

# Kindergarten Teachers' Perspectives on Culturally Responsive Education

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## Abstract

Six kindergarten teachers in the Greater Toronto Area were interviewed on their understandings of and approaches to culturally responsive education (CRE) in their classrooms. Teachers generally reported believing that CRE is important in kindergarten, and the practices they implemented fell into two categories: structured components of their classrooms and spontaneous accommodations or instruction. Teachers reported finding it challenging to access the resources they need to effectively practise CRE and to maintain ongoing communication with other school personnel and families. The implications of the findings are discussed to facilitate the development of age-appropriate CRE practices for kindergarten.

*Keywords:* culturally responsive, kindergarten, teacher perspectives, pedagogy

## **Résumé**

Six enseignants de maternelle du Grand Toronto ont participé à des entrevues au sujet de la compréhension et des pratiques pédagogiques culturellement adaptées (PCA). Selon les enseignants, les PCA sont importantes au domaine d'enseignement et que les pratiques se divisent en deux catégories: des composants structurés et des aménagements imprévus. Les enseignants ont de la difficulté à avoir accès aux ressources dont ils ont besoin pour exercer efficacement les PCA et pour maintenir une bonne communication avec leur entourage. Les implications de ces résultats sont discutées pour nous aider à développer des pratiques de PCA adaptées pour les jeunes enfants.

*Mots-clés* : culturellement adaptée, maternelle, perspectives des enseignants, pédagogie

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## Introduction

Public education systems across Canada have been formalizing policies on multiculturalism and advancing pedagogical approaches to ensure that all students feel included in their schools. Despite these efforts to make Canadian schooling experiences more inclusive, our public education systems still reflect the interests of dominant groups (Schick & St. Denis, 2005; Steinbach, 2011). Students of ethnic minority groups have expressed that curricula and classroom environments do not reflect them or their experiences (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011). At the classroom level, teachers' pedagogical beliefs and practices offer a powerful avenue through which inclusive environments can be created and facilitated (Gay, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995a). A rich body of research examines how teachers experience and respond to cultural diversity in their classrooms, and many pedagogical tools offer guidance on practising cultural responsiveness (Aronson & Laughter, 2016).

Some studies have examined the role of cultural diversity in early school years (e.g., Adair & Fabienne, 2014) and the cultural perspectives of early years teachers and teachers in training (e.g., Prochner, Cleghorn, Kirova, & Massing, 2016). In the field of teacher education, studies have illustrated that teachers' prior beliefs and experiences shape their perspectives on child development, and, subsequently, their perspectives on classroom practices in early years teaching (e.g., Gupta, 2006). However, there is little research on the perspectives of practising Canadian kindergarten teachers on culturally relevant practices or their implementations within the kindergarten curriculum. The role of cultural diversity in kindergarten is especially important as children are already shaped by their home cultures by the time they begin kindergarten, and their kindergarten experiences have significant implications for later academic, social, and emotional outcomes (York, 2016). Furthermore, considering that children are more likely to choose a play partner that is of the same racial or ethnic background (Girouard, Stack, & O'Neill-Gilbert, 2011) and to play with white dolls over black (MacNevin & Berman, 2017), it is important that classrooms do not reinforce messages of social inequality and injustice. Instead, classrooms should strive to develop the critical consciousness of children who can then challenge the status quo (Hyland, 2010). Positive communication between individuals of different ethnicities can improve attitudes toward, and relationships with, one another (Cameron & Rutland, 2008; Gaertner et al., 2008). For many children, kindergarten is one of the first consistent settings in which they develop peer relationships; these

classrooms are ideal contexts in which to foster relationships between children of diverse backgrounds and promote dialogue about differences. The primary goal of this study is to understand how kindergarten teachers in the Greater Toronto Area understand and practise culturally responsive education in their classrooms.

## **Culturally Responsive Education (CRE)**

Two leading frameworks in the field of cultural diversity and education are *culturally relevant pedagogy* (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and *culturally responsive teaching* (Gay, 2010). Culturally relevant pedagogy, as defined by Ladson-Billings (1994), “empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (pp. 16–17), extending also to collective empowerment. Teachers are challenged to broaden their sociocultural consciousness (Villegas & Lucas, 2002); their stances on educational and social inequalities are considered integral to the empowerment process (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b). Culturally responsive teaching, as described by Gay (2010), “[uses] the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them” (p. 31). The framework is grounded in the assertion that students find more personal meaning in academic knowledge and skills that align with their lived experiences and frames of reference, and, as such, engage with and learn the material more easily and thoroughly. While Gay’s earlier work (1975, 1980) focused more squarely on formal curriculum, her work and the literature on culturally responsive teaching has evolved to encompass the roles of teachers and their instructional practices (Aronson & Laughter, 2016).

Since culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching developed in response to the educational disadvantages experienced by black students and ethnic minority groups, the literature for both frameworks focuses primarily on racial and ethnic dimensions of culture. Understandings of culture have since evolved to encompass many dimensions beyond race and ethnicity (e.g., gender, socioeconomic status) and acknowledge membership to multiple cultural groups. As always, political and historical contexts continue to inform understandings of culture, and culture can be politicized through the “unequal relations that may exist between different ethnic, gender, and class groups”

(Prochner et al., 2016). It is important to keep in mind the dynamic and changing nature of culture, and the ways in which it is shaped and understood within social and political spheres.

In their frameworks, both Ladson-Billings (1994) and Gay (2010) identify the classroom as a central space for social justice and change, and they emphasize the significance of teachers' beliefs and practices in creating these spaces. Dover (2013) identified *culturally responsive education* (CRE) as one of the five strands that form effective teaching for social justice in K–12 classrooms, alongside democratic education, critical pedagogy, multicultural education, and social justice education. Her conceptualization of CRE as a strand integrates the critical pedagogies of the frameworks outlined by Ladson-Billings and Gay with multicultural education's teaching of culturally diverse content. While Dover's (2013) model emphasizes the need for teaching for social justice in K–12 classrooms, much of the research that was used to inform the development of the model was on older school grades. There is currently no model specific to implementing CRE in kindergarten. The present study, examining kindergarten teachers' pedagogical beliefs and practices of CRE, can enrich our understanding of current models that are geared toward CRE in K–12 classrooms, as well as support the development of ones that are more developmentally appropriate for younger children.

## **CRE in K–12 Education**

The majority of the literature on CRE is focused on the high school grades, followed by intermediate and elementary grades. High school teachers have used, for example, critical journal reflections, music genres, and performance poetry to engage students in a range of academic content and discussions on social justice (e.g., Christianakis, 2011; Lopez, 2011; Stovall, 2006). In an intermediate classroom, a teacher used family gardening to incorporate students' cultural practices in math education (Civil & Khan, 2001). In the elementary context, a Grade 2 teacher used freedom songs from the Civil Rights Movement during literacy activities, and students shared their family histories and stories to construct narratives about the history of their communities (Gorham, 2013).

While very few studies have examined CRE in kindergarten, the few that exist illustrate the potential opportunities for its effective implementation. Over a period of

two months, a kindergarten teacher held weekly 20-minute social studies lessons, during which children shared their personal experiences as immigrants and made connections between the experiences of various prominent individuals whom they were studying, such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. (Coughran, 2012). Another kindergarten teacher used multicultural dolls and pictures from the *National Geographic Magazine* to engage in conversation with their students about geographical and human differences, and their significance in local contexts (Lee & Lee, 2001). It is important to consider developmentally appropriate strategies for the implementation of CRE in kindergarten.

Play may offer unique developmentally appropriate teaching and learning opportunities for CRE in kindergarten. While all young children engage in play, its manifestations are culturally diverse—children create or recreate real-life events that are influenced by their environments at home and in their communities (Göncü & Gaskins, 2006; Leontiev, 2005). As such, teachers bear the responsibility of supporting children's play in ways that are meaningful to them (Hennig & Kirova, 2012). Teachers often have multicultural materials such as books and play objects, and it is important to understand how these materials relate to children's personal experiences and what they represent for them. For example, a traditional grinder, used for grinding grain or spices in Somali culture, was introduced to a dramatic play centre (Hennig & Kirova, 2012). During play, a Somali child modelled the actions used to grind grains while singing a traditional song. Two weeks later, students from different backgrounds were observed using the grinder in the way they learned from their classmate. Using materials that reflect children's diversity enriches their play and empowers their social and emotional attitudes as they see themselves reflected in their classrooms.

## **Teachers' Perspectives**

An emerging body of research describes teachers' beliefs about CRE and the challenges that they experience in its implementation. Teachers have noted that CRE facilitates an inclusive classroom culture in which students feel comfortable sharing their cultures and experiences (Meka, 2015; Parhar & Sensoy, 2011; Sarker, 2012). Teachers have also expressed that such environments promote meaningful teacher–student and student–student interactions and empower students beyond the classroom (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011).

Teachers have described various challenges in translating CRE into practice, including teaching-related challenges within their own classrooms and wider systemic challenges in their schools and beyond. Some teachers described collaborative learning to be difficult to implement with a new group of students every year, as each group differs in their prior cross-cultural experiences (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011). While some teachers described provincial curricula as flexible and providing room for creativity, many secondary school teachers described curriculum and assessment practices as constraining their teaching due to the focus on measurable objectives such as government-regulated exams (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011). Teachers have also described challenges relating to administrative rules and requests. One teacher recounted being told by administration that her and her colleague's lesson plans were too different from each other, and to create more similar plans. While the teacher did not mind sharing her plans, she felt that she could no longer be creative with her class and noted, "she has way more Hispanics and I have way more African American students in my class" (Gorham, 2013, p. 78). Another teacher commented on the difficulties of receiving principal support when advocating for more sensitive practices to address the needs of ethnically diverse students (MacPherson, 2010). Although one might assume that these beliefs and challenges could also hold for kindergarten teachers, it is likely that kindergarten teachers will have different perspectives, experiences, and challenges due to the younger developmental stage of kindergarten children.

## **Present Study**

The present study sought to better understand kindergarten teachers' experiences of CRE in their classrooms. The primary research questions were: (1) How do kindergarten teachers in Ontario understand and approach cultural diversity in their classrooms? (2) What challenges do kindergarten teachers experience?

## Method

### Setting and Context

This study was situated in a school board in Ontario's Greater Toronto Area. The Ontario Ministry of Education (OME; 2009) released the *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*, which outlines yearly action items and equity-related work conducted in Ontario school boards, and a monograph on the significance of culturally relevant pedagogy outlining the meaning of culturally responsive practice, the mindset of culturally responsive educators, and strategies for implementing culturally responsive instruction (OME, 2013). A play-based learning curriculum has also been mandated in Ontario, and kindergarten teachers are required to consider their students' cultural backgrounds in developing play-based learning activities (OME, 2016).

### Procedure and Participants

A total of six kindergarten teachers from five different schools participated in the study. First, schools that have been identified by the school board for their commitment to inclusiveness and supporting children's diverse needs were identified. Then, principals of those schools were contacted via e-mail outlining the purpose of the study and the nature of the research being conducted. Principals who were willing to have their schools participate forwarded the e-mail to the kindergarten teachers at their schools. Finally, interested teachers contacted the primary researcher directly. A semi-structured interview ranging between 30 and 60 minutes was conducted with each teacher at their school. Teachers varied in their self-identified demographic backgrounds (see Table 1) and their years of teaching experiences (see Table 2).



**Table 1.** Participants' demographic information

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Birthplace
Aretta	39	F	African	England
Brian	47	M	Caucasian	Canada
Shanelle	34	F	Caribbean	Jamaica
Greg	59	M	Caucasian	Canada
Kirsten	44	F	Mixed*	Canada
Crystal	40	F	Portuguese	Canada

\*Mixed includes Acadian, Mi'kmaq, Ukrainian, and Italian

**Table 2.** Participants' teaching experience

Pseudonym	Total Years	Years Kindergarten	Years International	Other Grades (International)
Aretta	9	1	3	1-4 (10-12)
Brian	14	12	–	5-6
Shanelle	5	4	1	(JET)
Greg	11	2	–	SE
Kirsten	8	1	–	1-11
Crystal	14	3	–	1-2, 4-5, SE, ESL

Note. ESL = English as a second language, JET = Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme, SE = special education.

## Data Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Open coding—using Patton's (2015) constant comparison method—was conducted to generate codes, categories, and themes on teachers' perspectives of CRE in kindergarten. For example, one teacher mentioned having her students create self-portraits to create dialogue about differences; in line-by-line coding, this was coded as *self-identity*. In the creation of categories, *self-identity* was grouped with similar codes from the same teacher interview into a broader *instructional lessons* category. Then, broader themes among the categories were identified, such as *instructional lessons* being a *structured* form of instruction to hold conversations in the classroom about cultural differences. Finally, common themes across interviews and similarities and differences in the perspectives and practices of the six teachers were examined.

## Results

All but one of the teachers believed that children's cultural backgrounds ought to be considered in their kindergarten experiences, but only a few of them reported implementing CRE practices on a regular basis. Teachers' reported practices were categorized into being either structured (planned, proactive) or spontaneous (unplanned, reactive); far more were spontaneous rather than structured. Teachers described challenges in implementing CRE practices, relating mostly to external influences on the classroom, such as access to resources and relationships with school personnel and families.

The analyses herein refer primarily to CRE with respect to children's ethnic backgrounds, as teachers most commonly described their classrooms—and, in effect, their CRE practices—in those terms. For example, when asked to describe the cultural composition of their classrooms, all six teachers referred to children's ethnic backgrounds. Many also referred to other markers of culture such as religion, gender, and socioeconomic status during ensuing discussions of the manifestations of CRE (see Table 3), but often only in passing or in single, isolated occurrences. When they did mention other markers, teachers mostly referred to their intersectionality with ethnicity (e.g., ethnic differences in gender norms). Thus, while examples from other markers of culture are sometimes referenced, the findings from this study generally refer to ethnic diversity in classrooms.

**Table 3.** Participants' references to markers of culture

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Religion	Language	Age	Disability	Gender	Race	Immigration Status	Socio-economic Status
Aretta	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Brian	X	X	X	X	X				
Shanelle	X	X		X		X	X		
Greg	X	X			X	X			
Kirsten	X		X				X		
Crystal	X		X				X	X	X

*Note.* An X indicates that the teacher referred to the cultural marker at least once. Markers are ordered left to right from most to least referenced.

### Teachers' Beliefs on the Importance of CRE in Kindergarten

Five of the six teachers reported that CRE is important in kindergarten, referring primarily to developmental and social justice reasons. According to Crystal, CRE is “very important and crucial, because at the kindergarten level, the kids need to develop a sense of identity.” Her reference to young children’s identity development reflects a developmental perspective in the consideration of culture in kindergarten. Researchers have indeed noted the need to consider young children’s home experiences for effectively supporting their learning and identity development (York, 2016). Shanelle held a social justice stance and emphasized that her big push is acknowledging rather than erasing differences:

A lot of times when we speak of difference, the end goal is that we’re the same. But we’re not the same... We can’t erase our differences. And it needs to be acknowledged because it affects how we navigate through life every day.

Indeed, there are different approaches to addressing race and ethnicity. Colourblind approaches value sameness and posit that it is best for educators to ignore racial and ethnic differences among students. Anti-bias curricula discuss the importance of celebrating diversity, developing positive identities, and counteracting discrimination (Farago, Sanders, & Gaias, 2015).

Perspectives on the age-appropriateness of implementing CRE in kindergarten emerged as an element of teachers' beliefs. The one teacher who did not think that cultural considerations are important in kindergarten believed that young children are naturally accepting of each other:

They're so young that it doesn't matter. They're so accepting of everything... We have a girl with hearing aids but after the first day, once they knew, it doesn't matter. We have a girl from our diagnostic kindergarten who comes in, and she's autistic, but it doesn't matter... So, even when they talk about their home or things, it's not a big thing. (Greg)

While Greg may have nurtured a highly inclusive classroom environment, this perspective can reflect a common misconception that children are too young to recognize differences or understand bias (York, 2016). Acceptance-focused perspectives reflect a limited view of CRE.

Teachers also discussed age-appropriateness in other ways. While Kirsten noted CRE to be important in kindergarten, she wondered if kindergarten students are too young: "I haven't spent a lot of time really thinking about how to tie in various cultural backgrounds into kindergarten, just because I'm not sure if they're old enough yet." In some instances, teachers explicitly shared some practices that they believed to be appropriate in kindergarten, while believing that other practices would not be developmentally appropriate. For example, Aretta read the book *The Tooth* by Avi Slodovnick to her students, which narrates an encounter between a young girl and a homeless man, with the girl offering her pulled tooth to the man so he can put it under his pillow for money. Aretta left out the last page: "The man said, if only I had a pillow. So, that's how the book ended, but I didn't want [the students] to not have hope. I personally don't show that page." Decisions about the age or developmental appropriateness of a topic are not clear-cut. Within the context of CRE, age-appropriateness may be conflated with teachers' comfort levels with addressing certain topics. For instance, Gay (2013) cautions that teachers "may concentrate on only 'safe' topics about cultural diversity...while neglecting more troubling issues like inequities, injustices, oppressions, and major contributions of ethnic groups to societal and human life" (p. 57). It is also important to differentiate between the age-appropriateness of a topic and developmentally appropriate ways in which to implement it.

Discussions on play generated more focused discussion of CRE in kindergarten, ultimately showcasing nuances in teacher perspectives. For example, while Kirsten believed that children's cultural backgrounds have a role in their kindergarten experiences, she did not feel they shaped their play experiences:

I think there are some things in Canadian culture that just everybody knows about. And it seems to me, with my kindergarteners, that that's what they're kind of engaged in when they're playing. For example, superheroes, things like that.

Kirsten's perspective speaks to the idea of a "Canadian culture," raising questions about what really is "Canadian" and what may be Eurocentric. Some critics address the history of comic books and superheroes as praising the European identity and degrading, for example, African and Chinese identities (Gateward & Jennings, 2015; Phillips & Strobl, 2013). While superheroes may appear to be "Canadian," many would argue that they represent a particular worldview.

Teachers often spoke of gender influences in play, varying in the extent to which they related gender to ethnic cultures. Aretta explained that children in her classroom tend to play with same-gender peers and adopt gender-prescribed roles in their play. She associated this type of play with children's home cultures: "I almost get a sense that sometimes when they're in class, it's very different from what they're used to at home. So, they're quickly learning to adapt and to assimilate." Instead of play being a space for children to explore their cultural identities, Aretta described it as a space to adopt new practices; moreover, even though gender-prescribed play persists in Western contexts of play, gender-prescribed play was "othered" and associated with the home cultures of students of minority ethnic groups. Greg also spoke of gender differences in play, but he did not associate gender with children's home practices or culture: "If anything, it's still more male-female. Colours or cooking. They don't want to do the house centre, they don't want to do the toy cars or something. It's more of that than cultural." This ambiguity around gender differences in play is surprising considering that researchers continue to indicate that young children's play and use of play materials is gendered (e.g., Änggård, 2011; Martin, 2011).

CRE emphasizes both teachers' beliefs and practices in creating a classroom environment that teaches for social justice. While most of the teachers expressed that CRE is important to consider in kindergarten, they varied in their perspectives as to how it should

be addressed in the classroom (e.g., in play) and how ethnic diversity may or may not intersect with other markers of culture in these kindergarten contexts (e.g., gender). CRE is not only about beliefs, but also about informing teaching.

## Teachers' Implementation of CRE in Kindergarten

Teachers spoke of both structured and spontaneous practices when describing their implementation of CRE. Structured practices refer to planned instruction enacted by teachers to incorporate children's cultural backgrounds into classroom routines; these included celebrations and instructional lessons. Spontaneous practices refer to unplanned accommodations or instruction that, combined with teachers' general beliefs and knowledge, emerge from students' requests or needs.

**Structured.** Most teachers reported incorporating cultural and religious celebrations in their classrooms, though only one teacher described incorporating celebrations as a tool to teach for social justice. Few teachers described implementing instructional lessons that were more integrated throughout the school year.

*Specific days or celebrations.* Five teachers incorporated celebrations into their classrooms by singing songs, reading books, or having table displays about various celebrations on their respective days. Shanelle explained the limitations of relying on single-day celebrations:

It has to be authentic and meaningful. Just sticking that there and saying, "Oh I did it," doesn't mean anything. Where do you go from there? If Diwali is happening, we shouldn't only be speaking about Diwali that day. It should be embedded throughout, connected to something else we're doing.

Banks and Banks (2016) refer to teachers' focus on celebrations and discrete cultural elements (i.e., "the contribution approach") as the first of four levels in building an integrated curriculum; heroes and holidays tend to be celebrated for special occasions and otherwise omitted from classroom curricula. On the other hand, Shanelle used Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday to spearhead social justice education on various issues, using the stories of various individuals:

On Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday, I read a book about him... So, was Dr. King treated fairly? No. Why not? Because of the colour of his skin... What did he do about it? He stood up, he said no. He didn't just sit and take it. Because I'm also trying to teach them to speak up. We don't just sit and take injustice. We try our best to do something about it. We went on to read about Malala, we read about Nelson Mandela, and Ruby Bridges. We're going to read about Iqbal.

An ensuing student request suggests that the young children responded well to these discussions:

Two of the girls have decided that they want to plan a party for all the kindergarten [classrooms] to celebrate these special people who stood up and said no against people being unfair, and people judging you because you're a girl, or because you're black, or because you're a kid. (Shanelle)

Shanelle and her students had begun preparing for the party at the time of the interview. The classroom conversations and the students' request to share their knowledge with others reflect the third (transformation) and final (social action) levels of building an integrated curriculum (Banks & Banks, 2016): Shanelle presented issues and events from diverse perspectives, and her students took a step toward social action by planning an event to share their knowledge with other kindergarten students.

Aretta took celebrations as an opportunity to engage parents in the classroom. For example, she had a parent come in and talk about Diwali with the class and hand out treats. Parental involvement is an important avenue for implementing culturally responsive practices (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011).

*Instructional lessons.* Two teachers explained having a unit on self-identity at the beginning of the year to set the stage for discussions about race, ethnicity, and human differences. Shanelle begins by introducing her students to the seven core principles of African-centred teaching (Nguzo Saba). She designed her classroom in this way to reflect the shared culture of most of her students. She spoke about the principle of *nia*, meaning purpose:

Our *nia* might be different, but we have a purpose here. We're not just here for no reason. For me, it's connected to culturally responsive pedagogy, because there's

a collective responsibility for each other, whether we're the same, whether we're different, and so it just ties in with that. And it's about finding our purpose, and why we're here, and how to be better with one another.

During circle time, Shanelle encouraged her students to express their personal *nia* and collective classroom *nia*. Crystal read multicultural books to converse about differences in appearances and cultures. Her students also made self-portraits each month: "They identify the colour of their skin, they identify their culture as where they come from, and why their skin is that colour." Finally, Kirsten asked students to greet each other in their home languages during attendance each morning. These more structured forms of instruction provide a foundation for critical discussions throughout the year.

**Spontaneous.** There was more variability in teachers' spontaneous practices than structured practices, as the needs of students in each class differ.

**Accommodations.** Accommodating students on a need-per-need basis can be another form of the contributions approach (Banks & Banks, 2016). Kirsten accommodated a Muslim student's dietary restrictions during a science lesson:

We were talking about hot chocolate and linking it to science...heat and evaporation and things like that. We had hot chocolate, and one of the parents mentioned to me that she'd like marshmallows that were *halal* [permissible]. And I said sure. She'd let me know where to get them, so I got them...and that's an easy thing to do.

While this example reflects focusing on a specific aspect of the religious practice instead of understanding the meaning of it (e.g., having a classroom discussion on the meaning and purpose of dietary restrictions in various religious and cultural groups), the accommodation was key for supporting the active participation of the student in the activity.

Aretta spoke of a female student who had recently arrived in Canada and whose grandfather was the only male she had spent significant time with in her home country. Aretta was unaware of this and paired the student with a male reading buddy. When the female student expressed discomfort, Aretta immediately paired her with a new female reading buddy. Aretta said that she had to "explain to [the male reading buddy] that it



wasn't anything against him personally, but that this student, this little girl, had just come from an environment where she wasn't around men." She thereby both accommodated the female student's needs and included the male student in the discussion about unique cultural experiences. Considering that teachers are continuously learning about their students' cultures, these examples are illustrative of ways in which teachers can respond to cues from students and parents in implementing CRE.

*Academic learning.* One teacher shared a noteworthy example on adapting academic instruction to meet student needs. Crystal spoke about a Russian student who was an English language learner:

When it came time for writing and even doing his name at first, I told him, do you know how to do it in Russian? And he said yes, so he would do it in Russian. And when we did math, I told him, do you know how to do it in Russian? And he would do it. And then when his mom would come, I'd ask her about what he had written... With your students who don't speak English, you need to know if they're fluent in their own language. And he is, and for that reason he was able to pick up on [English] very quickly.

Crystal knew that a student's proficiency in their native language is a significant resource for their learning of a second language (Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008). She ensured that her student had sufficient literacy skills in Russian, which informed her approach to teaching him English. Validating students' native languages also helps to promote a safe and welcoming environment to enhance student learning (Lucas et al., 2008).

*Conversations.* Teachers took advantage of spontaneous opportunities to have conversations with students about human differences. Crystal used multicultural foods to talk about the importance of trying new things. If students said, "this is gross, I don't want to eat it," Crystal would explain that it is important to have the courage to try things that are unfamiliar; if they still did not like the food after trying it, she asked them "to explain *why* they didn't like it." She also engaged students in conversations about current events (e.g., 2016 Fort McMurray wildfire) to reflect on how people's experiences might affect their daily living. Shanelle prompted students to reflect on their *nia* if

she found that they were not engaged in the classroom, returning spontaneously to their lesson on *nia* and encouraging students to express their attitudes and feelings.

Overall, most teachers enacted CRE on a need-by-need basis in their classrooms through spontaneous practices. With respect to teachers who did implement CRE in more structured forms of practice, their practices were more broadly addressing CRE through more noticeable factors such as celebrations and differences in physical appearance. However, one teacher even tied CRE to social justice education, which, as displayed in the Dover (2013) model, is the objective to be reached through the five strands, one of which is CRE. The larger presence of more surface-level practices may be related to kindergarten teachers' perspectives on what may or may not be age-appropriate in kindergarten—teachers are focusing on “safe” topics of cultural diversity in their classrooms.

### **Complexities of Beliefs and Implementations: Case Example**

Teachers' accounts of their classroom practices appeared at times inconsistent, pointing perhaps to the complexities of CRE. Aretta offers a case example that illustrates how teachers' beliefs on the topic of CRE may be shaped by different factors from their socio-political environments. In the following narrative, it is unclear why Aretta responded differently to students wearing a hijab or cross necklace:

I have a number of students in my class who wear hijab. And so, everybody in the class knows not to take it off or tug [on] it or touch it. Today, I had a student who was wearing a cross. And I didn't tell the mom to put it in [his shirt] because I'm not a Christian, but I just felt like if it was hanging out, it would be something that the other kids might try to pull or something. So, for safety, I asked the mom to put it in.

Previous research has also found internal contradictions in teachers' practice of CRE, relating them in part to political climates (MacNaughton & Hughes, 2007). Teachers may not have a strong foundation of CRE on which they are basing their practices, and may rather be responding to student needs as they are noticed—what is noticed and how it is addressed may be shaped by a number of factors, such as the media and social attention (or lack thereof) received by the issue.

As mentioned, when a female student expressed discomfort with a male reading buddy, Aretta paired her with a female reading buddy. However, she later explained that her students often choose same-gender partners and she reminds them to mix genders:

I noticed that a lot of times, a lot of the girls seem to be shy and it's taken a lot for them to come around. Or if you tell them to pick a partner, they'll automatically pick another girl rather than a boy. And even today, I remember having to say, "Boys and girls, we're going to sit girl, boy, girl, boy."

These practices suggest that there are limits to which teachers incorporate various practices in their classrooms, with some cultural practices being the "classroom norm" and others being "accommodated." While teachers may believe that CRE is important in kindergarten, they may be finding it challenging to understand how to implement the practices, thus resulting in inconsistencies.

### **Challenges Experienced by Teachers in Implementing CRE in Kindergarten**

Teachers felt that it was important to incorporate materials that embraced different races and cultures; for example, Crystal's classroom had dolls from different ethnic backgrounds, and Shanelle's classroom had mental math games that are played in many different parts of the globe with materials such as rocks. However, teachers reported finding it challenging to access the resources they need to effectively practice CRE. Crystal said she needs to access specialty stores to purchase items (e.g., different colours of yarn) and has difficulty finding multicultural resources such as play materials or books on specific celebrations:

Most of the books you could find were just those books that have all the celebrations, but there weren't any specific books on Kwanzaa. We were able to purchase a couple, but even then, there was just maybe two or three.

Teachers also alluded to contextual influences in their access to resources. Aretta recounted that, prior to joining her current school, she was teaching in a neighbourhood with fewer resources, and was unaware of what she had access to as a teacher: "There are so many resources that I wasn't aware of before I came to this school, and now I'm like,

‘Wow!’” Aretta spoke highly of a grant and book distribution program that enabled her current school to significantly expand and enrich its book collections, both in the library and in classrooms.

While the lack of physical resources was a challenge experienced by many of the teachers, it was also often accompanied by a lack of knowledge of certain topics. Teachers spoke about the challenges of incorporating subjects on which they had limited knowledge, in which case they felt it was more appropriate to not incorporate them:

I wouldn't want to do a poor job. I'd want to do a good job, or an accurate job, in portraying whatever it is I'm portraying. So, that's one example [Kwanzaa] that I had that I didn't do because I just didn't feel I was ready. (Kirsten)

Indeed, many teachers who do not implement CRE express that they are not competent in doing so (Gay, 2013). To increase their knowledge and comfort in these important areas, all but one of the teachers said they attended professional development sessions on CRE, either within their school, school board, or broader community. They also described several challenges making use of CRE techniques. Crystal explained that only select teachers are asked to attend the school board's workshops, and, upon return, share what they learned with other teachers. She explained that many of the teachers do not implement what is shared with them, and she believed that “if they got the full training, they'd be more comfortable with implementing and delivering more culturally based activities.” Greg mentioned attending only one session in his earlier years as a teacher. Overall, these professional development sessions appear to be isolated, single-day occurrences without follow-up programs that allow participants to come back and evaluate the results of implemented strategies (MacNaughton & Hughes, 2007).

Finally, some teachers said that it is challenging to maintain strong ties with other school personnel and families, whom they believe are key actors in the implementation of CRE. Brian struggled to get other teachers on board for holding school-wide initiatives (e.g., assemblies for Asian and Jewish heritage months). Kirsten expressed similar sentiments, suggesting that school- and community-wide initiatives be implemented to promote CRE and that the responsibility of CRE be extended beyond the classroom teacher:

I've really wished that the school, or board or whatnot, would have initiatives to have parents to just meet and greet. And have nights of socializing to get to know

one another and celebrating things. Where the teacher perhaps isn't the one initiating it. Making it more of a community, city-wide effort.

Overall, the challenges described by teachers reflect the importance of school and community support for strong relationships and effective dialogue about CRE. Teacher education, knowledge exchange, and professional development sessions may help to alleviate some of the discomfort that teachers may feel in implementing CRE practices with young children. As teachers feel more knowledgeable and equipped to teach a specific subject in developmentally appropriate ways, they will also feel more comfortable with the implementation of CRE.

## Discussion

The present study sought teachers' perspectives on the role of CRE in kindergarten, their practices, and the challenges that they experience. Most of the teachers believed that it is important to address cultural differences and perspectives in kindergarten; however, some of them placed limits on their implementation, due primarily to their perspectives on whether certain conversations are age-appropriate for young children. Because teachers may focus only on "safe" topics about cultural diversity (Gay, 2013), it is important to distinguish between age-appropriateness and teachers' personal comfort levels about addressing certain topics. The identification of age-appropriate "limits" placed by teachers is an important step toward helping them overcome their discomfort in addressing issues such as inequities or injustices, and to guide them toward developmentally appropriate ways of practice instead of dismissing issues altogether. Crucial to this process are teachers' self-reflections on their beliefs and practices, and wider efforts among teachers and school personnel to have conversations about the importance of CRE for student achievement and well-being (Singleton, 2015).

The CRE practices that teachers described implementing took the form of planned, structured approaches and unplanned, spontaneous approaches. Only one teacher prepared and implemented structured practices in multiple parts of her classroom (e.g., circle time, learning centres). The limited mention of CRE in direct academic instruction is not surprising considering its relative absence in the literature on CRE in kindergarten and may be an important area for research. Teachers most commonly described

incorporating celebrations and responding to explicit and isolated student requests and needs in their classrooms. A recurring theme in the literature on CRE is that relying on materials alone (e.g., an occasional book on a cultural celebration) is not enough (Aboud & Levy, 2000; Hyland, 2010). Teachers in this study used literature to communicate with their students about human differences. While the occasional presentation of a book about an ethnic group may reinforce “otherness” (i.e., some cultures being exceptions to the norm of whiteness; e.g., Hyland, 2010), some teachers took additional steps to use books as tools to elicit conversations about diversity and social justice. A CRE framework that considers structured and spontaneous practices complements other models. For example, Ladson-Billings’s (1995b) use of culture as a driving force for learning and academic excellence can involve both structured (e.g., teaching games from various global regions) and spontaneous (e.g., using a student’s native language to support their English language learning) practices, as can each of Banks and Banks’s (2016) four levels of integration of multicultural content.

Teachers’ beliefs varied significantly on the role of cultural backgrounds in children’s play experiences. With the play-based learning mandate in Ontario and many other jurisdictions, kindergarten teachers are required to balance play-based learning with curricular objectives and consider their students’ cultures in the development of play-based activities. While some teachers in this study shared their efforts in developing such activities, some expressed not seeing a role for culture in children’s play. In addition, some teachers who said that children’s cultures influence their play only minimally described implementing CRE in play contexts. The findings of this study suggest that teachers may not all be aware of the research on the embeddedness of culture in children’s play (e.g., Edwards, 2000).

Some teachers (who did not think that culture shapes children’s play) referred to mass media influences to explain why children tend to play in similar ways and with similar toys. Yet the influences of the toy industry may themselves depict a Westernized approach to play that is not reflective of all children’s experiences. Moreover, the materials and characters with which children play may implicitly reinforce cultural stereotypes or even dismiss some cultural groups altogether. It is critical that teachers engage in an ongoing process of self-reflection on their personal views and experiences of play and seek to learn about those of others. Play contexts can themselves provide effective

opportunities for teachers to engage in conversations with children about equity and social justice issues that are core to CRE.

None of the teachers mentioned incorporating Indigenous teachings; they appeared to guide their CRE practices primarily by the cultures represented in their classrooms and did not mention having any students of Indigenous identity. CRE involves not only guiding classroom instruction and content according to students' cultural backgrounds, but also teaching students about diverse perspectives. In all classrooms, the latter may include having conversations about the history, beliefs, and practices of Indigenous peoples. Considering the final report from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), it is important for future research to examine culturally restorative education and the inclusion of Indigenous beliefs and practices in kindergarten (Wood, 2016).

There are some limitations to this study. First, teachers could have been asked specifically about what CRE means to them. A teacher who describes beliefs and practices that align with CRE may not necessarily closely identify with CRE as a pedagogical orientation; this could have implications for the ways in which training or professional development programs are designed to encourage teachers to consider CRE. Second, classroom observations were not conducted, which could have enriched the findings. It is possible that teachers could not think of or describe all their practices in the interviews or described having certain beliefs in their interviews but implemented other practices in their classrooms.

Future research should also examine students' perspectives on CRE. Interviews with students would provide insights into their beliefs on the roles of their cultural backgrounds in school and the effectiveness of CRE according to their classroom experiences. Such research is emerging with older children (Byrd, 2016) and should include kindergarten-aged children as well, using research methods for seeking young children's perspectives (Alaca, Rocca, & Maggi, 2017; Clark & Moss, 2011; Dockett & Perry, 2005; Pyle, 2013). Finally, students may experience multiple cultural identities—gaining their perspectives on the intersections of their cultural identities can help researchers and educators better understand and address the complexities of students' schooling experiences.

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## Appendix A

### Resources Shared by Participating Teachers

#### Instructional Lessons

- A lesson on self-identity through arts and crafts: students created self-portraits and spoke about their differences and that together they form a community.
- A lesson on social justice education: the teacher read books about famous activists and engaged her students in conversations about fair treatment and standing up for justice.
- An intergenerational program: students engaged in interactive activities with adults of 20 to 80 years of age who were rehabilitating from disabling injuries and age-related health conditions.

#### Learning Centres

- A soup kitchen was set up to help students learn about services provided for those in need. Parents sent the teacher recipes of traditional soups that are cooked at home. These recipes were compiled into a recipe book; the class talked about the notion of community.
- A teacher spoke with her students about caring for the environment, which she tied to geometry education. They read *Galimoto* by Karen Lynn Williams, in which the main character makes toys with scrap materials, and discussed how communities in different regions of the world do different things with recyclable materials to create a healthier environment.
- A teacher planned to use music from different cultural traditions to connect with her students. She wanted to invite parents and community members to share their music with students.

#### Materials and Resources

- African drums during circle time
- Book stand in the classroom during different holidays
- Dual-language books for English language learners
- Map displaying the nationality of each student with their names or photos
- Math games from different regions of Africa and Asia
- Multicultural dolls at the drama centre



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