Kindergarten Teachers’ Perspectives on Culturally Responsive Education

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
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Abstract

Researchers and policymakers have been making efforts to build more inclusive Canadian schooling experiences that reflect the diversity of its student bodies. The present study examined kindergarten teachers’ experiences of culturally responsive education. Qualitative interviews were conducted with six kindergarten teachers in the Greater Toronto Area to learn about how they understand and approach cultural diversity in their classrooms and the challenges that they experience. Participating teachers most often referred to ethnicity in relation to students’ cultural backgrounds, and believed that culturally responsive practices have an important place at the kindergarten level. Teachers described implementing practices that are both structured components of the classroom, and spontaneous in that they are unplanned accommodations or instruction. They spoke of challenges relating to their access to resources both within and outside of their schools and establishing strong relationships with school personnel and families.
Acknowledgments

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**Introduction**

A growing research base in Canada and elsewhere indicates and supports the need to integrate students’ diverse cultural backgrounds into their schooling experiences (e.g., Banks, 2014; Dei, James, Karumanchery, James-Wilson, & Zine, 2000; Kanu, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Lopez, 2011a; 2016). Researchers have noted that, despite efforts to make Canadian schooling experiences more inclusive, public education systems continue to reflect White, Western, or Eurocentric interests (e.g., Schick & St. Denis, 2005; Steinbach, 2011). Parhar and Sensoy (2011) explain that because of this White dominance, students who are not White rarely see themselves or their experiences reflected in the curriculum or in their classrooms. This dominance is particularly worrisome given that Canada’s population is only increasing in its diversity. Statistics Canada’s (2011) projections show that, by 2036, immigrants will make up between 24.5 to 30.0 percent of the population, and visible minority groups will make up between 24.7 and 39.9 percent. Nearly one in five Canadians will be a second-generation immigrant. It is projected that Toronto will remain the primary area of residence for immigrants, with more than one in two people in the city being an immigrant or the child of an immigrant. Naturally, with the increase in population diversity comes an increase in the diversity of student bodies.

Teachers are considered powerful agents in ensuring that classroom environments reflect the diversity of their students (Gay, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Researchers have been examining how teachers experience and respond to cultural diversity in their classrooms, and offering ways in which teachers can be more culturally responsive (e.g., Aaronson & Laughter, 2016). Apart from several international studies (e.g., Adair & Fabienne, 2014), surprisingly few studies examine cultural diversity in the early years of schooling, and even fewer examine the perspectives or experiences of early years teachers. This omission is striking considering that
children are already shaped by their home cultures by the time they begin kindergarten, and that their kindergarten experiences have significant implications for their later academic, social, and emotional outcomes (York, 2016). The primary goal of this study is to understand how kindergarten teachers in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) understand and practice culturally responsive education in their classrooms.

Culturally Responsive Education (CRE)

Over the past four decades, there has been a growing movement in educational research that recognizes the importance of reflecting the cultural diversity of student bodies in classroom environments and instruction, and examines how this can be accomplished. Terms such as culturally appropriate (Au & Jordan, 1981), congruent (Au & Kawakami, 1985), relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1994), responsive (Erickson, 1987; Gay, 200), and sensitive (Thomas, 1997) are increasingly widespread in educational literature. Overall, these terminologies hold that classroom teaching:

- should connect in-school learning to out-of-school living; promote educational equity and excellence; create community among individuals from different cultural, social, and ethnic backgrounds; and develop students’ agency, efficacy, and empowerment. (Gay, 2013, p. 49)

Culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000) are two leading frameworks in the movement to reflect cultural diversity in education. The definition of ‘culture’ has shifted from the traditional understanding of its reference to race and ethnicity. The concept of culture now embodies a multi-faceted and complex understanding of individuals, who can belong to multiple cultural groups. For example, the “addressing” model developed by Hays (2001) includes ten dimensions of culture: age, disability (developmental), disability (acquired), religion and spiritual orientation,
ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, Indigenous heritage, national origin, and
gender. However, since culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching
developed in response to the educational disadvantages experienced by Black and other ethnic
minority groups, the literature focuses primarily on the racial and ethnic dimensions of culture;
of course, other dimensions may emerge, as cultural dimensions often intersect. Both
frameworks strongly recognize that the classroom is a space for social justice and change, and
together, emphasize the role of teachers’ pedagogical beliefs and practices.

Ladson-Billings (1994) defines culturally relevant pedagogy as pedagogy that
“empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically using cultural referents
to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 16-17) and that relates to not only individual, but
collective, empowerment. Teachers are challenged to broaden their sociocultural consciousness
(Villegas & Lucas, 2002) and their stances on educational and social inequalities are considered
provides the following three-part framework for culturally relevant pedagogy:

1. Culturally relevant pedagogy focuses on the academic excellence and leadership of
   students. Skilled teachers attend to students’ academic needs “to get students to ‘choose’
   academic excellence” (p. 160).

2. Culturally relevant pedagogy holds that students should maintain cultural integrity while
   achieving academic excellence; teaching practices can encourage this by using culture as
   a driving force for learning.

3. Culturally relevant pedagogy holds that students should develop a critical sociopolitical
   consciousness to challenge social inequalities.

Gay (2010) describes culturally responsive teaching as “using 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 (Gay, 2000). While Gay’s earlier work (1975, 1980) focused more squarely on formal curriculum, her work and the literature on culturally responsive teaching have evolved to focus on the roles of teachers and their instructional practices (Aaronson & Laughter, 2016). She outlines five essential elements of culturally responsive teaching: developing a cultural diversity knowledge base, designing culturally relevant curriculum, demonstrating cultural caring and building a learning community, cross-cultural communications, and cultural congruity in classroom instruction (Gay, 2001).

Dover (2013) combines culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching to identify four main tenets of culturally responsive education (CRE): culturally responsive teachers (1) connect students’ personal and cultural identities to academic skills and concepts, (2) engage in critical reflection about students’ lives and societies, (3) facilitate students’ cultural competence, and (4) engage in criticism of discourses of power (Dover, 2013). Within the Canadian context, scholars have examined ways that pedagogy, teaching, and learning contexts can be more culturally responsive (e.g., Lopez, 2011a). In the present study, I examine kindergarten teachers’ pedagogical beliefs in, and practices of, CRE.

**CRE in K-12 Education**

In this section, I review the existing literature on CRE in K-12 education. First, I review the literature on the impacts of CRE on student outcomes, which I organize by the four tenets described in Dover (2013). Second, I review teachers’ perspectives on CRE and the challenges they have reported experiencing in its implementation.
Student Outcomes

Analyses of academic achievement, course selection, and standardized test data reveal consistent patterns of social inequity, with students of minority ethnic groups and lower socioeconomic status underachieving in many academic outcomes (Aaronson & Laughter, 2016). Numerous studies have examined the positive effects of CRE on student outcomes, including traditional student achievement and other facets of success such as “motivation, empowerment, critical discourse, and agency” (Aaronson & Laughter, 2016, p. 178).

First, making connections between students’ personal lives and the academic content at-hand is an effective means to engage students in the material and improve their achievement (e.g., Christianakis, 2011; Civil & Khan, 2001; Ensign, 2003; Hill, 2012; Lopez, 2011a; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Stovall, 2006). In one classroom, the researcher engaged African American students in their social studies curriculum by using hip-hop lyrics to present social issues (i.e., the song lyrics discussed social issues). Students engaged in journal writing to reflect on the rappers’ intentions and questioned the history they had learned to date in their schooling. Using hip-hop music facilitated connections between the academic content and students’ personal lived experiences and students remained significantly engaged during the project. In another instance, researchers collaborated with a classroom teacher to engage students’ families in math education; students and their families participated in a gardening project for a five-month period to learn about measurement (Civil & Khan, 2001). As part of a research project, a teacher of a grade twelve creative writing course used performance poetry to engage her students in critical literacy learning (Lopez, 2011b). Students read spoken word poetry written by other youth and had conversations about their feelings and experiences in relation to these poems; students then created their own performance poetry based on their personal experiences. Such classroom education projects illustrate that students’ academic
achievement can be improved by tailoring instruction to validate their cultures and lived experiences.

Second, engaging in critical reflection about students’ lives and societal issues can improve their engagement in the subject and their academic performance (e.g., Dimick, 2012; Tate, 1995). For example, in a social justice science lesson, a White male teacher engaged in discussion with his 24 Black high school students about the environmental effects of a polluted river in their neighbourhood. They spent time by the river (e.g., tested water samples) and, based on their perspectives of the issue at hand, developed action projects. Students had the opportunity to express their projects through any means, such as by creating a music video or making a mixtape (Dimick, 2012). One teacher incorporated issues faced by her African American students’ communities to make mathematical learning more relevant to them (Tate, 1995). For example, her students embarked on a goal to close or relocate 13 liquor stores within 1,000 feet of their school. Discovering that the local laws were devised around an economic incentive system, “students reconstructed the incentive system to protect their school community from liquor stores” (Tate, 1995, p. 170).

Third, the classroom can be a space where students can learn about their cultures and the cultures of their peers to develop a sense of pride in their identities (e.g., Choi, 2013; Robbins, 2001). In a grade two classroom, one teacher used freedom songs from the civil rights movement during literacy activities; students shared their family histories and stories to construct narratives about the history of their community (Gorham, 2013). While preparing a recipe, the teacher held up kitchen items and asked her students, “What do you call this at your house?”, thereby honouring their home languages (Gorham, 2013, p. 24). Similarly, one teacher encouraged her students to speak to each other in their native languages and home communication patterns during small group activities (Powell, Cantrell, & Rightmyer, 2013). It
is important that efforts are made to address justice, conflict, and oppression not only across communities, but within communities as well (Brickhouse & Kittleson, 2006; Dimick, 2012). One teacher showed his class a video prepared by students in a neighbouring school, and his students began making fun of “the hair, clothing, accents, and grammar of students in the video” (Dimick, 2012, p. 1003); the students in the class and video were all from similar racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The researcher, who was at the back of the room, heard these comments. She explained that the teacher did not hear them from the front of the room, and thus did not have the opportunity to address the issue. Still, this scenario provided evidence that teachers may experience within-community conflicts in their classrooms, and it is important to develop effective teaching and classroom strategies to address these issues. An important step in the collective empowerment process described by Ladson-Billings (1994) is to break barriers and tensions within communities that have arisen from experiences of oppression and marginalization in society.

Finally, culturally responsive classrooms can critique discourses of power by deconstructing existing knowledge and forming new knowledge (e.g., Epstein, Mayorga, & Nelson, 2011; Martell, 2013). Ladson-Billings (2003) explains that “we continue to tell our students lies about our history, our world views, and our culture” (p. 1) and that the curriculum holds a “discourse of invisibility” that reinforces false beliefs that people of colour were insignificant in the development of the nation’s growth (in her case, the United States). In Canada, the history of Indigenous peoples and colonization have been systematically omitted from public education curricula. There is limited availability of, and access to, Indigenous instructional materials in schools for students, teachers, and parents (Rummens & Dei, 2012). Culturally restorative education practices are only now beginning to emerge, such as those outlined by Wood (2016) for kindergarten classrooms in an Ontario school board. The shift in
curriculum design honours the cultural and traditional experiences of the students within their classrooms, thereby validating and respecting Indigenous ways of being.

**Teachers’ Perspectives**

An emerging body of research describes teachers’ conceptions and beliefs about CRE and the challenges that they experience in its implementation (e.g., Gorham, 2013; Hohensee, 2013; Kanu, 2005; MacPherson, 2010; Meka, 2015; Parhar & Sensoy, 2011; Walden, 2008). Teachers frequently note that CRE facilitates an inclusive classroom culture in which students feel comfortable to share their cultures and experiences (e.g., Meka, 2015; Parhar & Sensoy, 2011; Sarker, 2012). Many teachers add that these classroom environments promote meaningful teacher-student and student-student interactions and empower students beyond the classroom to the outside world (Parhar & Sensory, 2011).

Teachers have described various challenges in translating CRE into practice, including both teaching-related challenges within their own classrooms, and wider systemic challenges in their schools and beyond. The challenges described by teachers are crucial to understand as they offer solutions and ways forward. Some teachers described implementing collaborative learning to be a difficult process since there is a new group of students entering the classroom each year, and each group differs in their prior cross-cultural experiences (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011). Some teachers described challenges with finding the time in the classroom to purposefully integrate CRE. 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, and relationships with colleagues. 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 lesson plans. While the teacher did not mind sharing her plans, she felt that she could no longer be creative with her class and added, “she has way more Hispanics and I have way more African American students in my class” (Gorham, 2013, p. 78). While she envisioned specific lesson plans to best support her students, she felt limited by administrative requests. Another teacher commented on the difficulties of receiving principal support when advocating for more sensitive practices in the classroom to address the needs of ethnically diverse students (MacPherson, 2010). In general, teachers have described finding it challenging to respond to inappropriate conduct by colleagues or superiors. A preservice teacher witnessed a teacher referring to a Black student as “homey” and imitating the student’s walk, but felt uncomfortable approaching the teacher about his misconduct due to their power differences (MacPherson, 2010, p. 280). In conclusion, while many teachers report believing in the principles of CRE, they also experience challenges in its implementation.

Research on teachers’ experiences with CRE has tended to focus on teachers of older school grades, and surprisingly little is known of the experiences of kindergarten teachers. As I will review next, a better understanding of kindergarten teachers’ experiences is important considering the differences in instructional expectations and practices in kindergarten classrooms compared to older school grades.

**CRE in Kindergarten**

Children’s early learning experiences have profound impacts on their development, making their experiences in kindergarten of significant importance (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; O’Connor, Collins, & Supplee, 2012; Pianta, Steinberg, & Rollins, 1995). Children arrive at school each uniquely shaped by their cultural and social backgrounds, and an important aspect of their kindergarten experiences is believed to rest on the provision of an environment that is
culturally, linguistically, and developmentally appropriate. It is also important for kindergarten environments to help children learn from each other’s cultures; children develop knowledge about the world in which they live through their interactions with others, including their peers (Manaster & Jobe, 2012).

Children can recognize racial differences by young infancy (e.g., Bar-Haim, Ziv, Lamy, & Hodes, 2006), sort people by race at three to four years of age (Aboud, 1988; Nesdale, 2001), and begin to apply racial stereotypes at six years of age (Pauker, Ambady, & Apfelbaum, 2010). Young children are also more likely to choose a play partner that is of the same racial or ethnic background (Finkelstein & Haskins, 1983; Girouard, Stack, & O’Neill-Giblert, 2011). While families are indeed critical for the shaping of children’s values, it is also 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). Much research explains that positive communication between individuals of different ethnicities can improve attitudes towards, and relationships with, one another (Cameron & Rutland, 2008; Gaertner et al., 2008). For many children, kindergarten classrooms are one of the first consistent settings in which they develop peer relationships; kindergarten classrooms are ideal contexts in which to foster relationships between children of diverse backgrounds and promote dialogue about differences.

Direct Instruction

One form of implementing CRE in kindergarten is through structured lesson plans on issues relating to cultural diversity and social justice. For example, in an ethnically diverse classroom, Coughran (2012) held 20-minute social studies lessons each week for a period of two months. She found that, by the end of her action research, children were better able to understand the meaning of racism and social injustice. During the lessons, children shared their
personal experiences as immigrants and made connections between the experiences of various prominent individuals whom they were studying (e.g., Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.).

While independent, structured lessons reflect a form of CRE in kindergarten, it is also necessary to incorporate elements of CRE throughout all curricular content (as reviewed in the section CRE in K-12 Education). Lee and Lee (2001) developed a strategy to help teach kindergarten students about the diversity of human populations through geography education. The researchers used multicultural dolls and pictures from the National Geographic Magazine to have conversations with kindergarten children about geographical and human differences, and their significances in local contexts. Lee and Lee’s (2001) research illustrates that developmentally appropriate methods of incorporating CRE in kindergarten are possible; a more commonly recognized developmentally appropriate practice for young children is learning through play.

**Play**

Children’s play is largely influenced by cultural values and perspectives that are found within their homes and surrounding environments (Edwards, 2000). It is important to recognize that culture is embedded within children’s play rather than an add-on to play. Göncü and Gaskin state that “play is a common childhood activity across cultures, but at the same time play typically expresses concerns that are culture specific” (2006, p. 113). In other words, while play may be widely practiced, its manifestations are culturally diverse. For children to become confident and empowered learners, it is important that educators consider how they can assist children in navigating their different worlds (Hennig & Kirova, 2012).

Cultural materials such as books (e.g., depicting cultural celebrations) and props (e.g., diverse play objects) are often present in kindergarten classrooms to help teachers create environments that are more reflective of the diversity among their students (Hennig & Kirova,
While it is important to have cultural materials and props inside classrooms, it is even more important to understand how these materials relate to children’s experiences outside of the classroom and what they represent for them. If classroom materials are not used to promote children’s understandings of diverse cultures, these materials risk being reduced to art displays in the classroom (e.g., MacNevin & Berman, 2017). During play, children create or recreate real-life events that are inevitably influenced by their environments at home and in their communities (Leontiev, 2005). As such, cultural props used during play become part of the reality of children’s activities. For example, Hennig and Kirova (2012) introduced a traditional grinder, used for grinding grain or spices in Somali culture, to a dramatic play centre. During play, a Somali child introduced the actions used to grind grains, and sang a traditional song while doing so. Two weeks later, students from different backgrounds were observed using the grinder in the way they learned from their classmate (Hennig & Kirova, 2012). Using materials that reflect the diversity of the students enriches children’s play activities and empowers children’s social and emotional attitudes as they see their identities reflected in their classrooms.

While the above example speaks to ways in which teachers can facilitate understanding between students in proactive ways, teachers may also need to respond to negative peer interactions and use them as opportunities for classroom learning. Researchers have found that such negative interactions may be overlooked during children’s play, and suggested that teachers and early childhood educators should intentionally observe and analyze children’s behaviours and social interactions (e.g., MacNevin & Berman, 2017; Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2014). For example, Hyun (1998) narrated a story reported by a teacher about a Korean-American four-year-old in her classroom, Eunjoo, who would bow as an expression of thanks. Eunjoo bowed when her teacher handed her a block at the play centre, and when one boy delivered pretend mail to her while she played house. Not understanding the cultural significance of the bowing,
the boy who delivered the pretend mail said to his teacher: “When she received the mail, she bowed again so we laughed. Then she started crying” (Hyun, 1998, p. 26). The teacher took this as an opportunity to have a discussion with her students about Eunjoo’s practice of bowing and what it means to her and her family. After this discussion, children would bow to each other, and to Eunjoo, both during and outside of their play, as an expression of thanks (Hyun, 1998). Eunjoo’s cultural practices were manifested in her play at school, and consequently presented an opportunity for her classmates to learn from her experiences. Furthermore, the teacher acted in a culturally competent manner; she acted as an agent of social change to create a positive learning and play environment for all children. Eunjoo’s unique cultural experience was therefore validated and used to impart knowledge in the classroom.

**Present Study**

The present study sought to better understand kindergarten teachers’ experiences of CRE in their classrooms. Two primary research questions guided the research: (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**

The present study was situated in a school board in the GTA – one of the most diverse cities in Canada and around the globe. In addition, the Ontario Ministry of Education has been making efforts towards developing education strategies that reflect the growing diversity of its student population. For example, the Ministry released an *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* (2009) such that “students see themselves reflected in their curriculum, their physical surroundings, and the broader environment, in which diversity is honoured and all individuals are respected” (p. 4), and a monograph on the significance of culturally relevant pedagogy
which outlines the meaning of culturally responsive practice, the mindset of culturally responsive educators, and strategies for implementing culturally responsive instruction (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). Finally, the Ministry (2010, 2016) implemented a play-based learning curriculum, and kindergarten teachers are required to consider their students’ cultural backgrounds and knowledge in the development of play-based learning activities. While CRE has been formally adopted by the Ministry in its curriculum and policy documents, there is little research or direction on how CRE may be manifested in kindergarten classrooms. Similarly, little is known about kindergarten teachers’ experiences with culturally appropriate practices; considering that teachers are important changemakers in the process, it is important to explore their perspectives and any challenges that they may be experiencing.

**Procedure and Participants**

Approval to conduct this research was received by the University of Toronto’s Research Ethics Board in Social Sciences, Humanities and Education and the participating school board’s External Research Review Committee. Upon approval from both sites, an information letter was sent by e-mail to principals of schools in the participating school board (see Appendix A). Principals who agreed to have teachers at their school participate forwarded the information to their kindergarten teachers. Interested teachers then contacted the primary investigator by e-mail and were asked to sign a consent form prior to participating (see Appendix B).

A total of six kindergarten teachers participated from five schools of the participating school board located in diverse communities in the GTA. All five schools have been identified by the school board for their commitment to inclusiveness and supporting children’s diverse needs. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each teacher at their schools (see Appendix C); interviews ranged from approximately 30 to 60 minutes. The teachers varied in their self-identified demographic backgrounds (see Table 1) and their years of teaching
experiences (see Table 2). All teacher names herein are pseudonyms.

Table 1

*Participant Demographic Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Birthplace</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aretta</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>African</td>
<td>England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanelle</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caribbean</td>
<td>Jamaica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirsten</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Mixed*</td>
<td>Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crystal</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Portuguese</td>
<td>Canada</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* *Acadian, Mi’kmaq, Ukrainian, Italian.*
Table 2

*Participant Teaching Experience*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Total Years</th>
<th>Years Kindergarten</th>
<th>Years International</th>
<th>Other Grades (International)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aretta</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1–4 (10–12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>5–6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanelle</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>(JET)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirsten</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1–11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crystal</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1–2, 4–5, SE, ESL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*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 and analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Patton, 2002). First, each interview was coded using open and axial coding. Open coding was conducted through line-by-line analysis to identify concepts and categories in each individual interview, and axial coding was then conducted to identify relationships and connections between those generated categories. Second, cross-class analysis was used to examine themes common across all interviews and to identify similarities and differences in the perspectives and practices of the six teachers. For example, one teacher mentioned having her students create self-portraits to open dialogue about differences; in open coding, this line was coded as “self-identity”; in axial coding, this category was grouped with others from the same teacher’s interview into a broader “instructional lessons” category. Finally, in cross-class
analysis, teachers’ instructional lessons were compared to identify commonalities and differences in their practices.

**Results**

Teachers most commonly described their classroom compositions and, in effect, their CRE practices, in terms of children’s ethnic backgrounds. Five of the six teachers believed that children’s cultural backgrounds are important to consider in their kindergarten experiences, yet only a few of the teachers implemented CRE practices on a regular basis in their classrooms. Their implementations were categorized into either structured (planned, proactive) or spontaneous (unplanned, reactive) practices. Teachers more commonly referred to incorporating spontaneous rather than structured practices. Several limits or boundaries within which teachers practice CRE emerged. Teachers described similar challenges in implementing CRE practices, which most often related to external influences on the classroom, such as access to resources and relationships with school personnel and families.

**Teachers’ Descriptions of Classroom Cultural Composition**

When asked to describe the cultural composition of their classrooms, all six of the teachers referred to children’s ethnic backgrounds. For example, Brian explained:

> There are students where their parents come from African countries, Caribbean countries, Tibet, Bangladesh, Philippines, a Spanish-speaking country, … Sri Lanka, and Hungary. Tibetan is the largest population. Tibetan and the Philippines in the class right now would be the largest two groups.

While most teachers only referred to ethnicity in defining the cultural makeup of their classrooms, many teachers 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). For example, Greg briefly mentioned that there is “a girl with hearing aids” in his classroom.
However, teachers often only mentioned other markers of culture in passing or in single, isolated occurrences. In addition, when they did mention other markers, teachers mostly referred to their intersectionality with ethnicity (e.g., one teacher referred to ethnic differences in gender norms). As such, while examples from other markers of culture are sometimes referenced, in general, the findings from this study refer to ethnic diversity in classrooms.

**Teachers’ Beliefs on CRE**

All but one teacher reported that CRE is important in kindergarten, referring primarily to developmental and social justice reasons. Crystal shared that 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 importance of considering young children’s home cultures and personal experiences for effectively supporting their learning and identity development (York, 2016). Shanelle held a social justice stance and emphasized that her big push is the acknowledgement of differences instead of erasing them:

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’re the same in some foundational ways; we have a mind, body, and soul … and that’s the unifying factor … but we can’t erase our differences. And it needs to be acknowledged because it affects how we navigate through life every day.

Shanelle’s beliefs touch on the different approaches identified in the literature to addressing race and ethnicity in the early years. Colorblind approaches value sameness and posit that it is best for educators to ignore racial and ethnic differences among students; on the other hand, anti-bias curricula discuss the importance of celebrating diversity, developing positive identities, and counteracting discrimination (Farago, Sanders, & Gaias, 2015).
Table 3

*Teacher References to Markers of Culture*

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<th>Ethnicity</th>
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<th>Gender</th>
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*Note.* The symbol X indicates that the teacher referred to the cultural marker a minimum of one time. Markers are ordered from the most to least referenced (left to right).
The one teacher who did not think cultural considerations to be 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 in general. 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 to them. 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 may also reflect a common misconception that children are too young to recognize differences or understand bias (York, 2016). Solely acceptance-focused perspectives also reflect a limited view of CRE and its tenets; as previously mentioned, CRE also has many other elements, such as building connections between the classroom and children’s experiences outside of school, and empowering students to believe in their abilities to create societal change.

Teachers varied more in their perspectives when asked specifically about the role of culture in children’s play. 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. So, they’ll play superhero kind of themes, everybody knows about 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). In other words,
while superheroes may appear to be “Canadian,” many would argue that they present only a particular worldview.

Teachers often spoke of gender influences in play, varying in the extent to which they related gender to ethnic cultures. For example, Aretta explained that children in her classroom tend to play with same-gender peers and adopt gender-prescribed roles in their play (e.g., girls playing at the house centre). 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.” Aretta’s narrations made salient two points: (1) instead of play being a space to make room for children to explore their cultural identities, Aretta described it as a space to adopt other practices, and (2) even though gender-prescribed play persists in Western contexts of play (Martin, 2011), it was “othered” and associated with the home cultures of students of minority ethnic groups. Greg also focused on gender when asked if children bring their cultures into their ways of play, but did not associate gender with their home practices: “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 quote also illustrates that Greg did not see gender as a form of culture; he later added that gender differences in play were “more general” (e.g., pink or blue) and that he “[did not] see much of it”. 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., Ånggård, 2011; MacNaughton, 2006; Martin, 2011).

**Influences on teachers’ beliefs.** Teachers’ personal experiences appear to shape their beliefs and practices. Teachers referred to their personal identities and experiences as mothers, fathers, and teachers in Canada and other countries, and how these experiences shaped how they
view the role of culture in their classrooms. For example, Brian described himself near the beginning of our interview: “As somebody who has grown up in Toronto, who is aware of his heterosexual Caucasian male privilege, and who’s very interested in that which he is not, I really enjoy asking questions.” Brian was mindful of his cultural identities in relation to those of his students and open about aspects of his classroom about which he may need to seek more information. Teachers often have limited understandings of cultures other than those they identify with, so it is important for them to self-assess their relationships to their students’ cultures (Montgomery, 2001), just as Brian is in the process of doing.

At the same time, teachers also appear to develop narratives and assumptions about different cultures, which may impact on their practice. One teacher stated that “some kids come from a culture where they are very, very, trained that blue is for boys and pink is for girls” (Aretta). As previously mentioned, some teachers’ views appear to “other” some students’ cultures and reflect Eurocentric teaching. In these instances, teachers appear to treat CRE as synonymous with assimilating students to “Canadian” culture. In the following narrative, Brian speaks of cultural differences based on his personal experiences and interpretations:

And the Hungarians tend to be very – their attendance isn’t great, and they tend to be distrustful of authority figures and the school system because that’s their experience back home. So, institutions, they tend to not be so trusting of. For some of them, school just isn’t a priority, it’s not important. And so, they might come in the morning and not in the afternoon. Some might pick them up at lunch and not bring them back. And it’s trying to find the way to sell them on school, and sell them on, you know, if Nathan comes he learns English better, and that’s good for him and it’s good for you. I don’t usually have to sell to Tibetans on school. Usually I have to sell them on listening,
thinking, and remembering, though. Because everything gets done for them at home by many of the parents and the grandparents. They are a little pampered.

While cultures consist of various shared customs, beliefs, and lived experiences, it is important to not overgeneralize these to all individuals who identify with a particular culture. In addition, it is essential to learn about cultural practices from reputable sources and the individuals who themselves identify with the culture; what one thinks they know about a certain culture might not be true. Interestingly, Brian also shared that he has a copy of the Qur’an in his classroom, and discussed the benefits of having prior knowledge about parents’ cultural and religious practices in communicating with them:

Already having some knowledge about Islam from a university course meant that it was a lot easier for me to foster relationships with the parents. Because they didn’t necessarily have to educate me on halal and haram – starting with some knowledge made them a lot more comfortable.

While Brian noted the importance of having accurate knowledge of Islam when speaking with parents of Muslim students, he appears to have relied on isolated experiences and stereotypes in forming his perspectives about his students of Hungarian and Tibetan backgrounds. Teachers may need to deconstruct their existing knowledge and form new knowledge (e.g., Epstein et al., 2011; Martel, 2014) to appropriately implement CRE.

**Teachers’ Implementation of CRE**

When describing the implementation of CRE in their kindergarten classrooms, teachers discussed both structured and spontaneous practices. Structured practices refer to planned instruction enacted by participating teachers; these practices are efforts made by the teachers to incorporate children’s cultural backgrounds into classroom routines. Spontaneous practices refer to unplanned accommodations or instruction that, combined with teachers’ general beliefs
and knowledge, emerge from students’ requests or needs in the classroom. During both structured and spontaneous practices, teachers used materials either with a set objective, or to create a physical environment that was more welcoming for children’s diversity.

**Structured.** Most teachers reported incorporating celebrations from various cultures into their classrooms, though only one of them described doing so in elaborate ways. In addition, only a few teachers described implementing structured practices that were more integrated into the academic year than single-day celebrations.

**Specific days or celebrations.** Five of the six teachers mentioned incorporating cultural and religious celebrations in their classrooms. For example, teachers mentioned singing songs, reading books, or having table displays about different celebrations on their respective days. However, for most of the teachers, it appeared that these practices were brief and isolated occurrences; most of them did not describe their practices in much depth. Shanelle explained the limitations of relying on single-day celebrations for CRE and spoke in detail about further extending her practices:

> 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? You know, 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.

Shanelle’s aim of ensuring that cultural content is meaningful and connected to other classroom curricula reflect an understanding that diversity requires one to think beyond celebrating diversity, to incorporating cultural diversity more holistically. Banks and Banks (2016) discuss the contributions approach, i.e., focusing on celebrations and discrete cultural elements, as the first level in building an integrated curriculum. Shanelle speaks to the limitations of the contributions approach, in that the students learn little or nothing about ethnic groups outside of
the special occasion. In her classroom, she used Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday to spearhead social justice education and discuss key figures in history while also acknowledging the diversity within her classroom:

On Dr. Martin Luther King’s birthday, I read a book about him, Martin’s Big Words … 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.

While King’s birthday celebration is on a single day, Shanelle used it as an opportunity to introduce a theme in her classroom: conversations about individuals who demonstrated strength for different causes (e.g., Malala fighting for female education) at different points in their lives (e.g., Ruby Bridges as a child). A request by two of her students suggests that the classroom responded positively to this discussion:

Two of the girls in particular have decided that they want to plan a party for all of the kindergartens 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)

At the time of our interview, Shanelle had been in the process of preparing the party with her students for the end of the school year. Kindergarten students taking the initiative to celebrate and share their knowledge about these key figures suggests that the discussions were empowering. In addition, the classroom conversations and the students’ request to organize a celebration 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 talked about celebrations being an opportunity to also engage parents in the classroom: “When it was Diwali, we had one of the moms come in and talk to the children about Diwali and hand out treats different things.” Indeed, parental involvement is recognized as an important avenue for implementing culturally responsive practices, and parents can contribute to various aspects of the classroom (e.g., Parhar & Sensoy, 2011).

**Instructional lessons.** Shanelle and Crystal explained having a unit on self-identity at the beginning of the school year to set the stage for discussions about race and ethnicity and human differences. Shanelle begins the school year by introducing her students to the seven core principles of African-centred teaching (Nguzo Saba) created by Maulana Karenga; she designed her classroom in this way to reflect the shared culture of most of her students. She spoke about the principle nia, purpose, which to her means “to come [to school] to learn, to be good friends”. Shanelle added:

> All of our nias 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.

She discusses these ideas with her students during circle time, encouraging them to express both their personal nia and collective classroom nia. Crystal reads books such as *Shades of People* by Sheila M. Kelly and *All The Colours We Are* by Katie Kissinger and Wernher Krutein to start conversations about differences in appearances and cultures. She also described making a self-portrait at the end of every month: “They identify the colour of their skin, they
identify their culture as where they come from, and why their skin is that colour.” Crystal gives
voice to her students to express their identities to one another and to learn about each other’s
differences. Finally, Kirsten asks students to greet each other in their home languages during
attendance at the start of the day. These more structured forms of instruction provide a
foundation for critical discussions throughout the year; children are explicitly introduced to
concepts that can then be embedded in the classroom throughout the school year.

**Spontaneous.** Understandably, 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 described by Banks and Banks (2016). For example,
Kirsten talked about accommodating a Muslim student during a science lesson that involved hot
chocolate and marshmallows:

> 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*. 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 may be a simple request to accommodate, it also suggests that Kirsten was
maintaining ongoing communication with the students’ parents: Kirsten used the Arabic term
*halal*, and the student’s mother felt comfortable approaching Kirsten about her concerns. In
addition, this simple accommodation had a meaningful impact by allowing the student to
actively participate in the science activity.

Aretta spoke about a female student who had recently come from Saudi Arabia and
whose grandfather was the only male she had spent significant time with. Unknowing of this,
the teacher paired the student with a male reading buddy in the classroom. When the female
student expressed much 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 included the male student in the discussion about different cultural experiences. Considering that teachers are continuously learning about different cultures, these examples are illustrative of ways in which teachers can respond to cues from students and parents in implementing CRE.

**Academic instruction.** A characteristic of culturally responsive teachers is to gear their teaching to methods that best suit their students. While the interviews only revealed one example of this in academic instruction, it is a noteworthy example. Crystal discussed a Russian student in her classroom who did not speak any English:

> When it came 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.

This quote illustrates Crystal’s knowledge that a student’s proficiency in their native language is a significant resource for learning a second language (Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008). She used this knowledge to ensure that her student had sufficient literacy skills in Russian, which informed her approach to helping him learn English. Validating students’ native languages also helps to promote a safe and welcoming environment to enhance their learning (Lucas et al., 2008).
Conversations. Several teachers described taking advantage of spontaneous opportunities to have conversations with their students about cultural diversity. Crystal used multicultural foods as a tool to have a conversation with her students about the importance of trying new things. When some students said “this is gross, I don’t want to eat it,” Crystal explained to them that while one may not enjoy all foods, it is important to try things that are unfamiliar, and to not be scared to do so; she also asked students “to explain why they didn’t like it, so they couldn’t just say I don’t like it”. In other words, Crystal used multicultural foods as an opportunity to teach her students about the value of putting oneself in unfamiliar situations to gain new experiences and appreciate each other’s differences. Similarly, she spoke about engaging in “courageous conversations” with her students about current events to critically reflect on how people’s experiences might impact their daily living. For example, she had a conversation with her students on socioeconomic disadvantage in relation to the effects of the Fort McMurray wildfire on housing and employment. Shanelle explained that if she finds a student who is not focused or engaged in the classroom, she prompts them to reflect on their nia. In this way, she spontaneously returns to their lesson on nia, encouraging her students to express their own attitudes and feelings.

Materials. During both structured and spontaneous practices, teachers used materials to showcase their learnings and create physical environments that are more welcoming of children’s diversity. Crystal talked about the importance of having dolls and art materials that reflect the diversity in her classroom, such as having different shades of brown yarn (i.e., for hair) and different coloured googly eyes. Shanelle described having games in her classroom that are both representative of the ethnic makeup of her classroom and played in many different parts of the globe. For example, she teaches her students how to play a mental math game that is often played in regions of Africa with materials such as rocks: “It’s not just magnetic letters
and snap cubes. It’s using materials that we just find anywhere.” Last year, Shanelle had an ECE from the Philippines who brought a similar game into the classroom, noting that children in the Philippines play it as well; Shanelle then added this game to their classroom. Aretta talked about accessing materials outside of the classroom. She explained that her school library has dual language books, such as books in with both English and Arabic text, which she brings into the classroom when a new student who does not speak English joins her class.

**Displays.** Teachers spoke of various displays on classroom walls. Shanelle attached a photo of each book that they read in their classroom on a map to the locations where the books were written, with a string connecting all the books to show that everyone is connected. She also taped “hello” in different languages on the door to welcome her students. Students were also involved in the creation of some displays. Greg had a large map on the classroom wall on which students had indicated their nationalities; students wrote their names on pieces of paper and attached them onto the map. Shanelle had her students respond to the question “What is your nia?” on pieces of paper, which were then posted on the wall beside their cubbies to illustrate diverse perspectives.

**Limits to Teachers’ Implementation of CRE**

Many of the teachers’ reflections on the limits to their implementation of CRE related to their thoughts on age-appropriateness. Kirsten explicitly touched on this point: “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.” While she did see a role of children’s cultural backgrounds in their kindergarten experiences, and made attempts to implement CRE, she struggled to understand the extent of its applicability in kindergarten and what she should or should not implement. Aretta mentioned reading the book *The Tooth* by Avi Slodovnick to her students at the beginning of the school year, but leaving out the last page that indicates that one
of the characters does not own a pillow: “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.” While Aretta recognizes socioeconomic differences among the students in her class (e.g., students using the code “red alert” to indicate they did not have breakfast that morning), she intentionally decided to omit the last page of The Tooth. In other words, teachers made conscious decisions about what is age-appropriate to discuss in their classrooms. 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’ own comfort levels with instructing on a topic in the classroom. For instance, Gay (2010; 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 the age-appropriateness (i.e., developmentally appropriateness) of the ways in which to discuss or instruct about a topic. Teachers differed in their decisions about the topics and extents of conversation that are appropriate at the kindergarten level; as illustrated earlier, Shanelle believed it is both appropriate and essential to discuss social injustices with her students and thus found developmentally appropriate ways to do so.

At times, teachers’ descriptions of their classroom practices appeared to be inconsistent, pointing perhaps to the complexities of CRE. For example, in the following narrative, it is unclear why Aretta responds 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 to tug it, or not touch it. And you know, today I had a student who was wearing a cross. And I didn’t tell the mom to put it in 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, in order for safety, I asked the mom to put it in. These inconsistencies align with previous research that have found internal contradictions in teachers’ practice of CRE, which may sometimes be related to the political climates of the time (e.g., MacNaughton & Hughes, 2007). As mentioned previously, Aretta spoke about a female student who came from Saudi Arabia and whom, after expressing discomfort with a male reading buddy, was paired with a female reading buddy. However, she later described how her students often pick same-gender partners and how 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.”

In other instances, teachers decided to opt out of incorporating certain elements in their classrooms, such as celebrating different holidays. Greg stated:

I made the decision not to do the different celebrations. I don’t know, I thought about whether maybe I should do it. And then I started looking at them all. It’s like we’re doing all of these different celebrations … I don’t know, I just thought it was easier for me not to do it. I copped out on that one.

His decision appears to align with his perspective that CRE is not essential in kindergarten. Some teachers also spoke about the challenges of implementing CRE when they did not feel they had adequate knowledge on a given subject to incorporate it in their instruction or teach it
to their students. Teachers felt that it was more appropriate to not implement a practice if they did not feel ready to do so:

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)

This perspective is consistent with Gay’s (2013) remark that many teachers who do not implement CRE express that they are incompetent in doing so.

**Challenges Experienced by Teachers in Implementing CRE**

Teachers spoke of challenges in accessing resources from both within and outside of the school setting. They shared that while they would like to have strong relationships with school personnel (e.g., other kindergarten teachers, principals) and families to effectively practice CRE, they experience difficulties in establishing stronger connections.

**Access to resources.** Some of the teachers described challenges in finding and accessing appropriate resources for incorporating diverse cultures in their classrooms. Crystal described struggling to find multicultural resources (e.g., play materials) and needing to access specialty stores to purchase items (e.g., different coloured yarn that reflect different hair colours). She also struggled to find 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.

Aretta recounted that, prior to joining her current school, she was teaching at a school 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!” Considering the significant socioeconomic variations between communities in the
GTA (e.g., Hulchanski, 2010), some teachers may have to work harder than others to find resources. 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 individual classrooms. In other words, teachers alluded to contextual influences in their access to resources. Appendix D contains a list of resources and ideas generated through these interviews, which will be shared with the participating school board and schools to help facilitate the sharing of resources between teachers.

All but one of the teachers mentioned attending professional development sessions on CRE within their school, school board, or broader community; the nature of these sessions varied and teachers shared several challenges with them. For example, Greg mentioned attending only one session in his earlier years as a teacher through the school board; its focus was more broad in that the session discussed nurturing acceptance of different cultures within the classroom. Crystal explained that only select teachers are asked to attend such workshops by the school board and, upon return, share what they learned with other teachers; she explained that many teachers do not implement what is shared with them and believed that “if they got the full training, they’d be more comfortable with implementing and delivering more culturally based activities in their classroom.” Shanelle attended sessions through a program outside of the school board that focused on implementing African-centered teaching in day-to-day programming (such as in literacy and math). Only one workshop was mentioned to take place within the school itself; this single-day workshop was held at one of Aretta’s previous schools to inform teachers about the social norms of various cultures to promote cultural sensitivity in their classrooms. Overall, all these professional development sessions appear to be isolated occurrences over single days; there are no follow-up programs “in which participants can test new strategies and evaluate the results” (MacNaughton & Hughes, 2007, p. 200).
**Communication with school personnel and families.** Several teachers expressed experiencing challenges in communicating with others whom they believe are key actors in the implementation of CRE. Brian spoke about his interest in holding school-wide initiatives (e.g., assemblies for Asian and Jewish heritage months) but finding it challenging to get other teachers on board; he says that teachers are either too busy or find it too difficult. In addition, most of the teachers explained that while they recognize that family involvement and communication is necessary, they experience challenges in continuously maintaining those relationships. Brian believed that it is important “to spend more time bringing the children’s families and experiences, their parents or guardians, and grandparents into the mix so that the school is part of the community and the community is part of the school,” but finds it difficult to make time to communicate with parents. He explained that parents are disappointed if he only reaches out to them when he has concerns about their children, and that he tries to take advantage of pick-up and drop-off times in the mornings and afternoons to speak with parents. Kirsten expressed similar sentiments, and wished that there were more opportunities for parents to interact with each other and with teachers without having to rely on teachers to initiate the interactions:

> But on several occasions, 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.

Teachers’ understandings of parent-teacher communication reflect a broader notion of a sense of community that fosters positive relationships and open dialogue.

**Discussion**

There has been limited research on the implementation of CRE in kindergarten classrooms. The present study provides insight into teachers’ perspectives on the role of CRE in
kindergarten, their practices, and the challenges that they experience. Results revealed that most of the participating teachers believed that it is important to address cultural differences and perspectives in their kindergarten classrooms. However, some of the teachers placed limits on their implementations of CRE, due primarily to their perspectives on whether certain conversations are age-appropriate at the kindergarten level.

As previously noted, perspectives on age-appropriateness may be convoluted with teachers’ personal comfort levels with addressing certain topics. As Gay (2010; 2013) explains, teachers may focus only on “safe” topics about cultural diversity; it is important to distinguish between age-appropriateness and personal comfort. The identification of age-appropriate “limits” placed by teachers, as described in this study, is an important step towards helping teachers 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 courageous conversations on the importance of CRE for student achievement and well-being (e.g., Singleton, 2015).

The CRE practices that the teachers described implementing took the form of both 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 also its relative absence in the existing literature on CRE in kindergarten; it may be an important area of further study. Teachers most commonly described incorporating cultural celebrations and responding to explicit and isolated student requests and needs in their classrooms. Shanelle described carrying her structured approaches into spontaneous moments in the classroom; since she had already established knowledge of differences in practices and
perspectives in her classroom, she appeared to be more readily able to raise these concepts in a variety of activities and situations throughout the school year.

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). Some teachers in this study used children’s 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 in this study took additional steps to use books as tools to elicit conversations about diversity and social justice. One teacher even expressed awareness that children may also come from families with primarily oral home literacy practices (Dyson, 2003) and used an African drum while students shared thoughts and stories orally during circle time.

A CRE framework that considers structured and spontaneous practices complements other models described throughout this study. For example, Ladson-Billings’ (1995a) use of culture as a driving force for learning and academic excellence can be both structured (e.g., teaching the classroom games from various cultural areas) or spontaneous (e.g., drawing on a student’s native language to support their English learning). This categorization also complements the four levels of integration of multicultural content outlined by Banks and Banks (2016), in that each of the four levels may comprise both structured and spontaneous practices.

The variability in teachers’ beliefs on the role of children’s cultural backgrounds in their play experiences is noteworthy. With the legislation of play-based learning in Ontario and many other jurisdictions, kindergarten teachers are required to balance play-based learning with curricular mandates and consider their students’ cultural backgrounds and knowledge in the development of play-based learning activities. Yet while some teachers in this study shared their efforts in developing such activities (see Learning Centres in Appendix D), some expressed
not seeing a role for children’s cultural backgrounds in their play experiences. In addition, aside from one teacher, even teachers who did believe that children’s cultures influence their play only minimally described implementing CRE in play contexts. In other words, while researchers have written on the embeddedness of culture within children’s play (Edwards, 2000), the findings of this study suggest that teachers may not be aware or mindful of this.

Some teachers who did not think that culture shapes children’s play referred to mass media influences to explain that children tend to play in similar ways and with similar toys. Yet the influences of the toy industry may themselves depict a certain cultural 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. Critical herein as well may be an ongoing process of self-reflection in which teachers reflect on their personal views and experiences of play and seek to learn about those of others, particularly those of their students. In addition, as a few teachers in this study have shown, play contexts may 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 in their classrooms. The teachers in this study guided their CRE practices primarily by the cultures represented in their classrooms, and none of the teachers mentioned having any students of Indigenous identity when they described the cultural makeup of their classrooms. While CRE includes guiding classroom instruction and content according to the cultural backgrounds of one’s students, it also involves teaching students from diverse perspectives. In the context of this study, the latter aspect may include having conversations about the history of Indigenous peoples in Canada and discussing the beliefs and perspectives of Indigenous peoples about nature. While my aim in this study was to understand teachers’ most salient perspectives and
practices of CRE, I could have perhaps asked teachers specifically about Indigenous education. Considering especially the final report from the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (2015), culturally restorative education (Wood, 2016) and the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives and practices in kindergarten classrooms are important to examine.

There are some limitations to this study. First, while I asked teachers about their perspectives on the roles of culture in kindergarten classrooms, in hindsight, I would have liked to specifically ask teachers 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. How teachers feel about CRE more broadly could have implications for the ways in which training or professional development activities are designed to encourage teachers to consider culture in their classrooms. Second, I did not have the opportunity to include any observational data to enrich my findings. For example, it is possible that teachers described having certain beliefs in their interviews but implemented other practices in their classrooms, or that teachers focused more on certain practices during their interviews but also practiced CRE in different ways in their classrooms.

Future research should also examine students’ perspectives of CRE and its effectiveness. Research in this area is only beginning to emerge with older aged children (e.g., Byrd, 2016) and should include kindergarten aged children as well, especially given the growing literature on research methods for seeking young children’s perspectives (e.g., Dockett & Perry, 2005). Examining children’s perspectives through developmentally appropriate methods would provide insight into their experiences and beliefs about the role of their cultural backgrounds in their schooling experiences, and the effectiveness of CRE practices. Finally, as previously alluded to, children may experience multiple cultural identities; gaining children’s perspectives
on the intersections of their cultural identities can help researchers and educators better understand and address the complexities of children’s experiences in their classrooms.
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Footnotes

1 One notable exception is Brian’s intergenerational program; he mentioned regularly taking his students to engage in interactive activities with adults ranging from their twenties to eighties who are rehabilitating from disabling injuries and age-related health conditions.
Appendix A

Information Letter

My name is Betül Alaca and I am a Master’s candidate in School and Clinical Child Psychology at the University of Toronto. For my Master’s thesis, I am conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Angela Pyle on the role of culture in kindergarten classrooms.

Title of Project: Kindergarten Teachers’ Perspectives on Culturally Responsive Education

What is the purpose of this study?
The objective of this research study is to understand how kindergarten teachers in Ontario approach cultural diversity in their classrooms, and any associated challenges that they experience.

What does participating in this study entail?
I will ask kindergarten teachers to participate in an interview with me to discuss the role of culture in their kindergarten classrooms. The interview would last from 30 to 60 minutes, and can be held at your school or another mutually convenient location. I will ask teachers about their understandings of culture and students’ cultural backgrounds, and how this may play a role in children’s learning and kindergarten experiences. I will ask teachers about the ways in which cultural backgrounds inform aspects of their classrooms, and what challenges they may experience in trying to maintain culturally responsive practices. With their permission, I will audio record the interview.

When will the interview take place?
Interviews will be held from April to May 2016.

What will happen to the information from the interviews?
The audio recordings will only ever be accessed by me or my supervisor. I will transcribe the audio recordings and analyse them for themes. Pseudonyms will be used for teachers and schools in all interview transcripts, data analyses, and research dissemination such as publications, presentations, or other venues.

How will this study contribute to the literature and teaching practice?
Compared to older school grades, there is surprisingly little known about kindergarten teachers’ experiences with culturally appropriate practices in diverse settings. My study will help start conversations about culture and education within the context of early learning environments. Teachers will have access to the findings of my study and may therefore benefit from the experiences of other Ontario teachers.

The study has been approved by both the Research Ethics Office at the University of Toronto and by the [name of school board].

Please e-mail me at betul.alaca@mail.utoronto.ca if you are interested in participating. Please also feel free to contact me if you have any questions about the study.
Title of Project: Kindergarten Teachers’ Perspectives on Culturally Responsive Education

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Betül Alaca at the University of Toronto, under the supervision of Dr. Angela Pyle. The objective of this research study is to understand how kindergarten teachers in Ontario understand and approach cultural diversity in their classrooms and associated challenges that they experience.

I will ask you to participate in a 30- to 60-minute interview to discuss the role of culture in kindergarten classrooms. With your permission, I will audio record this interview.

The data collected from this study will be maintained on a single password-protected laptop and any associated paperwork will be kept in a locked cabinet. The results of this study may be shared in publications, academic conference presentations, and other educational presentations. However, your name and your school’s name will not be shared.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any point. Should you have any questions about the study, please contact Betül Alaca at betul.alaca@mail.utoronto.ca.

The study has been approved by the Research Ethics Boards of the University of Toronto. If you have any questions related to your rights as a participant in this study please contact the Ethics Review Office at the University of Toronto at 416 946 3272 or, ethics.review@utoronto.ca.

Thank you for considering participation in this study.

Agreement to Participate: By signing this consent form you are indicating that you have read this consent form and that you have been given the opportunity to ask questions which have been answered to your satisfaction. By signing the consent form you are indicating that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

__________________________________________  ________________  ______________________
Name of Participant          Participant Signature          Date
Appendix C

Interview Questions

Biographical Information
- Educational background
- Years of teaching experience
- Years teaching kindergarten
- Prior teaching experiences

What is the cultural makeup of your classroom?

What is the role of children’s cultural backgrounds in their kindergarten experiences?
- Prompt: Can you give me an example of that?

In what ways do your students’ cultural backgrounds inform aspects of your classroom?
- Prompt: Can you give me an example of that?
- (Instructional material, play material, class content)

How have your experiences with culture in the classroom changed (if at all) with the implementation of play-based learning?
- Prompt: Can you give me an example of that?

Does your school offer training or professional development opportunities on culturally responsive practices?
- Prompt: School board? Other (i.e., outside of the school board)?
- Prompt: Have you personally participated in such training? Why or why not?

What challenges, if any, did you experience in your attempts to adopt or to maintain culturally responsive practices in your classroom?
- Prompt: Can you give me some examples?
Appendix D

List of Resources Shared by Participating Teachers

Literature
- *All the Colours We Are* by Katie Kissinger
- *Shades of People* by Sheila M. Kelley
- *The Tooth* by Avi Slodovnick

Instructional Lessons
- A teacher had a lesson on self-identity through arts and crafts. Each student created a self-portrait and they spoke about their differences that make them who they are and that together they form a community.
- A teacher had a lesson on social justice education by drawing from literature on key figures (e.g., Martin Luther King Jr., Malala, Ruby Bridges). The teacher and her students had conversations about fair treatment and standing up for what is right.
- A teacher held an intergenerational program. He took his students to engage in interactive activities with adults ranging from their twenties to eighties who are rehabilitating from disabling injuries and age-related health conditions.

Learning Centres
- A soup kitchen was set up in the classroom to help students learn about services provided for those in need. Parents and families sent the teacher recipes of traditional soups that they make at home. These recipes were compiled into a recipe book, and the teacher and students talked about the notion of community.
- A teacher spent time with her students talking about caring for the environment. She read *Galimoto* by Karen Lynn Williams with her students, in which the main character makes toys with scrap materials; she talked about how people from different regions of the world do different things with recyclable materials to create a healthier environment, and tied their discussions to geometry education.
- A teacher plans to use song and music from different cultural traditions to connect with her students and build a sense of community. She would like parents and community members to come into the classroom and share their music with students.

Materials and Resources
- African drums used during circle time.
- Book stand in the classroom during different holidays.
- Coloured yarn, googly eyes, and pencil crayons for self-portraits.
- 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.