racism which has long been extinct. Other writers have argued that the rigid view of racism as always being carried out by white people is false (Hartigan, 1999b; Nayak, 1999, 2007). The interfaces between oppression and resistance constantly shift (Nayak, 1999) and are located in the multiple interconnections between race, gender, sexuality and social class (Hartigan, 1999b) as a form of intersectionality. For example, the importance of social class on identity is marked by Jane (a white, English staff member) as she talks of the ‘hard to reach’ families on the estate surrounding the Centre:

The problem is not always with the ethnic minorities, the families that we are missing sometimes are you know, your typical ’white trash’ kind of family where the mother sits at home all day and sends her kid out to get her some fags [cigarettes] or some booze [alcohol]. Those are the sorts of family we can’t get.

Recent media and political discourse within the UK has built an image of the white ‘chav’; a colloquial term for a working class person seen as atavistic, unintelligent, tasteless or criminal (Skeggs, 2005). Skeggs argues that this ‘white trash culture’ discourse excludes the white working class from the power and privilege of the white middle classes. This shows how a preoccupation with the power relations between black and white people can result in a failure to attend to the
important effects that other factors such as social class has on the power relations between individuals. It cannot be assumed that all the individuals shrouded beneath the veil of whiteness have undisputed access to the power usually associated with the term. Bonnett (2008) describes how historically white supremacy has demanded racist egalitarianism (the equality of all white people over all non-white people) which has been difficult to achieve within an anti-egalitarian class structure. Jane’s attitudes suggests that exploring and attempting to re-work the Centre’s staff members perceptions of working class families may be as important as attending to their attitudes towards ethnic minorities.

Some of the white staff members in the Centre felt that much of the Centre’s anti-racist policies and practices had excluded white people and cast them in a negative light:

> We have done a huge amount of damage in the past, like the Macpherson report ... and it has made a certain sector of the community who are majority indigenous English or Irish or Welsh or ... yeah have made us paranoid! Because of the laws that have been passed against the indigenous population. (Jane, white/English)

> We used to go up to the town hall. I used to go with Joanne ... Joanne is a black Jamaican. Joanne would be taken off and given ackee and salt fish and I would be taken off, given a very dry curly cheese sandwich and told I was racist! (Emily, white/English)

Emily and Jane indicated that the anti-racist policies in the Centre paint an image of white people as automatically racist. Emily discussed national race equality legislation as making white, British people feel ‘paranoid’. These feelings of confusion and resentment amongst white people are also represented in the literature that identifies a failure of anti-racist policies to engage with white, English ethnicities (Rutherford, 1997; Nayak, 1999). Jane and Emily felt that the only notion of white ethnicity that was offered to them through anti-racist policies and practices was one of white, English people as racist. The Burnage Report (MacDonald et al, 1989) on the fatal stabbing of an Asian youth in Manchester also argued that the anti-racist policies of the school concerned had essentialised white identities, treating all white students as implicitly racist on the basis of their whiteness, ‘whether they are ferret-eyed facists or committed anti-racists’ (p. 402). There are calls for an increased engagement and reconstruction of the white ethnicity to expose its multiplicity and open up spaces for its positive forms to emerge (Nayak, 1999; Nylund, 2006; Giroux, 1997), ‘creating a positive, proud, attractive, antiracist white identity’ (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998, p. 12).

**Recommendations for Practice**

Some white scholars suggest that the answer to ending racism and oppression is to delete the category of whiteness altogether (Garvey & Ignatiev, 1996). This is exactly the opposite of what the data from this study suggests is needed to occur for progressive practice to emerge. Early childhood settings such as children’s centres can move from being places of social and cultural reproduction to sites of social and cultural transformation and the data presented offers some insights and possible ways forward. Lenz-Taguchi (2006) suggests engaging in an ‘ethic of resistance’ (p. 281) using deconstruction techniques to counter racism in early childhood settings. This involves:

> thinking deeply about the assumptions and taken-for-granted notions we bring with us (often without awareness) as we engage in our daily work with children. As we practice an ethic of resistance, we deconstruct, or take apart, what we ‘know to be true’, to reflect on it, analyse it, criticise it, and resist its seductive powers arising from its familiarity. (Lenz-Taguchi, 2009, p. 295)

Davis (2009) discusses tactics that were useful in deconstructing discourses of whiteness and destabilising white hegemony amongst a group of white educators. She discovered that ‘for many white individuals, the act of naming and locating white as a cultural group is in itself a disruptive act that provides space for shifts and critical engagement’ (p. 120). Perhaps remedying the problems associated with whiteness in the Centre could begin with conversations amongst staff, parents and children that recognise whiteness as a cultural group and consider what consequences normalised and unnamed white identities have. Skattebol (2005) suggests that a possible tactic for de-normalising white privilege could involve inviting parents and practitioners to make a list of how whiteness has conferred certain automatic benefits upon them. In the Centre it may be useful to go
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beyond this and think about times in which white people can feel powerless, taking into account differences in social class and how this may affect both white and black people.

Other approaches that hold promise include Nayak’s (2008) study of whiteness amongst children in England that involved children tracing their family histories and ethnic and social class lineage as a way of deconstructing whiteness. This tactic started to break down the assumed coherence of a white, English ethnicity as past immigration into England within the family histories of the white students was revealed. Nayak found this challenged homogenised views of migration and allowed children to feel as though they had a personal stake in anti-racism rather than feeling excluded from it.

Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. (2011) also discuss how providing a mirror to a mixed ethnicity child to help her to draw herself facilitated ‘a stuttering in the concept of identities and self views’ (p. 20). Perhaps using techniques like drawing and self-portraiture may be a useful way for practitioners, such as those discussed in this article, to initiate discussion with children so that they can explore the ‘excluded middle’ (MacNaughton & Davis, 2009, p. 151) between binary pairs. For example, such discussions allowed the children in Nayak’s study to realise that there were ‘different shades’ (p. 280) of white and that black and white exists on a spectrum rather than a binary. Although such strategies may differ in success in different contexts (Nayak, 2007), similar attempts may begin to rupture dominant discourses of whiteness and racism and find entry points for making new, positive forms of white identities that are anti-racist.

Conclusions

This article has revealed whiteness in its multiple guises within the Centre as performed, constructed and deconstructed by parents, staff and young children. In particular, the child focused methods of photo-elicitation, walking tours and creative activities with children allowed access into some young children’s emergent sense of their and other ethnic identities.

The research supports the assertion of Giroux (1997) that whiteness as an identity category is confined within a notion of racism that gives white people little alternative, critical lens or social imaginary in which they can visualise themselves creating an alternative space in which to participate in the fight for social equality. A critical white perspective sees power as contextual and identity as multiple. In the multi-ethnic context of the children’s centre, it is possible that whiteness could, at times, be rendered powerless and other identity factors subsume whiteness in the power (or lack of power) that children or adults could exert. Future anti-racist strategies in multi-ethnic settings need to find ways of helping staff, parents and children to explore these multiple aspects of whiteness. Both white and black people need support to discover how whiteness can be oppressive, but also how it can be anti-racist, and the recommendations above provide some possible approaches. Perhaps through instilling such understandings of power and racism in children’s centres, staff may gain insights into how they can increase cohesion between people of different races and of different ethnicities, as well as across other parameters of difference.

References


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