

Anti-racism commitment in early childhood education: The limits of cultural competency

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journals.sagepub.com/home/cie**Mahdis Azarmandi**

University of Canterbury, New Zealand

Andrea Delaune

University of Canterbury, New Zealand

Nicola Surtees 

University of Canterbury, New Zealand

Kari Moana Te Rongopatahi

University of Canterbury, New Zealand

Abstract

Racism is pervasive in education in Aotearoa New Zealand, including in early childhood education. The preparedness of early childhood teachers to respond to the Ministry of Education's current anti-racism policy direction is a pressing concern. This is particularly the case, given the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa* offers little guidance to support early childhood teachers to develop anti-racism pedagogies. This primarily theoretical article seeks to contribute to dialogue with early childhood teachers about both racism and anti-racism pedagogies. The theoretical arguments advanced in the article focus on document analysis of *Te Whāriki*. Analysis includes consideration of the themes of inclusion, equity and social justice. It also includes consideration of what these themes might imply about expectations for early childhood teachers' uptake of anti-racism approaches in their practice. Document analysis is supplemented by limited preliminary survey data drawn from the initial findings of the *Anti-racism Commitment in Early Childhood Education: Pathways to Inclusion, Equity and Social Justice* (ARC-ECE) study. Drawing from race-critical scholarship to further advance the theoretical arguments, the article highlights tensions in early childhood teachers' understandings about racism. The limits of narrow definitions of racism that explain it as the result of 'cultural difference' are explored.

Corresponding author:

Nicola Surtees, Faculty of Education, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch, New Zealand **Email:** nicola.surtees@canterbury.ac.nz

In making a case for thinking beyond cultural competence and culturally responsive practice, the article calls for an immediate rethinking of racism in (and beyond) the sector.

Keywords

Early childhood education, racism, anti-racism, cultural competency, anti-racism pedagogies

Introduction

When we think of anti-racism and education, we might not immediately think of interventions that involve children in early childhood education settings. Some of us might think that these children are too young to know what racism is or too innocent to have harmful ideas about others. But as international research has shown, children develop ideas about racial difference as early as 3–5 years (Hirschfeld, 2008; Jordan and Hernandez-Reif, 2009; Levy and Hughes, 2009). This article focuses on anti-racism in early childhood education in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand. It is informed by race-critical scholarship and theories.

Systemic racism across the education sector in Aotearoa New Zealand is pervasive, even as awareness of it grows (Blank et al., 2016; Ritchie, 2020).¹ While tamariki (children) in early childhood settings may not have knowingly contributed to the growth in awareness, many of the school age tamariki and rangatahi (young people) who contributed to the study *Education Matters to Me* (New Zealand School Trustees Association and Office of the Children’s Commissioner, 2018: 18–19)² have. These tamariki and rangatahi indicated they experienced racism in their schools. Comments such as ‘racism exists – we feel little and bad’, ‘just cause we are Māori doesn’t mean we are stupid’ and ‘some teachers are racist. They tell you that you are not going to achieve’ were typical. The Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand (2021b) suggests the complexities and nuances of racism are not always recognised by early childhood or school teachers, a point that is reinforced by international research findings (Beneki and Cheatham, 2019; Boutte et al., 2011; Daniel and Escayg, 2019; Husband, 2016). The Teaching Council (2021a) has also signalled the need to engage in discussion with early childhood and school teachers about racism through their initiative *Unteach Racism*, a professional learning tool. Consisting of an app, resources and conversations in a teachers-only online platform, the tool was launched in 2021.³ As the Teaching Council acknowledge in the tool, developing shared understandings about racism through conversation will help equip teachers to identify and intervene in situations where racism or racist behaviours occur.

If teachers’ understandings of racism are based on limited definitions of racism, their identification of and intervention in racism may be inaccurate and/or misguided. As race scholars have pointed out, racism definitions shape how anti-racist responses and solutions to racism are framed (Azarmandi, 2022; Lentin, 2004; Müller, 2021). International research within early childhood education has identified the need for racial literacy, anti-racist pedagogies, and critical examinations of power to enhance teachers’ understandings (Curenton et al., 2022a, 2022b; Escayg, 2019). Against the backdrop of the Aotearoa New Zealand Ministry of Education’s anti-racism policy direction, this article explores how limited definitions of racism within policy documents in Aotearoa New Zealand result in a limited awareness of exactly how to ‘unteach’ racism in early childhood education contexts. The article’s genesis is located within a broader Aotearoa New Zealand research project titled *Anti-racism Commitment in Early Childhood Education: Pathways to Inclusion, Equity, and Social Justice* (hereafter ARC-ECE).⁴ The project involves several data-collection stages, including analysis of the national early childhood education

curriculum *Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa* (Ministry of Education | Te Tāhuhu o Te Mātauranga, 2017) (hereafter *Te Whāriki*) and a nationwide survey of early childhood teachers. The theoretical and conceptual arguments we are advancing focus on our analysis of *Te Whāriki*. This analysis is supplemented by the inclusion of minimal preliminary survey data for purposes of demonstration in the ‘Unpacking the racism-culture conflation’ section.⁵

Our analysis of *Te Whāriki* draws upon race and whiteness studies (Azarmandi, 2022; Dei, 2014; MacDonald and Reynolds, 2017). We contend that despite acknowledgement of exclusion and discrimination within *Te Whāriki* and contemporary educational resources like *Unteach Racism*, there exist notable tensions in the way early childhood teachers perceive and comprehend racism. Specifically, these tensions revolve around their grasp of the intricacies of racism, as well as the constraints of definitions that attribute racism to mere ‘cultural differences’. That is, teachers do not always have a clear, shared understanding of how to identify and respond to racism and this lack of clarity is tied to how racism is presented in *Te Whāriki* and other policy documents. We illustrate how policy and practice often focus on cultural difference, rather than racism. In turn, this reduces racism to a failure to celebrate ‘cultural’ difference rather than acknowledging the systemic and political nature of racism. Having problematised the emphasis on cultural competency approaches as a solution for addressing issues of racial injustice, we conclude the article by signalling the need for teachers to think beyond these approaches in the interests of renewing and advancing anti-racism commitment in the sector.

Contextualising this study

Anti-racist pedagogies support raising attentiveness to covert, racially loaded messages within educational contexts (Brown et al., 2010) as a pedagogical imperative. While there is a growing body of literature on race, anti-racism and early childhood education, especially in North America, in Aotearoa New Zealand the language of race and anti-racism is less common. The existing body of literature on race and early childhood education suggests teachers have demonstrated discomfort in discussing issues associated with race, leading to avoidance (Kemple et al., 2015).

Race-critical scholarship

Recent studies argue that racism should not be reduced to the practices of societal outliers by a small group of ignorant individuals (Byrd, 2011). Furthermore, issues related to racism should not be solely located as an ideological tension between groups (Kolluri and Tichavakunda, 2023). Escayg (2020a) offers guidance for foundational principles of anti-racism in the US for early childhood education, stating that anti-racism in education needs to counter the effects of racism at both the macro and micro levels. Enacting these principles for anti-racism requires a deepening of teacher’s understandings of the ways in which racism operates at both the institutional and individual levels (Legette et al., 2023). As these race-critical scholars stress, because of its endemic nature, structural racism often goes unacknowledged except in its most violent and overt forms.

As already suggested, racism is pervasive in education. Indeed, we acknowledge racism as woven into the very fabric of Aotearoa New Zealand (Western) society rather than as its exception. Race-critical theories draw attention to the endemic nature of structural racism and inform the ARC-ECE study. However, in the Aotearoa New Zealand context, conversations and responses to racism are not typically mobilised through an explicit racial lexicon but rather through the articulation of cultural-ethnic differences. Here, culture becomes the primary framework for how racism

is understood and challenged. Consequently, increased cultural competency is presented as a remedy to structural racism. By not identifying race, studies on education can avoid any account of power structures of white supremacy that has been historically produced by diverse overlapping colonial enterprises (Dei, 2014; Lentin, 2005, 2008; MacDonald and Reynolds, 2017). Despite growing literature internationally, which underscores the significance of race analysis in early childhood education, concrete ideas about what anti-racism in early childhood settings could entail still remain marginal. Race-critical scholars further emphasise the ongoing relevance of race in perpetuating educational inequity. They demonstrate how educational systems reproduce racism and racist ideologies through institutional practices, educational documents and teaching methods.

Understanding structural racism and the roles teachers may play in reproducing and disrupting it is central to anti-racism. This is particularly significant, given social justice-oriented approaches in education have increased yet have and do so in ‘incremental or symbolic ways ... while otherwise preserving ... “White interests”’ (Hambacher and Ginn, 2021: 331). For example, in the Aotearoa New Zealand context, acknowledgement of Māori cultural norms and knowledge is referenced in curricula, study programmes and government guidelines. The country claims to be bicultural and in the education sector the centrality of Te Tiriti o Waitangi⁶ is often highlighted. Cultural competence and culturally responsive practice are the most commonly identified ways in which state institutions and the education sector have sought to respond to the problem of colonisation and inequality. The language of bias, diversity and cultural difference has largely replaced terms such as colonisation, racism and anti-racism. However, an overemphasis on diversity, bias or cultural competency can undermine critical anti-racism (Howard, 2004). Writing about the Australian context, Bargallie and Lentin (2020) point out that it may be

commonplace to think about racism as founded on ignorant, prejudicial or outdated ideas that merely need dispelling, [but] the race critical literature demonstrates that race is primarily a political project; a technology of rule that is necessary to maintain and reproduce the status quo. (n.p.)

In the educational context, race ‘powerfully implicates and orients schooling’ (Dei, 2014: 240). For this reason, it needs to be acknowledged and addressed. Race, of course, does not refer to an objective human condition, nor can it be simply reduced to a social construct. Rather, as Lentin (2020: 5) argues, race is a ‘technology for the management of human difference, the main goal of which is the production, reproduction, and maintenance of white supremacy on both a local and a planetary scale’. Rather than addressing race and white supremacy, Howard (2004) points out that anti-bias education, cultural competency and culturally responsive practice remain some of the most common examples of how incremental change and challenging racism has been pursued. Such frameworks, Howard argues, cast racism and whiteness as individualised conditions rather than recognising how race continues to stratify society. He writes:

Only the habit of White privilege could allow any White body, antiracist or otherwise, to feel that s/he can, at will, easily shake off the manner in which one’s body is taken up by a white supremacist system when people of color have been struggling to do so for centuries. (2004: 74)

Within the early childhood context, Escayg (2019, 2020b) writes on the limitations of anti-bias curricula. Curricula which focus on individual perspectives of race and race relations, at the expense of a broader appreciation of the possibilities for intersectional analysis that could be generated by a stronger focus on the institutional nature of racism, are problematic. Escayg (2019, 2020b) conceptualises early childhood education with anti-racism underpinning as the space to move beyond the

limitations of anti-bias (and other) approaches. In situating the issue solely within the individual, these approaches fail to take wider account of the ways in which racism is pervasive within institutional contexts. Deconstructing whiteness becomes an issue of teaching and learning about white privilege and power through anti-racism pedagogies.

Limited definitions of racism that do not acknowledge the work of race and whiteness in the shaping of the settler colonial state circumscribe the possibilities of anti-racism commitment in education, including early childhood education. Therefore, there is little ‘unconscious’ about it (Bargallie and Lentin, 2020). Anti-racism in education must go beyond cultural diversity or cultural competency to challenge the effects of race and racism (MacDonald and Reynolds, 2017). In this article, we use Dei’s (2014: 240) definition of anti-racism education ‘as an action-oriented educational practice to address racism and the interstices of difference (such as gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, ability, language, and religion) in the educational system’. In the Aotearoa New Zealand context, addressing the role of race and racism in education means centring broader questions of colonialism and Indigenous dispossession and assuring that any anti-racism response is te Tiriti-based.

The study approach and design

The ARC-ECE study approach and design will only be briefly outlined here as the purpose of this article is to engage in theoretical and conceptual work on anti-racism commitment in early childhood education. As mentioned earlier, the study involved a textual analysis of *Te Whāriki*, the findings of which are presented below. Additionally, there was an element of empirical data collection via a nationwide survey of early childhood teachers that is still ongoing due to the upheavals of the Covid-19 pandemic. Although the article is primarily a conceptual and theoretical work, emerging data from the survey supports this work. Therefore, the inclusion of some key information about it is pertinent at this point.

The survey is investigating early childhood teachers’ understandings about, experiences of, and responses to racism in early childhood education with a view to establishing teacher readiness to confront racism.⁷ After the survey was granted ethics approval by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, it was distributed to teachers across a range of early childhood services. The survey data were analysed thematically drawing on race-critical scholarship. In this case, codes such as ‘racism definitions’ and ‘racism explanations’ helped us identify themes. These include whether participants understood racism as (a) an exception to an otherwise non-racial norm and (b) whether racism was explained as an issue of cultural difference rather than a system of power based on race. We contrasted these initial results to our textual analysis of *Te Whāriki* and other documents. In the discussion section, we unpack how policy and teacher understandings present limitations for addressing racism as systemic and political, rather than as individual and cultural.

The policy context for teacher practice: A textual analysis of *Te Whāriki*

The pivotal role of teachers in shaping racial perceptions, whether deliberately or unintentionally, has been highlighted by Fargo et al. (2015). They emphasise that educators in early childhood settings often convey messages regarding race and racism to children. As such, teachers are ‘one important agent of racial socialization in the classroom Early childhood educators may inadvertently or advertently, verbally or non-verbally, implicitly or explicitly send messages about the meaning of race and racism to children’ (Fargo et al., 2015: 3). The increased awareness and

impact of racism in education alongside teacher preparedness to respond to racism is reflected in wider international research (Beneki and Cheatham, 2020; Sachdeva and Adair, 2019).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, this is brought to light through policy in the Ministry of Education's recent anti-racism policy direction. This is evidenced in guiding Ministry documents, including *The Statement of National Education and Learning Priorities* (NELP) (Ministry of Education | Te Tāhuhu o Te Mātauranga, 2020b). Central to documents such as *Te Whāriki, Ka Hikitia – Ka Hāpaitia* (Ministry of Education | Te Tāhuhu o Te Mātauranga, 2021a), *Te Hurihanganui* (Ministry of Education | Te Tāhuhu o Te Mātauranga, 2021b) and the *Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020–2030* (Ministry of Education | Te Tāhuhu o Te Mātauranga, 2020a) is the aspiration that Māori and Pacific tamariki and rangatahi are free from discrimination and stigma. However, within the specific context of early childhood education, there is scant direct guidance to support early childhood teachers to develop anti-racist pedagogies. Indeed, the terms racism or anti-racism are absent from both *Te Whāriki* and the more up-to-date website for the curriculum, *Te Whāriki Online* (<https://tewhariki.tki.org.nz>). Given this lack of specificity, the purpose of this section is to consider the intent of *Te Whāriki* to ascertain what implicit guidance it might offer teachers.

Te Whāriki provides a bicultural framework for English medium services and an Indigenous framework for Māori medium services⁸ based on the 'partnership'⁹ established between Māori and the British Crown by Te Tiriti o Waitangi in 1840. In upholding the articles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, *Te Whāriki* lays the groundwork for a unique framing for educational practices with the tamariki of Aotearoa New Zealand. This framing promotes strong themes of equity, social justice and inclusion for all tamariki. Indeed, *Te Whāriki* explicitly 'acknowledges that all children have rights to protection and promotion of their health and wellbeing, to equitable access to learning opportunities, to recognition of their language, culture and identity, and, increasingly, to agency in their own lives' (Ministry of Education | Te Tāhuhu o Te Mātauranga, 2017: 12). We contend this statement sets an expectation for early childhood teachers to commit to upholding these rights within their own professional principles *and* to undertake practical steps to ensure these are realised within early childhood settings.

Arguably, if early childhood teachers are to foster positive educational outcomes for tamariki, they will need to engage in larger conversations and professional development in relation to anti-racism. As implied within the *Te Whāriki* strand of *Contribution | Mana Tangata*, teachers will need to draw from anti-racism approaches in their practice too. The necessity of this work is emphasised within this strand through the themes of equity, social justice and inclusion mentioned above, in conjunction with a focus on the rights of tamariki to equitable opportunities for active participation within the learning community. In particular, Goal 1 of the strand states, 'Children experience an environment where there are equitable opportunities for learning, irrespective of gender, ability, age, ethnicity or background' (Ministry of Education | Te Tāhuhu o Te Mātauranga, 2017: 37).

The learning outcomes and evidence of learning and development sections for Goal 1 offer some more specifically relevant terms. The sections identify the need for this vision to be enacted by both teachers *and* tamariki. Teachers are expected to support tamariki to become increasingly capable of 'treating others fairly and including them in play | te ngākau makuru', including 'ease of interaction with children of other genders, capabilities, and ethnic groups' and the 'confidence to stand up for themselves and others against biased ideas and discriminatory behaviour' (Ministry of Education | Te Tāhuhu o Te Mātauranga, 2020b: 37). While we can only speculate that the intent of *Te Whāriki* is for teachers to enact a practice aligned with the objectives of anti-racism, we are firm in our conviction that the utilisation of more universalist terms in the document does not sufficiently support teachers to engage in anti-racist praxis. More clarity is needed to enable teachers to develop pedagogical strategies in line with the assumed intent of *Te Whāriki* and to aid tamariki to support this work too.

The scope of responsibility for early childhood teachers is further extended through the *Te Whāriki* directive for wider social engagement. Due to the theoretical underpinnings for the curriculum – including ecological systems theory, sociocultural theories, kaupapa Māori theories, and Pasifika approaches – early childhood pedagogies transcend the boundaries of traditional teacher–child relationships. Teachers are expected to uphold the vision of *Te Whāriki* beyond the immediate early childhood setting, with pedagogical responsibilities in their work with families, whānau and community. Arguably, this expectation anticipates teachers’ involvement in promoting anti-racism. However, prior to the *Unteach Racism* tool, an emphasis on assuring culturally safe contexts and equal access was to the fore, not anti-racism (Chan and Ritchie, 2019; Rameka and Glasgow, 2015). *The Hikairo Schema: Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning in Early Childhood Education Settings* (Macfarlane et al., 2019) and *Tapasā: Cultural Competencies Framework for Teachers of Pacific Learners* (Ministry of Education | Te Tāhuhu o Te Mātauranga, 2018) are examples of resources that reflect this emphasis.

In particular, *Te Whāriki* asks teachers to work proactively with families, whānau and community to identify and remove barriers to participation and learning, including social and conceptual barriers. This framing acknowledges systemic inequality through recognising that different barriers for different communities exist. However, it largely relies on universalist claims of inclusion rather than a specific understanding of racism and how it is produced and maintained in early childhood settings. This is especially so, if the systemic and endemic nature of racism is not sufficiently recognised. Additionally, relying on curriculum documents alone assumes that teachers will all have a clear, shared understanding of what constitutes racism and thus also possess the required tools to respond. We argue that teachers require racial literacy to understand, identify and respond to racism. In order to do so, racism has to be recognised as structural rather than as an interpersonal issue. These ideas are further elaborated in the following sections.

Unpacking the racism-culture conflation

To reiterate an earlier point, the Aotearoa New Zealand Ministry of Education’s current policy direction is focused on confronting racism. However, we argue that documents such as *The Statement of National Education and Learning Priorities* and *Te Whāriki* do not sufficiently define what racism is, despite promoting the need for educational environments that are learner-centred, culturally responsive and equitable. While more recently the *Unteach Racism* tool has tried to explicitly address this issue, many of the participants may not have engaged with the resource yet, given its launch occurred in the same year the survey went live. Either way, it offers the following definition:

Terms such as bias, prejudice and racism are often used interchangeably, as if they hold the same meaning. When we use the term racism throughout the *Unteach Racism* App and resources, it is beyond intentional acts of cruelty committed by individuals. Rather, racism is a system that creates and sustains racial inequities through a collection of racist ideas, actions or policies. (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2021a)

Unlike previous documents, *Unteach Racism* also acknowledges the term race as relevant to the understanding of racism. Race is defined as ‘a power construct which groups people into a hierarchy of superiority based primarily on skin colour and other attributes. There is no scientific or genetic basis to race but it has been and continues to be used to justify systems of power, privilege and oppression’ (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2021a).

We see this acknowledgement of race in *Unteach Racism* as an important move towards anti-racism. However, contrasting these definitions to race-critical scholarship, we identify

shortcomings in how racism continues to be framed in the documents identified above. Firstly, if racism is actually defined within these documents, then the definitions used situate racism as an exceptional occurrence rather than an endemic issue. Secondly, racism continues to be posited as being about cultural difference. This framing was also evident in participant responses to particular survey items. It is how they identified racism – which in turn shaped their ideas about how they might respond to or challenge it.

Defining racism

When participants were asked how they defined racism as well as how prepared they felt to name racism if they saw it, two aspects stood out: the focus on culture to explain racism and the conflation of discrimination and racism. We read the latter as a universalisation of racism. That is, racism is perceived as an ahistorical and universal experience of discrimination which leaves the political project of colonial racism and the system of privilege that racism entails largely unaddressed. The following responses from three participants, all of whom were born in Aotearoa New Zealand, are illustrative:

People not being accepting of other cultures. Being disrespectful. People with a negative attitude to other races and cultures. (New Zealand European/Pākehā)

To me racism is going against or discriminating someone for their culture, beliefs, looks, gender or who they are as a person. (Other Ethnicity)

People judging others based on their culture or appearance. People judging others based on their own experiences with other cultures without knowing them first. (New Zealand European/Pākehā, Middle Eastern, North African, Other Ethnicity, Ashkenazi Jewish)

The participants indicate how racism is tied to physical appearance as well as other markers of difference, such as culture. However, they also conflate discrimination based on gender as part of racial discrimination. It is unclear if the use of the term ‘beliefs’ in the middle extract was intended to indicate how religious groups such as Jews and Muslims are racialised or whether it was intended to refer to any kind of belief, including political views. Here there is a connection to the framing of *Te Whāriki*, identified above, where it states, ‘all children have rights to protection and promotion of their health and wellbeing, to equitable access to learning opportunities, to recognition of their language, culture and identity, and, increasingly, to agency in their own lives’ (Ministry of Education | Te Tāhuhu o Te Mātauranga, 2017: 12). The close textual arrangement of markers of difference, coupled with a distinct lack of operating definitions, could offer an insight into the participants’ conflation of racism with other forms of discrimination. If the participants have access to scant information to support their own working definitions of racism and are presented with a range of differences in the same sentence, it is unsurprising that there are misunderstandings of what racism is specifically about. Equating cultural difference to racism is a likely outcome of the operating definitions and language provided to early childhood teachers through key policy and other documents, as demonstrated by the participants’ responses.

Discourses of ethnicity and culture

Participants are also likely informed by a historical shift from discourses of race and racism to discourses of ethnicity and culture. The emphasis on culture and cultural difference is common in how

racism is framed in the Aotearoa New Zealand context. Engaging race is often implied to reaffirm pseudo-science, following the logic that race produces racism rather than the other way around (Miles and Spoonley, 1985). Following this logic, ethnicity and ‘culture’ are suggested as better suited to explain racism. Such reasoning is indicative of the post-World War II shift from definitions of biological determinism to culture, resulting in the ‘the biologization of culture’ (Bonilla-Silva, 2003: 69). That is, rather than racist discourse, tropes such as ‘poverty, or ‘culturally prone to crime’ are used as stand-ins for race discourse, which present culture as fixed and unchangeable and at the same time valuing some cultures over others.

The predominance of the discourse of culture must be brought into question by the contemporary shifts to addressing racism within educational policy and other key guiding documents. Such a move to unteach racism requires reengagement with an articulation of racism and the concept of race. Without clarity within the discourse, or scope to engage teachers specifically and directly about the conflation of race and culture, it is reasonable to assume that there will be stagnation in specific pedagogical responses to racism within particular early childhood education contexts, much less broader systemic reviews of institutional racism in education.

The rearticulation of racism through the language of culture, however, is not a historical novelty and the perceived discontinuities of racial thinking are key to racism’s continuity (Lentin, 2004; Stoler, 2002). This continuity is removed from view when racism is presented as an ahistorical and universal phenomenon between human beings or as exceptional practice in an otherwise non-racist society. In the shift away from the ‘pseudo-science’ of defining race from the 18th and 19th centuries, and the continued primacy of scientism which denounced the ‘science of race’, there is a displacement of ‘race’ for ‘culture’. With this displacement comes the notion of two distinct racisms, one biological and one cultural, and a distinction between an old and a supposedly new racism. However, as Stoler (2002) points out, the distinction between overt forms of racism versus a more covert racism produces a flattened history of race. These distinctions between cultural and biological racism are neither arbitrary nor clear-cut, but contingent ‘on a basic and historically problematic contrast between a biologized, physiological and somatic racism’ (Stoler, 2002: 371) and a subtle, culturally coded, racism. In effect, irrespective of being located within the discourse of ‘culture’, racism is still pervasive within education and educators who are only versed in ‘cultural-competence’ are arguably much less equipped to respond to its impact.

While some of the participants’ responses mentioned above make a distinction between race and culture, most referred to racism as discrimination and rejection of someone based on their cultural difference. In response to our question, ‘What do you think racism is?’, the following comments further demonstrate this conflation:

It is discriminating against another culture. (New Zealand European/Pākehā)

Belittling another culture, a sense of superiority because you are the dominant culture. (New Zealand European/Pākehā)

Racism can be blatant but can also be null or hidden curriculum. Sometimes it is hard for mainstream (dominant culture) kaiako to understand. (Māori, New Zealand European/Pākehā)

I think Racism is a complete disregard and disrespect for another persons [sic] race, culture, self, difference, colour, right to equality in society. (New Zealand European/Pākehā)

Additionally, the response below conflates all discrimination from gender, social class and someone’s professional background with racism:

Judging someone based on anything that makes them unique/different to you – culture, religion, ethnicity, appearance, interest, social position, job, gender etc. (New Zealand European/Pākehā)

This response, and the wider responses identified within this section that conflate race with a range of differences, highlights the tensions between the universalist claims of inclusion identified with the intent of *Te Whāriki* and a more distinct understanding of racism, understood through the socio-historical and political origins of the concept of race. The concern to dispel the term race entirely and use culture instead rests on the assumption that the concept of race creates racism, rather than racism creating race. Racism as a system of oppression functions independently of the idea of race as a natural and scientifically meaningful concept, or the rejection of this concept. This is especially obvious because racism exists even in the absence of overt racist ideology. If we understand racial categories, including whiteness, as socio-historical and political formations and racism as a structure that organises people along hierarchies of worth (based on their proximity or deviation from whiteness), then any anti-racism must engage and respond to racism and the process of racialisation as historically evolving. In the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, it is crucial to not conflate indigeneity and race as one and the same. Racism is a central feature of the colonial project that requires a power relation and process of marking non-white subjects as other (Jackson, 2018).

Building from this, in the Aotearoa New Zealand context all anti-racism must be te Tiriti-based anti-racism (Azarmandi, 2022). This requires understanding the history of colonisation and indigenous dispossession as well as accounting for other forms of racial exclusion that occur. When, as one participant stated, the ‘Human race is the only race’ (New Zealand European/Pākehā), the process of racialisation and making other, is removed from view. What is assumed is that racial thinking is about pseudo-scientific ideas of innate human difference rather than understanding racism as a political project.

Anti-racism in early childhood education: Thinking beyond cultural competence and culturally responsive practice

Racism, as a political project, is reproduced in educational settings. MacDonald and Reynold’s (2017) work examines how issues of race inform the day-to-day experiences of secondary school teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand classrooms, specifically in relation to culturally responsive practice as a response to racism. They draw on Rodriguez (2011: 115) who points out the limitations of focusing on cultural difference and cultural responsiveness:

Educators often address issues of difference through a variety of pedagogical learning approaches to accommodate difference (culturally specific and gender related). It is not that the cultural differences approach is inadequate ... but more that the emphasis on cultural diversity too often masks power relations, keeping dominant cultural norms in place ... the cultural difference approach reinforces the idea that the colonized possess particular characteristics that are knowable and managed.

Understanding power relations and the salience of race is central to overcoming racism, yet the aspect of culturally responsive pedagogy that focuses on ‘cultivating student’s critical consciousness regarding power relations ... remains untouched’ (MacDonald and Reynolds, 2017: 51). *Te Whāriki* supports early childhood teachers to promote children’s ‘confidence to stand up for themselves and others against biased ideas and discriminatory behaviour’ (Ministry of Education | Te Tāhuhu o Te Mātauranga, 2017: 37). However, it is clear from the participants’ responses that ideas of bias and discrimination will be informed by discourses of culture, rather than an

understanding of the socio- historical and political origins of the concept of race. We argue that this cultural framing can be viewed as expected, due to the reorientation of the discourse of 'race' within Aotearoa New Zealand. This expectation prompts us to advocate for a more subtle and nuanced appreciation of the power relations that are hidden through the erasure of race and racism discourse. Power relations in Aotearoa New Zealand have been shaped by the process of colonisation and Indigenous dispossession; this is important to consider for Pākehā as well as other communities of colour. As Azarmandi (2022: 142–143) writes:

... while all those racialised non-white might experience oppression, it is through Indigenous dispossession that the white colonial status quo is produced and maintained [in Aotearoa New Zealand]. Therefore, an anti-racism that resists the workings of the colonial regime has to engage with Indigenous dispossession in order to understand what race does ... Understanding how groups are racialised and positioned within this context is useful for understanding racism because it discloses the process of marking racial others and shows how racial regimes develop and are maintained [including in educational contexts].

Understanding of the process of marking racial others and the development of racial regimes would be supported by a te Tiriti-based approach to anti-racism. Positioning anti-racism within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, based upon the foundation of te Tiriti o Waitangi, is consistent with the bicultural positioning of *Te Whāriki*. A te Tiriti-based anti-racism approach would offer educators a clearer path to maintaining the objectives of anti-racism that are implied within *Te Whāriki*. It would also fortify teacher's critical understanding of their role within the wider imbalances of power in educational systems.

Yet, the question remains whether culturally responsive pedagogy is best to address these imbalances of power. In fact, as Castagno and Brayboy (2008: 941) pointed out in their review of culturally responsive schooling for Indigenous Youth, cultural responsiveness has little impact on teacher practice 'because it is too easily reduced to essentialisations, meaningless generalisations or trivial anecdotes'. Cultural responsiveness then becomes an extension of neoliberal framing of personal responsibility that places responding to students' needs only on teachers rather than focusing on institutional practices (Azarmandi, 2022; MacDonald and Reynolds, 2017). There are similarities to the findings of other research studies (Legette et al., 2023), inasmuch as educational institutions are racialised spaces, where little is done to visibilise the subtle ways in which racial inequities are reproduced, redirecting attention to the individual. Instead, MacDonald and Reynolds (2017: 57) urge us to 'place less emphasis on knowing and managing particular characteristics in the name of being culturally responsive and directly acknowledge the meanings and effects of race to be better positioned to read the world before reading the word'.

Conclusion

Earlier in this article, we indicated the ARC-ECE project aims to ascertain teacher preparedness to respond to the Aotearoa New Zealand Ministry of Education's recent policy direction to ensure tamariki and rangatahi are free from racism in educational settings. In making a start on answering these project aims, we have demonstrated clear tensions between early childhood teachers' current definitions of racism and the recommendations of race-critical theories to respond to racism and develop anti-racism approaches. These tensions are centred on a key issue: that teachers are understanding racism through a lens of culturally appropriate practice. Although problematic, this issue is not entirely unexpected. Through a deeper appreciation of the socio-historical and political origins

for – and movement away from – race and racism discourse, it is clear why educational approaches have promoted the discourse of culture and culturally appropriate practice as a response to discrimination.

Contemporary policy initiatives that reengage with race and racism in their terminology are yet to establish clear, concise, and sociopolitically and historically informed definitions of racism to guide teachers into deeper understandings of the terms ‘race’ and ‘racism’. Consequently, teachers are still grappling with the shift in lexicon, and drawing on the established understandings of race = culture that are part of their operating understandings of how to respond to difference and discrimination. Additionally, teachers are conflating racism with a range of discriminatory responses to a range of differences that have no bearing upon the legacy of systematic oppression that race and racism have produced within contemporary society. As a result, it is reasonable to assume that when teachers are looking at racism through a culturally appropriate pedagogical lens, their pedagogical responses will not serve the drive to unteach racism. Nor will their responses support a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of racism in their pedagogical practices. As MacDonald and Reynolds (2017: 56) point out, ‘culturally responsive pedagogy is unlikely to do this [respond to racism] because the theoretical aspect of critical engagement, which has the potential to lend itself to discussions about race, is silenced during implementation’.

In response to our findings and this key point, we ask the following question: How can teachers identify and intervene in racism when they are unable to define racism accurately? Furthermore, if they cannot define racism, how do they know that they are not unwittingly reinforcing racism through their everyday practices? As mentioned, this work is part of a bigger project examining teacher preparedness, but we hope we have been able to provoke some immediate thinking about these findings and raise questions about the conflation of the discourses of race and culturally appropriate practice. This seemingly small rethinking of racism has the potential to promote an immediate reconsideration of this conflation by practitioners and policymakers, with a view to redress.


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ORCID iD

Nicola Surtees  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1356-7885>

Notes

1. Systemic racism has also been documented in other sectors, including criminal justice (Tauri, 1999), health (Came, 2014) and housing (Houkamau and Sibley, 2015).
2. This study involved listening to what 1,678 tamariki and rangatahi had to say about education, both face to face and via online surveys. Hearing their voices enabled them to contribute to the development work of the New Zealand Government’s priorities for education, known as *The Statement of National Education and Learning Priorities* (NELP) (Ministry of Education | Te Tāhuhu o Te Mātauranga, 2020b).
3. We do not have access to information about teachers’ uptake of the *Unteach Racism* tool.
4. The research team and authors of the article are all women: one Māori scholar, a tauwiwi (non-Māori) scholar of color and two Pākehā (white) scholars.

5. Future empirical articles will share the results of the survey in depth.
6. We distinguish between Treaty of Waitangi and Te Tiriti o Waitangi to acknowledge that state institutions often interpret the English version in ways that diminish or deny Māori sovereignty. The te reo Māori version, however, highlights that Māori sovereignty was never ceded.
7. Our use of ‘experiences of’ racism is deliberately broad. Survey items were designed to elicit information about whether teachers had experiences of witnessing racism and/or whether they had experienced being the target of racism.
8. English medium services are those where the primary language is English. Māori medium services are those where the primary language is te reo Māori.
9. We put partnership in quotation marks to draw attention to the limitations of ‘partnership’ in a settler colonial context where Indigenous people have and continue to be dispossessed. The use of the word partnership refers to the content of the English version of the Treaty of Waitangi (the te reo Māori version refers to sovereignty and governance). But, it also implies that within the settler state Indigenous people and the state are supposedly engaging in relationships of equal power. We argue this assumption is further masked by terminology such as bias, which implies some kind of individual moral failure rather than systemic inequality and unequal power relations. For further discussion on the tension of ‘partnership’ see Skerrett (2019), Skerrett and Ritchie (2020) and Skerrett and Ritchie (2021).

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Author biographies

Mahdis Azarmandi is a senior lecturer in educational studies and leadership at the University of Canterbury. After obtaining her PhD from the National Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Otago, she held a position as assistant professor at DePauw University. She has also taught in Germany and Denmark. Her research interests are anti-racism, critical race and whiteness studies, memorialisation and decolonisation. She is co-editor of the book *Decolonize the City! Zur Kolonialität der Stadt*. She is an anti-racist activist and a teacher for life-long learning.

Andrea Delaune is an early childhood lecturer at Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha | University of Canterbury. She is dedicated to raising social justice awareness, with a specific focus upon transformative change and pedagogical possibilities in a wide range of disciplines and research areas. Currently, Andrea is involved in projects on sustainability, anti-racism commitment, philosophy of education, early childhood education, teacher advocacy, and speculative thinking for educational change.

Nicola Surtees is a senior lecturer in early childhood education at Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha | University of Canterbury. Her interdisciplinary scholarship encompasses early childhood education and family sociology. The ways early childhood settings become places where every family experiences belonging is a theme in her work. She is a co-editor of *Te Aotūroa Tātaki: Inclusive Early Childhood Education*, a book exploring inclusion and social justice in New Zealand.

Kari Moana Te Rongopatahi (Ngāi Tahu, Kāti Māmoe, Waitaha) is a lecturer in Māori Education at Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha / the University of Canterbury. Her research interests include Mātauranga Māori, Maramataka, Kaupapa Māori education, Decolonisation, Te Tiriti o Waitangi, language revitalisation, second language acquisition theory and anti-racism. She is currently pursuing a PhD examining the struggle for tino rangatiratanga in Kaupapa Māori Education.