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'I'm not from a country, I'm from Australia.' Costumes, scarves, and fruit on their heads: The urgent need for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy when sharing diverse books with children

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'I'm not from a country, I'm from Australia.' Costumes, scarves, and fruit on their heads: The urgent need for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy when sharing diverse books with children

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Abstract

Children's books play a central role in today's classrooms. Educators can use children's literature to promote children's social and cultural understandings and critical thinking skills. This is particularly important when extending children's knowledge and understandings of themselves, their identity and those who may differ culturally, socially or historically, thus supporting diversity and inclusion. Further, when diversity is considered, valued, and supported through Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP), outcomes for children from underrepresented backgrounds improve. This paper reports on a study conducted in four early learning settings in Western Australia investigating educators' practices when sharing diverse literature with young children. This study found in the majority of book sharing in these centres the cultures, backgrounds, life experiences and funds of knowledge of children from underrepresented backgrounds were invisible. Further, educators' practices were bereft of CRP and likely to demean and confuse those from underrepresented backgrounds and increase all children's misconceptions of others.

Keywords Culturally responsive pedagogy · Children's literature · Equitable education · Diversity · Principles of diversity · Early childhood education

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Introduction

Principles of diversity lie at the heart of education worldwide. In Australia, these are reflected in the Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2016) and the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009), both rooted in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC) which explicitly states:

> States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status. (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989)

These principles are echoed and embedded in the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers that all Graduate Teachers must meet to be registered as a teacher and continue to develop in the profession (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadershio [AITSL], 2018). Three of these (Standards 1.3, 1.4 and 2.4) contain explicit reference to diversity and, particularly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

When principles of diversity are enacted in classroom practice, educational and social outcomes improve for children from traditionally marginalised backgrounds (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Morrison et al., 2019; Souto-Manning & Mitchell, 2009; Souto-Manning et al., 2018).

Further, sharing diverse children's literature through Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) (Boutte, et al., 2008; Roberts et al., 2005; Souto-Manning & Mitchell, 2009; Souto-Manning et al., 2018) is one important way to enact principles of diversity and contribute to equitable outcomes for all children.

However, evidence suggests current practice with children's books contributes to stereotyping and marginalisation of children from underrepresented[1] backgrounds, while potentially contributing to a sense of superiority for children from majority backgrounds.

The problem appears multifaceted. First, many children's books collections in educational settings are monocultural; overwhelmingly representing the majority mainstream (Crisp et al., 2016). Recent Australian studies report similar findings in Australian long day care settings (Adam, 2021; Adam & Barratt-Pugh, 2020). Second, when diverse literature is used, a lack of CRP silences minority voices,

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[1] Across the many research fields encompassing diversity, many terms are used to attempt to describe those who are discriminated against, minoritised or marginalised. These include minority groups, minoritised groups, marginalised groups, People of Colour, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour), historically excluded, underrepresented and underserved. We acknowledge this dilemma and the challenge of choosing a term that does not position any people or groups in a deficit light. In this paper, we attempt to consistently use the term underrepresented (people or groups).

perpetuating negative stereotypes and promoting cultural misconceptions (Boutte et al., 2008; Roberts et al., 2005; Souto-Manning & Mitchell, 2009; Souto-Manning et al., 2018).

In Australia, there has been little research of the relationship between these documented problems in early learning settings. Therefore, this paper provides an exploration of this problem by reporting on a recent study conducted across four Western Australian early learning settings.

Review of the literature

Australian Educational Policy

In 2009, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed on a national approach to education reflected in the Melbourne Declaration of 2008 (Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training & Youth Affairs, 2008) and subsequently the Mpartnwe (Alice Springs) Education Declaration (Department of Education Skills and Employment, 2019). This consensus underpinned the EYLF in 2009 and the Australian Curriculum in 2010. Each of these foregrounds a commitment to valuing diversity and educating children through culturally appropriate approaches.

In Australia, all Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings are assessed through the National Quality Standard (NQS) across seven quality areas. In these, awareness and acknowledgement of cultural diversity play a central role in expectations of educators (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2011a, b, 2018). However, translation into practice presents a large challenge for educators (Morrison et al., 2019) (Adam, 2021). Further, while successive Australian governments have endeavoured to enact these educational policies in order to close the gap in education for Aboriginal students, the 2021 Close the Gap report shows the gap is narrowing in only two out of the seven priority areas (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021; Jackson-Barrett, 2021). The *Close the Gap* report underscores the need for strengths-based approaches in institutions and organisations working with and for Aboriginal peoples (Australian Human Rights Commission 2021).

Culturally responsive pedagogy

When diversity is considered, valued, and supported through CRP, outcomes for children from underrepresented backgrounds improve (Ladson-Billings, 2017; Morrison et al., 2019; Sylva et al., 2006). For this paper, we adopt the definition of CRP of Australian scholars Morrison, Rigney, Hattam and Diplock 'to refer to those pedagogies that actively value, and mobilise as resources, the cultural repertoires and intelligences that students bring to the learning relationship' (Morrison et al., 2019, p. 59) They argue CRP is essential to improve 'learning experiences and outcomes

for Aboriginal young people, for students from diverse heritages, and indeed for all students in Australian schools' (Morrison et al., 2019, p. 59).

CRP using diverse literature

Provision of authentic diverse children's literature can help children develop their sense of identity and global perspectives and world view (Bishop, 1997; Boutte et al., 2008; Souto-Manning & Mitchell, 2009; Souto-Manning et al., 2018). When educators incorporate CRP in book-sharing, children's social and educational outcomes improve. Further, children can engage in examinations of privilege and equity (Ladson-Billings, 2017; Souto-Manning et al., 2018; Yared et al., 2020). This helps children develop critical awareness of wider socio-political dimensions of their communities and society (Morrison et al., 2019). Importantly, this supports 'those in the mainstream to develop the kinds of skills that will allow them to critique the very basis of their privilege and advantage' (Ladson-Billings, 2017, p. 83). Further, this can enable 'Culturally relevant teachers [(to)] support their students to become both critically literate of texts and critically conscious of the social, cultural, economic, political dimensions of their life-worlds' (Morrison et al., 2019, p. 23).

CRP is built on educators viewing children's cultural and linguistic resources and funds of knowledge as assets (Comber & Kamler, 2004; Hattam & Prosser, 2006; Moll et al., 1992; Morrison et al., 2019). Through adopting CRP approaches children's language, culture, cultural knowledge, and life experiences are welcomed and incorporated into rich teaching and learning environments. Thus, there is a need for provision of a range of authentic, culturally diverse books reflecting the cultures, lives and "assets" of all children's lives. Further, this necessitates and enables educators to connect children to stories through rich two-way learning experiences.

However, the incorporation of CRP with diverse literature is absent from, or limited in, most learning environments and the problem appears twofold.

First, many studies, including the larger study related to this paper, show most books published for children reflect monocultural Eurocentric viewpoints (Caple & Tian, 2021; Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, 2018; Crisp et al., 2016).

Second, current practice of educators suggests a lack of understanding and confidence in CRP with the result that educators frequently reinforce stereotypes or outdated, uninformed attitudes through a tokenistic focus on what Harbon and Moloney call the 'four Fs of culture—food, folk-dancing, festivals and fashion' (2015, p. 16).

When educators limit focus to these visible aspects of culture, they overlook rich funds of knowledge children bring to the classroom (Moll et al., 1992). Further, this contributes to othering of children from these backgrounds while reinforcing superiority and normativity in majority background children (Alvaré, 2017; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Morrison et al., 2019; Rhodes & Byrne, 2021).

This study

This paper reports on part of a larger study investigating factors and relationships influencing how kindergarten educators in Long Day Care Centres (LDCCs) in Western Australia use children's literature to address principles of diversity. This paper reports on educator practice in book sharing sessions identified as those in which they specifically addressed cultural diversity.

This paper reports on the following research question:

To what extent did educators incorporate CRP when sharing culturally diverse books with children?

Method

Conceptually, this study is framed within a critical pedagogical perspective (Boutte et al., 2008; Freire, 1999). Implicit in this is a probe into how literacy education, including literature, 'mediate/s messages that children receive about their cultures and roles in society' (Boutte et al., 2008, p. 943). Within this perspective, a critical discourse analytic methodology was employed to analyse the discourse of educators when sharing books with children. In critical discourse analysis 'an understanding of what is normatively questionable in our societies and of the desirable direction for improvement precedes the analysis' (Nonhoff, 2017, p. 3). This approach aimed to 'analyse in particular those discourses that express, legitimate, reproduce or question relations of power and domination' (Nonhoff, 2017, p. 3).

Participants and context

The study was conducted in the kindergarten rooms of four long day care centres (LDCC) in Western Australia selected by stratified purposeful sampling informed by data from the 2011 Australian Census (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011).

LDCCs in Western Australia operate in purposefully built or adapted buildings providing full or part-time care for birth to five years. A typical LDCC has separate rooms for birth–24 months, 24–36 months and 36 months–preschool age (kindergarten) children. From 2012, LDCCs with more than 25 children are required to employ at least one educator holding an early childhood teaching qualification. Services must operate in accordance with the Education and Care Services National Law and Regulations and are assessed against the NQS (ACECQA, 2011a, b).

Research participants and selection

Twenty-four educators participated. Qualifications ranged from an Education Assistant Diploma to a Bachelor of Education. These included the kindergarten educators and centre coordinators. One hundred and ten children also participated.

Ethical approval was granted through (removed for review). Children's parents gave informed consent for observation of children's participation in book sharing and the educator spent time with the children in each centre showing them the video cameras and enabling them to be familiar and comfortable with the process prior to commencing observations. The centres and participants were assigned pseudonyms. Member checking of all interview data was undertaken, and participants were free to withdraw at any time.

Data sources

For this paper, data were drawn from:

- 3 h and 35 min of recorded interviews with educators.
- 148 video recorded observations of book sharing sessions.
- 119 A4 pages of researcher's handwritten field notes.
- 2 Notices to Parents

Using multiple data sources gave opportunities for triangulation of findings. Triangulation was undertaken throughout the analysis process to allow identification of concepts and for comparison and contrast. This allowed the researcher to synthesise themes and interpret significant relationships and their meanings.

Book sharing data and detailed observation spreadsheet

The researcher video recorded all book sharing sessions involving an educator and children over five consecutive weekdays in each centre. All these sessions were part of the program of each participant room. A detailed observation spreadsheet was designed to record details of each book sharing session. For this paper, the book sharing sessions in which educators stated an intention of focusing on or acknowledging cultural diversity were identified and the associated data were extracted. Data extracted for this paper included the educator's stated intention of the session, the book used for the session and the number of children included in the session. The selected book sharing sessions were transcribed by the researcher.

Field notes

Detailed field notes were kept by the researcher throughout each observation period. These assisted the researcher to crosscheck data to ensure reliable and unbiased judgment could be made through comparison and triangulation with all data sources.

Data analysis

The semi-structured interview data were transcribed and entered into NVivo10. These were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) five stages of thematic

Table 1 Book Reading Sessions, Time and Focus on Diversity

Centre	Overall No of Educator Sessions	Overall time Educator (mins)	No of sessions Focused on Diversity	Time On Diversity (mins)	% of Overall Ed Time
Riverview	51	453.75	2	26.5	6
Community House	47	177.00	1	9	5
Dockside	29	170.50	1	8.5	5
Argyle	21	100.00	0	0	0

analysis through an inductive approach in which 'frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in raw data emerge from the application of a systematic analytical process' (Thomas, 2006, p. 238).). Intercoder agreement (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Miles et al., 2014) was undertaken with two additional experienced researchers to ensure trustworthiness of the coding process.

Each of the identified book sharing observation videos were transcribed and analysed also using Braun and Clarke's (2006) five stages of thematic analysis and intercoder reliability undertaken as above. This was triangulated with the interview data. During the analysis in the third centre, Dockside, it became apparent further information associated with two specific cultural celebrations was necessary, so the researcher conducted further examination of literature and reliable websites to assist with this part of the analysis.

Results

Book sharing contexts

All centres conducted planned educator led reading with children, usually as whole group sessions. All centres also conducted educator led sessions initiated by the children.

Educators expressed a belief in the importance of attention to cultural diversity and books as one way to enact that. While educators from all centres reported culture or children's backgrounds as an important criterion when selecting books, perceptions about this varied. Most educators spoke of backgrounds and culture interchangeably. Some also mentioned the importance of children being able to relate to 'something' in the book. However, educators from all centres except Dockside expressed concerns about not knowing what was 'politically correct' when choosing or sharing diverse books with children. Some saw attention to diversity as mainly relating to linguistic diversity and the authors note this aspect of the study has been focused on in another paper (Adam, 2021).

When educators described how they enacted book sharing to address or acknowledge diversity, they mostly referred to focusing on celebrations, or the 'different' or 'special' aspects of 'other' cultures. Educators exhibited a noticeably high level of confidence when talking about this which contrasted noticeably with their hesitation

and uncertainty when they described how they respond to children's backgrounds, or knowing what books are 'politically correct'.

Attention to diversity in book sharing

As shown in Table 1, intentional focus on diversity or inclusivity of children's cultural or ethnic backgrounds was a small minority of the overall time educators spent sharing books.

In each of the four sessions in which the educators focused on cultural diversity, educator practice focused on cultural diversity as *special* or *other*. These are reported here as vignettes.

Riverview—Betty Vignette

Context Betty was reading to a group of six children. Betty selected a book about cultural celebrations around the world she advised had been placed in the book basket by Lead Educator, Michelle, to support a curriculum focus on culture.

Betty's practice Betty focused the children's attention on 'special' aspects of cultural celebration, particular activities, clothing and food.

On several pages Betty commented on the special nature of the activities represented. For example: 'That's a special celebration in India. This one's about India as well, another special celebration' and, 'They're having a special party and celebration here'.

Betty also drew attention to food being eaten or to clothing worn by people in the book and focused on this as different or special, for example:

> Look at her there she's wearing a beautiful, a very beautiful costume. So, this mummy dresses a little bit different to me or to your mummy because she comes from another country, so she wears different clothes. From India........ Yes, he's got a special scarf on his head.

Betty did not appear to consider the clothing in question might be familiar to some or all of the children, thus the 'different' nature of clothing was promoted as being outside the possible lived experiences of the children in the centre.

Riverview—Adina Vignette

Context Adina was sharing a non-fiction book about life in China with a group of five children. When asked about the purpose of sharing this book Adina advised, 'This was because we were doing cultures, there was cultures in the curriculum' and, 'This book is about that place. It is good in a way they come to know about that country, what they eat, what they wear and that'.

Adina's practice Like Betty, Adina focused attention on the 'different' nature of life in 'other' countries, particularly food and clothing through comments such as, 'Differ-

ent countries have different ways of doing things'. Adina, also focused on appearance as a factor of difference asking the children,' Can you guess which country I come from?' When one child suggested China, her answer was, 'Do I look like I'm Chinese? I come from India'.

Adina then asked Emma, a child of Maldivian heritage, 'What country do you come from?' Emma appeared somewhat confused and replied, 'I'm not from a country; I'm from Australia'. Adina corrected herself to comment Emma's father was from the Maldives and proceeded to ask if Emma knew what crops were grown in the Maldives. It was evident from Emma's confusion in her response she had never visited the Maldives and she appeared upset that Adina assumed she could answer the questions. It appeared in attempting to be inclusive of Emma's cultural background, Adina possibly focused on aspects of culture outside the lived experience of this child.

Community House—Bethany's Vignette

Context A child, Jenna, selected a book which focused on life in an African Village. Educator Bethany offered to read the book to Jenna and another child, Levi.

Lead Educator, Lily, reported the book was one she had made available with the intention of exposing children to 'other' cultures as part of the centre curriculum.

Bethany's practice Bethany focused strongly on pointing out the 'special' nature of the African village lifestyle portrayed, frequently drawing the children's attention to the 'special' nature of activities, food and clothing in the text. For example: 'Yes, they are special hats that only special people are allowed to wear. They're chiefs; they are picked by the king. They're special hats, they are important'. And:

> There are the chewing sticks, these are the special brushes they use to brush their teeth with. These people do in Africa though, they don't have the same toothbrushes as us, this is their special toothbrush. It's a pretty cool idea, look it's a special stick and then when you chew on the special stick it goes soft on the end and makes a toothbrush. It's pretty cool.

Bethany also invited the children to make comparisons between themselves and the children in the text. For example, 'He's using special white chalk. Do you like to draw with chalk?' Bethany also made comparisons between an object or activity in the book and something familiar to the children. For example: 'They use these leaves to wrap up their food like a sandwich'.

Thus, while Bethany was largely focusing on the 'special' nature of the lifestyle represented in the book she appeared to be actively trying to help the children make connections between the activities and lifestyles in the book and their own lives.

Interestingly, Levi made several comments on the content of the book including such comments as twice saying, 'Look a Black girl' and, 'It's like a toothbrush'. Bethany did not directly address Levi's two comments regarding the 'Black girl' and instead drew attention to similarities between the activities on that page and

A Taste of Portugal Festival

We will be celebrating on the 17th of June

(Actual date is the 8th June)

We are going to learn Zumba moves and carry plastic fruit on

our head just like people in Portugal

If you have any suggestions of activities please tell XXXXX or big room

staff

Fig. 1 Centre Notice—A Taste of Portugal Festival

those likely to be familiar to Levi. From this, it appeared Levi's attention to diversity impacted on Bethany's practice but issues of race he noted seemed to be ignored.

Dockside—Rhiannon's Vignette

Context Dockside Centre Coordinator, Tracy, reported she had instructed the educators to focus on cultural celebrations throughout the year and that she had purchased two books specifically to address the NQS criteria relating to cultural competency. One of these was to support the focus on cultural celebrations and was known in the centre as the 'Multicultural Book'. Throughout this book were images of children portrayed in national costumes positioned alongside items commonly associated with that culture: For example, children in China represented in national dress, standing on the Great Wall of China alongside a Chinese dragon and children in Germany wearing lederhosen, standing outside a stall selling sausages.

Alice, the lead educator, reported that four times each month they celebrated a cultural festival. On the noticeboard at the entry to the kindergarten room were two notices relating to celebrations planned for the month of June. These are shown in Figs. 1 and 2.[2]

Alice had planned a book sharing session as part of celebrating the Taste of Portugal Festival and asked another educator, Rhiannon, to take the session. After being unable to locate the book dedicated to cultural celebrations around the world

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[2] The notices have been recreated to remove identifying information. The recreations use the same, wording, layout, and images as the original notices.

21st June

We will be celebrating on the XX of June

National First Nations (American Indian) Day

Children will make traditional head pieces and dance to

traditional music

If you have any suggestions of activities please speak to XXXXX or big
room staff

Fig. 2 Centre Notice—First Nations Day

originally selected for this (and referred to by educators as 'The Multicultural Book') Alice, selected the book *Handa's Surprise* by Eileen Browne, a story set in Africa.

Rhiannon's practice. On the first page, Rhiannon drew attention to an aspect of the lifestyle portrayed by noting differences and comparing these to the children's own lives, when she asked the following questions:

Can you see what our friend's doing on the picture, what is she doing…?.
Where is she carrying it? How is she carrying it? Do we carry fruit on our heads…?
Do you think she lives in Australia…?
Right maybe we'll find out we don't carry food on our head, do we?

Rhiannon then focused on questioning children about the types of fruit illustrated. After reading the book and placing it out of sight of the children, Rhiannon raised the topic of Taste of Portugal Festival for the first and only time saying:

Ok, today is Taste of Portugal day. Do you know what that is? Shall I tell you? Today's Taste of Portugal day and in Portugal they like to carry fruit on their head. So today we're going to try to carry fruit on our head. Do you think you can do it?

Thus, this practice was similar to Betty in Riverview and Bethany in Community House in placing a strong focus on food, clothing and/or appearance when drawing children's attention to cultural diversity.

From the time Rhiannon finished the utterance, there was no further mention of Portugal or of the celebration. Instead, the focus shifted to how well the children could balance plastic fruit or beanbags on their head. This activity was photographed to paste into the children's journals to showcase the celebration of cultural festivals.

It is important to note when 'The Multicultural Book' originally intended for the session was located, it did not contain a page about Taste of Portugal day, so it is likely Handa's Surprise would have been used regardless.

Discussion

Based on the four case studies detailed above, five key closely related themes emerged from the results.

Theme one: 'Look a Black girl'—avoidance and fear

Evidence suggests educators may avoid talking about race and racial issues based on belief children are too young to engage in such discussions (Beneke & Cheatham, 2019; Whittingham et al., 2018) or these might be considered racist in themselves (Beneke & Cheatham, 2019). Other evidence suggests a lack confidence and knowledge compounded by a lack of resources results in educators being hesitant to discuss issues relating to equality, power, values and attitudes (Boutte et al., 2011). DiAngelo (2011) further explains this hesitancy to engage in confronting and challenging content as 'white fragility' a phenomenon whereby 'white' people when speaking about race, racism and cultural diversity can experience negative feelings. In Australia, such fragility has been referred to as 'the White man's burden' by Moreton-Robinson (2011). As further outlined by White et al.

> A vicious cycle ensues, with people feeling embarrassed or even defensive about their lack of knowledge and skills and reluctant to ask questions or to expose their lack of professional learning. This combination can lead to further silence and ignorance, with teachers and leaders often afraid, resentful, defensive, patronising or aggressive regarding professional development in the best ways to support culturally diverse students. (2019, p. 10)

Twice, a White child (Levi), pointed out and commented on a 'Black girl.' Each time, the educator, Bethany, ignored him. Educators from this centre and two of the others had expressed concerns about knowing what was 'politically correct' when choosing or sharing diverse books with children. Thus, Bethany's avoidance appears to reflect this fear and uncertainty.

Multiple studies suggest children should be involved in ongoing discussions about race, racism and racial bias (Yared et al., 2020). Importantly, evidence also shows even very young children are more than capable of, and open to, having such discussions. However, many educators, including those in this study, are fearful of 'getting it wrong' or not being 'politically correct' (Adam, 2021) and this contributes to the avoidance of conversations about race or racism and instead leads to a focus on the exotic or other. Further, this uncertainty may have been the key to educators' approach and foci evident in the following four themes.

Theme two: Costumes and scarves—the promotion of the exotic or special other

A frequently identified concern by researchers into CRP is a 'tendency towards tokenism, whereby culture is rendered in terms of the visible and the superficial' (Morrison et al., 2019, p. 47). Similarly, a large body of evidence suggests when diverse literature is used in classrooms the focus remains on the more visible and superficial notions of culture (Boutte et al., 2008; Roberts et al., 2005; Souto-Manning & Mitchell, 2009; Souto-Manning et al., 2018; Adam, 2021). Harbon and Moloney (2015) refer to these as 'the conspicuous "four Fs" of culture—food, folk-dancing, festivals and fashion' (2015, p. 16). The results presented in this paper suggest the practice of educators in these LDCCs reflected an uncritical, tokenistic and superficial attention to diversity through focusing on these conspicuous Four Fs.

Further, when focusing on the Four Fs, educators tended to promote these as outside the lived experience of the children and something 'special' to people in 'other countries'. For many of the children in this study, the dress, food and lifestyles were likely to be familiar and part of their own daily experiences and cultural background, and for others, something they would see regularly in their own community. While these educators were well-intentioned, their attempts to be culturally responsive 'seem stuck in very limited and superficial notions of culture' (Ladson-Billings, 2017, p. 77).

CRP is reflected when educators connect learning to students' lives and prior learning experiences, and build on these to expand children's knowledge, understanding and experiences (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Morrison et al., 2019). While it was evident some educators did attempt to assist children to make comparisons with their own lives, this was largely limited to everyday activities such as cleaning their teeth or drawing with chalk. This demonstrates a lack of CRP, with educators failing to engage with deeper dimensions or life experiences of children (Morrison et al., 2019).

Such practices can lead to social and emotional implications for children's sense of self-efficacy and identity and for their academic achievement (DETYA, 2000; Gollnick & Chin, 2009) as well as contribute to a sense of normativity and superiority for children from majority cultural backgrounds (Yared et al., 2020). Such outcomes are the very antithesis of CRP.

Theme three: 'In Portugal they like to wear fruit on their head'—the promotion of misconceptions and stereotypes

Particularly concerning was an apparent ignorance or disregard among educators, particularly in Dockside, towards cultural authenticity. This was firstly reflected in the use of a book from one culture to teach about another culture. Tschida et al. (2014) warn the use of a 'single story' not only creates stereotypes, but this is problematic as not only are the stereotypes untrue, but they are also incomplete. In the Dockside vignette, not only was one story used but it was an incorrect story. This was further complicated by an apparent disregard or lack of awareness regarding the

association of Zumba with Portugal and the incorrect name of the national festival in question.

Taste of Portugal Day is not a Portuguese national celebration. Rather, *Portugal Day* is the National Day of Celebration in Portugal while *Taste of Portugal Festival* refers to a festival conducted by the Victoria St Markets in Melbourne to celebrate Portugal Day (Jen, 2021). Further, the image on the notice to parents appears to be taken from a website that does in fact promote a national Portuguese festival called *Festival of the Trays* which is quite different to Portuguese National Day (Portuguese Harvest Festival, n.d.). It is also important to note the associated activity mentioned on the centre notice to parents (See Fig. 1) suggests Zumba is linked to Portugal or the festival, whereas Zumba is a dance style which originated in Columbia and other Spanish speaking countries and only since the 1990s.

The evidence presented in Fig. 2 suggests oversight or ignorance such as this may be a recurring issue in this centre as the notice for the subsequent celebration for 'National First Nations (American Indian) Day' also contained inaccurate information. The celebration held each year on 21st of June this planned activity appears to link to is called National Indigenous Peoples Day, and is held in Canada not the United States and is a celebration of First Nations, Inuit and Métis Indigenous peoples of Canada (Government of Canada, 2022). Added to this is an apparent ignorance that the term American Indian is considered controversial to many First Nations Americans. Further, appearing to label First Nations Canadian people as First Nations American people implies homogeneity between multiple cultures. Such practice leads to the promotion of superficial and stereotypical understandings (Chaudhri & Schau, 2016; Roberts et al., 2005).

Further, it appeared the perceived importance of focusing on a 'cultural celebration each week' led instead to prioritising activities that could be photographed for the students' journals rather than conducting authentic and rich learning experiences to develop students' ways of knowing and being in relation to life experience and culture. In the words of Sleeter, 'Learning "about" culture then substitutes for learning to teach challenging academic knowledge and skills through the cultural processes and knowledge students bring to school with them' (2012, p. 569).

Theme four: 'I'm not from a country, I'm from Australia' making assumptions and promoting the visual as defining identity

Educators in this study made numerous assumptions about children's experiences and about individual cultures. These were largely tied to visual differences as identifying factors for cultural identity and background. These were shown in such comments as 'Do I look Chinese?' (Adina, Riverview) and 'She comes from another country, so she wears different clothes', (Betty, Riverview). Of particular concern was Adina's question to Emma about what crops 'are grown in your country?' Emma's confusion about this was evident in her response 'I'm not from a country, I'm from Australia'.

Such assumptions demonstrate cultural essentialism, a notion all members from particular backgrounds, cultures or categories of people are typified by one or more defining characteristics or features (Alvaré, 2017; Morrison et al., 2019). Such practice ignores lived experience of the children and the wide diversity within and across cultures, backgrounds and other identities. Further, 'presumptions of cultural homogeneity within hugely diverse groups of people is dangerous' (Gorski, 2016, p. 223).

Alvaré highlights that such approaches, while intended to promote 'integration, inclusion, and empowerment across cultural divides', instead lead to 'magnifying existing feelings of alienation, exclusion, and disempowerment' (Alvaré, 2017, p. 32). Certainly, in this study the confusion and distress shown by Emma appeared to underscore such evidence.

Gorski argues instead of such essentialist practices, when focusing on culture, educators should 'focus on the individual cultural identities of individual students rather than on lists of presumed cultural traits stereotypically attributed to entire groups of people based on language, race, ethnicity, class, immigration status, or other identities' (2016, p. 224).

Theme five: Covering Curriculum at the expense of enriching cultural diversity

Most educators expressed a need to address cultural diversity in order to 'cover the curriculum'. At Community House, Lily made the book available with the intention of exposing children to 'other' cultures as part of the centre curriculum. At Dockside, Tracy had instructed the educators to focus on cultural celebrations throughout the year and had purchased two books specifically to address the NQS criteria relating to cultural competency. From a positive perspective, the curriculum can be viewed as a key driver in increasing the focus on cultural diversity. However, a focus solely on cultural celebrations overlooks the rich and contemporary lives and identities of diverse children (Shay, 2018). Further, as has been alluded to above, without a clear understanding of CRP, this focus can be misdirected and reinforce misconceptions and stereotypes.

The notion of 'covering the curriculum' in relation to the sessions on exploring cultural diversity appeared to induce a more transactional, objective approach from the educators. The sense of having to learn about cultural diversity affords a more 'let's get this done' approach which is counterintuitive to learning processes that embed cultural diversity by means 'of enactment and embodiment that focusses on connecting the individual learner to a learning community through ways of knowing and being' (White et al., 2019, p. vi).

It is apparent quality educators should focus on lived experience when it comes to cultural diversity. It is critical educators do not make assumptions with reference to culture and allow students to have agency within sessions to make observations and explore the life experience within and across cultures. Rather than trying to direct student attention and point out each of the cultural differences within the book, educators may be better placed to use the reading of the book as a catalyst to sharing the life experience and connections of humanity.

Conclusion: *Culturally (ir)Responsive Practice*

While there were 148 book sharing sessions in this study, only four of these were held with an intention of focusing on and exploring cultural diversity. These sessions accounted for less than 6% of book sharing time in three centres with the fourth centre having no book sharing with a focus on cultural diversity. Thus, in the overwhelming majority of book sharing in these centres the cultures, backgrounds, life experiences, worldviews and funds of knowledge of children from underrepresented backgrounds were invisible. However, of equal or greater concern is the sessions in which educators did address diversity were bereft of CRP and in fact, were likely to demean and confuse those from underrepresented backgrounds and increase all children's misconceptions of others. This can have implications for children's social and emotional wellbeing, impact their sense of identity and self-efficacy and affect later academic achievement (Alvaré, 2017; DETYA, 2000; Gollnick & Chin, 2009).

Educators appeared to focus on a belief they needed to 'cover' cultural diversity due to curriculum requirements. This was compounded with hesitancy and fear of getting things right with the resulting practice being a focus on difference rather than a celebration of the diverse. It would seem there is a need for a greater focus on CRP, including in relation to critical selection and use of authentic diverse children's literature, in initial educator training and in ongoing professional development. Educators need training and support to move beyond 'thinking "about" the cultural background of their students (Vass, 2017, n.p.) and, instead think 'deeply about the implications of teaching and learning taking place in and through culture' (Vass, 2017 n.p.).

To celebrate the diverse, educators need understanding of, and confidence in, CRP.

Culturally responsive educators will not see cultural diversity as merely the transmission of knowledge and content but rather developing students' ways of knowing and being emphasising connection and relationship across all cultures and diverse groups. This embedded, embodied and integrated dynamic learning approach will address more meaningfully and authentically 'multiculturalism' or those who may differ culturally, socially or historically, thus supporting diversity and inclusion. This is a natural protection against perpetuating stereotypes and reinforcing misconceptions. Through a more embedded/integrated approach, diversity becomes 'normalised' and part of the everyday and thus less a transactional, bolted on issue/curriculum element to address.

The outcomes of this study have implications for improving CRP, early years education and both initial and ongoing teacher education. We lend our voices to others including Vass (2017), Castagno and Brayboy (2008) as well as Morrison et al. (2019), who call for 'a shift in teaching practice, curricular materials, teacher dispositions and school–community relations' (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008, p. 942) to harness and build on identities and funds of knowledge of children and use these as assets in their learning.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Ethical approval Ethical approval was granted through Edith Cowan University: Project 10,741. Children's parents gave informed consent for observation of children's participation in book sharing and the educator spent time with the children in each centre showing them the video cameras and enabling them to be familiar and comfortable with the process prior to commencing observations. The centres and participants were assigned pseudonyms. Member checking of all interview data was undertaken, and participants were free to withdraw at any time.

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