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Burnett, Bruce M. (2001) Coming to terms with culture and racism. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 2(1):pp. 105-109.

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Coming to Terms with Culture and Racism

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ABSTRACT How the early childhood sector engages with and ultimately addresses notions of racism is clearly contingent upon what educators in the field believe to be its origins and causes. Despite what appears to be a complex and multifaceted set of 'origins and causes', it is surprising to find that most educational institutions tend to position their anti-racist programmes somewhere along a single continuum where, at one extremity, are programmes that implicate individuals, while at the other are programmes which lay the blame on institutions. The purpose of this short commentary is to outline these two dominant positions and to unpack some of their underlying theoretical baggage. However, another more important goal is to challenge educators into broadening their established understandings of racism and thus allow for non-traditional forms of racism to be included, i.e. those which are not exercised in transparent and overt forms. One of the major hurdles appears to be focusing educators' attention on the elusiveness of the actual target of the anti-racist programme. The predicament in the early childhood sector is how best to provoke its educators into refusing the apparent 'safety' of established anti-racist programmes and encourage them to recognise that the manner in which racism is socially constructed and exercised is both fluid and evolving. Only after the imprecise and blurred make-up of contemporary racism is recognised can educators begin a process where successful aspects of traditional anti-discrimination programmes are retained, and new programmes developed to target aspects of racism that are centred on *culture*.

Shifting the Blame

The following explanations of racism – individual, institutional and cultural – share a common understanding that discrimination revolves around the positioning of particular groups or individuals as superior in relation to others. Although it is evident when reading the collection of articles in this special

edition of *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* that several accounts draw on a combination of the aforementioned explanations, it is nonetheless intriguing that blame can be attributed so differently in each case. For those seeking a more specific account of how racism is theorised in the literature, it may be useful to turn to the work of Healy (1999), Hollinsworth (1998), Rizvi (1996) and Pettman (1992).

Let's Blame it on the Individual!

The first explanation of racism is entrenched within the domain of psychology and essentially points the finger directly at the individuals who carry out racist acts. This understanding of racism is centred predominantly on individual parties and encompasses forms of behaviour that include prejudice, harassment, violence, duress and vilification. Overt public acts constitute a 'mainstream' perception of what racism is and the forms of behaviour in which it is manifested. Interestingly, these forms of racism are most easily targeted by anti-discrimination legislation and represent the bulk of complaints examined in Australian courts (Zelinka, 1996). For early childhood educators contemplating anti-racist programmes, it is important to consider that the key point that delineates this way of thinking about the issue of racism is that it centres on the conduct of an individual or group. This positions the act of racism, along with any subsequent anti-racist education programme, within a sphere of 'person-centred' analysis that has its foundation in social and or developmental psychology (see, for example, Duckitt, 1992).

Although it is obvious that individuals do in fact carry out acts of racism, educators would be ill advised to assume that the origins of racism are situated exclusively in the mind-set and deeds of such individuals or small groups (Hollinsworth, 1998). It is useful to draw a distinction between long-term preventative anti-racist programmes and those of a more urgent nature such as the programmes put into operation in several high-profile south-east Queensland high schools (Australia) during the mid- to late 1990s. In the case of short-term programmes aimed at altering student behaviour, educators appear to conclude far too quickly that the site of 'therapy' must reside within the individual or group performing the racist acts. While this position may appear logical, given the urgency in which such programmes are usually implemented, such an understanding of racism clearly fails to take into account the influence of cultural and institutional structures in perpetuating racism.

It's Not My Fault!

What about Structure ... What about the Institutions?

The next explanation of racism moves the debate beyond simply identifying and subsequently directing 'therapy' towards those 'unbalanced' individuals who perform discriminatory acts. By drawing on neo-Marxist debates

occurring in the broader sphere of social theory (see, for example, Hall, 1986 and Rizvi, 1996), the debate has shifted from the psyche of individuals into the arena of the social and cultural. Whereas in the previous account of racism, we see a rationale embedded within the spheres of individual or group behaviour, institutional accounts of racism are predisposed to locate their analysis within various social contexts. In general terms, such accounts of racism position racism as a form of social inequality similar to other socially constructed distinctions, including class or gender (i.e. Connell, 1995).

Institutional accounts of racism have unsettled the entrenched notion of racial intolerance and bigotry being something performed only by the 'ignorant', 'misled' and 'unbalanced'. For example, it is now relatively uncommon for long-term anti-racist programmes to frame notions of racism in solely individualistic or biological terms, i.e. as a component of human nature or an aspect of individual fallibility. By moving an understanding of racism beyond individual practice, it has been possible to position racism as a form of 'discrimination against (or oppression of) certain groups of people by the institutions and systems that regulate our society: the legal and medical systems, the educational system, the public service' (Zelinka, 1996, p. 12).

This second means of theorising racism has allowed educational institutions to move the focus of their anti-racist programmes from an analysis of individual conduct toward an investigation of the systemic ways in which existing social and economic privilege are protected and discrimination is allowed to occur.

It's Got Nothing to Do with Race ... Implicating Culture

The next means of theorising racism uses the foundation of culture as its focus of analysis and does not attempt to locate the 'origins and causes' of racism in any single practice or structure. In contrast to the previous two accounts, this approach establishes such discrimination in specific 'technologies' that enable racism to be both expressed and maintained. The key to this means of conceptualising racism is the emergence of culture – in contrast to 'race' – as the signifier of incompatibility between racial and ethnic groups. Evident in the Australian race debates of the 1980s and 1990s, it is possible to see how public figures such as Professor Geoffrey Blainey or Pauline Hanson were able to dislocate 'culture' from 'race' as a means of defending an Australian 'way of life' (Stratton, 1998). The large segments of the Australian public who so eagerly tapped into this new racist discourse defended their actions by arguing that a person's race was not considered to determine their 'culture'. In other words, 'anybody of any race [was thought to be able to] assimilate into any culture' (Stratton, 1998, p. 64).

Although demonstrating similarities with Australian post-war policies of assimilation where migrants were encouraged to 'become Australian' as quickly as possible by shedding their language, culture and traditions, contemporary racism successfully camouflages traditional fixations on racial

and ethnic incompatibly with the new indicators that use culture as a means of differentiation (Donald & Rattansi, 1992). Sometimes referred to as 'new racism' (Barker, 1981), this understanding of racism perceives race as far less problematic than culture, for although race remains the principal marker of difference, such difference is now expressed in cultural terms. Cole (1997) proposes that such new forms of racism are targeted in a Western context towards cultural groups who are perceived as incapable of, or unwilling to, assimilate into the 'mainstream'. In Cole's view, the term 'racism' should possibly be replaced by 'culturalism'. By promoting the notion of culture as discrete, homogeneous and standardised, new racists are able to declare that their discussion has nothing to do with race in isolation (Stratton, 1998). More accurately, we have what Castles et al (1988, p. 135) describe as a 'culturally aware' form of racism where discrimination constitutes an intentional or unintentional means of constituting culturally differentiated social groupings.

Implications for Early Childhood

This brief analysis has traced three approaches about which educators need to be aware when attempting to implement anti-racist programmes. Although the first two positions are relatively common, the third means of conceptualising racism is different from the blatant forms of discrimination on which many early childhood educators seek to concentrate. For such educators to address racism adequately, it would appear that it is now necessary to look inward at the systemic structures of their classrooms and educational institutions and question the degree to which it is necessary for some children to negotiate cultural borders, and if so, how such borders inscribe and position their relationship to the dominant culture. This is undoubtedly something that should not just be confined to the early years of a child's education. If we are to achieve equitable anti-racist educational programmes in schools, there is a need for all teachers to be aware that contemporary discriminatory practices vary considerably from established traditional notions of racism.

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