Action for Change? Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Perspectives in Early Childhood Education Curricula

Melinda G. Miller, PhD candidate (Completed 2013), Queensland University of Technology

Overview

This doctoral study examines the impact of whiteness on non-Indigenous educators' work around embedding Indigenous perspectives in early childhood education curricula. It draws on whiteness theories and related critiques to question how whiteness and racism continue to operate in diversity work that is seen to be productive and inclusive. The study identifies racialising practices reproduced in embedding processes in place of reporting examples of 'good' early childhood education practice. While this is discomforting, the thesis makes the argument that naming whiteness and racism enables depth of understanding about how racialising practices are present in professional practices and personal standpoint, even when approaches to embedding Indigenous perspectives align with recommendations in early childhood education policy (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Responding to recommendations in policy: The display of an Aboriginal flag

Research Questions

1. How does whiteness impact the work of embedding Indigenous perspectives in two urban early childhood centres?

2. How does a research-based approach to professional development support the work of embedding Indigenous perspectives?

In this research, whiteness and racism are understood as a "form of doing" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 45) rather than a form of inaction. This orientation enables consideration of how the everyday actions and talk of educators are shaped by whiteness and colonial discourses.

Methodology

Method

- In adopting an action research methodology, early childhood educators were invited to participate in professional development focussed around broad themes of culture and diversity.

- Action research involves recursive cycles of questioning, gathering data, critical reflection and deciding on a course of action (see Figure 2). The participants engaged in individual, small group and whole-centre action research projects, with the aim of effecting change in their thinking and practices.

- In line with a facilitated, collaborative approach to action research, as the researcher I adopted several roles in the participants' action research projects including active listener, resource person, mentor and interposer.

Participants

- Participants comprised 22 non-Indigenous early childhood educators from two urban long day care centres: the first a community-based centre and the second a for-profit centre, both catering for children aged birth – 5 years.
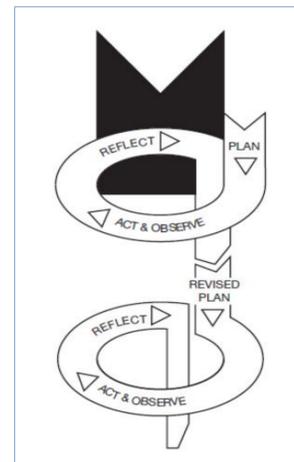

Figure 2. An action research cycle (Source: Kemmis & McTaggart, 1998)

Data Analysis

- Data analysis involved coding, categorisation and the development of themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994) that were re-read to ask further questions about the data, for example: how racialising practices mediated relations to place, interactions with Indigenous people, and decision-making about curricula; why themes of risk and permission were salient in the educators' approaches to embedding Indigenous perspectives; and the impact of an action research approach to professional development.

- Data were also read using whiteness studies literature (Dyer, 1997; Shaw, 2007) and critiques (Ahmed, 2012; Moreton-Robinson, 2008) related to architecture and education to enable insights into the reproduction of racialising processes during the action research process.

Findings

Whiteness regulated and organised the educators' attempts at consultation and their choices in curriculum development and design. In **consultation processes**, the non-Indigenous educators mobilised whiteness by marginalising reciprocal forms of participation and positioning Indigenous people in service, duty and brokerage roles in interactional patterns. These discourses limited the participation of Indigenous people in consultation processes through subordination and subjugation; thus enabling non-Indigenous educators to maintain positions of domination and control despite wanting to form sustained partnerships. This created tensions between actively seeking participation and placing boundaries around how Indigenous people could be present and represent themselves within the two centres.

Colonial discourses were also mobilised in **curriculum development and design**. For example, autonomy over the selection and exclusion of particular resources relieved concerns for educators about appropriate teacher-talk and responses to children's questions, but upheld marginalising practices that project simplistic representations of Indigenous peoples and cultures. Slippages between Indigenous and multicultural constructs at times worked against claims about how Indigenous perspectives were given legitimacy and primacy in curricula focused on embedding processes.

In relation to **identity work**, presumed relations with Indigenous people were dependent on the knowledge and experiences of individuals. Standpoints adopted included: cultural mediator; distanced observer; perpetrator-victim; advocate/protector and 'restorer'. These standpoints were not static. Some educators demonstrated significant shifts in self-awareness and some did not, but there was active engagement in discussions around identity work over the course of the project, supported through the introduction of whiteness theories and Indigenous scholarship.

In embedding processes, the educators negotiated **forms of permission** including policy recommendations, Indigenous authority or involvement, staff relations and individual standpoint. They viewed their work as being 'risky' at times due to concerns about parental response, causing offence, and the right to teach about Indigenous perspectives as non-Indigenous educators. This highlighted how **approaches to professional development** require conditions that support critical analyses of self and connections between educational practices and broader social processes, alongside technical aspects of an educator's professional role. A lack of options for professional development in the before-school sector, and the lack of theoretical tools available in vocationally-defined education and workplace practices, were identified as ongoing concerns.

References

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