Article

'Why Are the White Kids Clean and the Brown Kids Still Dirty?': Parental Encounters with Racial Discrimination in Early Childhood Services

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Abstract: In Australia, the Early Years Learning Framework sets out a vision for all children to experience belonging, wellbeing, confidence, and a sense of identity. This article forefronts the voices of parents with refugee experience, through focus groups and interviews, to explore why they removed their children from early childhood education and care (ECEC) services. Supplemented by interviews with early childhood practitioners and researcher experience, constructivist grounded theory overlaid with critical race theory provided a lens through which to scrutinize the way racism implicitly impacts structural practices within ECEC environments. The overarching message was that everything is framed within the parameters of the dominant culture, which was taken for granted by educators, who are predominantly White and middle class. Parents withdrew their children because they perceived care to be culturally unsafe and unsuitable and because cultural and linguistic support was rarely available. Of concern were the smothering effects of assimilation and the imposition of a foreign culture which unsettled family life. Compromised identity and the nullification of cultural and linguistic heritage left children with little or no sense of belonging.

Keywords: early childhood education; refugee families; racism; cultural identity; cultural safety; cultural competence; belonging

1. Introduction

1.1. Children's Right to Access High Quality ECEC

All parents have the right to expect that their child's physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual safety is afforded the highest priority and that their values, cultural practices, and traditions are upheld in early childhood education and care (ECEC) services (UNICEF 1996). The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (V2.0) (EYLF) sets out a vision for all children to experience belonging, wellbeing, confidence, and a sense of identity, underpinned by principles such as respect for diversity; equity; inclusion; high expectations; critical reflection; and ongoing professional training (Australian Government Department of Education [AGDE] 2022). The National Quality Framework (NQF), underscored by the principles of equity, inclusion, and diversity, "recognises all children's capacity and right to succeed regardless of diverse circumstances, cultural background and abilities" (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA] 2024, p. 10). At the state level, the Queensland Multicultural Policy commits to equitable access by "supporting education systems that people of all cultural backgrounds can benefit from—from early childhood education and care through to every stage of learning and skilling" (Department

of Families, Seniors, Disability Services and Child Safety 2024, p. 6). This means that refugee families also have the right to inclusive institutional policies, and that practice should be non-discriminatory and match institutional policy.

High-quality universal ECEC programs enhance children's cognitive, social, and language skills (Camilli et al. 2010); lay the foundations for long-term health, educational, and employment outcomes (Heckman 2011); reduce the likelihood of developmental vulnerabilities; and prepare children for a successful transition to school, thus affording a powerful means of transcending disadvantage (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development 2017). In Australia, high-quality education is delivered through kindergarten, also known as preschool, which is a structured, play-based educational program provided by a four-year qualified teacher for approximately 600 h in the year before formal schooling commences.

1.2. Context and Purpose of This Research

A refugee is a person who has been forced to flee conflict or persecution, has crossed an international border to seek safety, and cannot return to their country without risking their life or freedoms (UNHCR 2024b). 'Refugee' is a legal term that carries with it certain protections and entitlements (UNHCR 2024b). Due to increased global conflict, violence, and human rights violations, as of 30 June 2024, there were 122.6 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, nearly half of whom were children (UNHCR 2024a). Over the past decade, guided by the Australian Government's Regional Dispersal Policies, Queensland has experienced an increased intake of refugee and humanitarian entrants. However, the state and its educational institutions were underprepared, resulting in children from refugee backgrounds missing out on ECEC.

Young children from refugee backgrounds are one of the most developmentally vulnerable groups in Australia if their parents do not speak English (Australian Government Department of Education and Training 2016; Australian Government Department of Education [AGDE] 2024). If children who are vulnerable are unable to avail high-quality ECEC, then the benefits, including positive social identity formation, may be threatened, potentially leading to lifelong negative trajectories. Structural marginalization, activated by racial discrimination, can cause children to develop complex identities, alienation, and ambivalent attachment to the nation state to the point where they may eventually become resistant to it (Banks 2017).

Young children from refugee backgrounds are afforded a safe, secure, and stabilizing environment through participation in high-quality ECEC environments (Signorelli et al. 2015, 2017). However, ECEC service utilization by refugee families is low in all Australian states and territories (Allen Consulting Group 2011; Baxter and Hand 2013; Hopkins et al. 2017; Krakouer et al. 2017). When this research was conducted, children of non-English speaking background (NESB) comprised 20% of the preschool-eligible population in Australia, but only 12.1% attended kindergarten, dipping to 9% in Queensland (Australian Government Productivity Commission 2017), and participation has remained low. Data collection undertaken by ECEC services in Queensland is not required to differentiate between migrants and refugees; hence, the percentage of refugees enrolled in ECEC programs is unknown. Reasons for non-engagement by refugee families have been difficult to determine (Baxter and Hand 2013; Krakouer et al. 2017).

The impact of racial discrimination as a participatory barrier to ECEC is noted in the international literature (Hyder 2005; Rutter 2006), but early childhood research in Australia has largely remained silent about racism (Sims 2014). The author found that refugee families experience limited participation in ECEC services, with key areas of exclusion being the high cost of childcare; limited language rights, including a lack of accurate

information in culturally and linguistically appropriate formats and a lack of interpreters; gendered adult English tuition (limiting childcare options); cultural variance between home and early childhood settings; the impacts of refugee-related trauma; and ethno-cultural discrimination (Lamb 2020). The outworkings of ethno-cultural discrimination amounted to structural racism, which included refugees being placed on waiting lists indefinitely, receiving false information about eligibility criteria, and the denial of access on religious grounds (Lamb 2024).

This article explores encounters between refugee parents and ECEC service providers to discover why some parents chose to remove their children after overcoming multiple enrolment hurdles and why others reluctantly conformed so their children could be educated. The discussion focuses on ways that the ECEC system could be reformed to create welcoming, equitable, inclusive, and socially cohesive environments for refugee families, promoting acceptance, participation, and belonging.

2. Methods

From 2015 to 2019, I undertook a comprehensive qualitative study to explore barriers and enablers to ECEC participation for refugee families with children under six living in the three geographical areas in Queensland (with the highest proportion of refugees).

2.1. Research Questions

The overarching research questions were as follows:

1. What are the barriers and enablers to access and participation in ECEC services for families with refugee experience living in Queensland?
2. What strategies do early childhood practitioners (ECPs) and family support workers (FSWs) implement to include children from refugee backgrounds?
3. How well do these strategies work to facilitate participation?

2.2. Data Sampling, Selection, Recruitment, and Design

Fifty-five participants were recruited from seven community-based agencies delivering a state government initiative to increase kindergarten participation for migrant and refugee children. Of the 55 participants, 52 were women and 3 were men; 29 were recruited as parents; and 26 were ECPs, comprising FSWs, bilingual cultural support workers (CSWs), teacher/directors, teacher/educators, and service managers.

Participants were purposively sampled under one or more criterion:

(a) a refugee parent/caregiver with a child under six;
(b) an ECP assisting refugee families to access ECEC;
(c) a degree- or diploma-qualified early childhood educator working with refugee families.

ECPs were selected based on paid employment in a participating agency, and parents were selected because they were clients of a participating agency.

In line with the Human Research Ethics Committee protocol, I announced intent to conduct this research in a Stakeholder Working Group to which all participating agencies belonged. Senior Managers were provided with the ethically approved information package (including research protocols, consent forms, and the revocation of consent forms) and an invitation to select the team members to be interviewed based on the above criteria. Seven agencies consented in writing, then sent information directly to eligible staff, who, if interested in the study, contacted me directly.

Participating agencies were also provided with the opportunity to recruit parents, and two agreed to do so. The recruitment of parents occurred as follows: I sent the parent information package to Senior Managers who forwarded it to relevant ECPs. If they were

interested in recruiting parents, they received in-depth briefings regarding the research purpose and parental selection criteria. Parents were informed about the research by those ECPs and were invited to participate on a voluntary basis. Parents who wished to participate but did not have a functional level of English were enabled to communicate through a bilingual worker.

All literate participants, including all ECP's, provided written consent, but participants from strong oral traditions with limited literacy in English and their first language/s required the purpose and process of the research to be interpreted verbally by a trusted bilingual worker, and oral permission recorded, as pre-approved by the UNE Ethics Committee. All logistics were determined by participating agencies.

This study was designed to occur in three stages:

(a)   ECP in-depth interviews (CSWs, FSWs, and managers);
(b)   Parent focus groups (with further ethics approval granted to conduct parent interviews); and
(c)   Educator in-depth interviews.

Additional data included observations recorded in field notes, a research journal, child paintings, and agency reports.

2.3. Participant Characteristics

Thirty-eight participants had refugee or refugee-like experience, which included all twenty-nine parents, in addition to nine ECPs. Of the 38 refugee participants, 25 were born in Africa, specifically South Sudan, Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Nubia, and Congo. Other refugee participants were from Iran, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Türkiye, and Vietnam. Collectively, this group spoke 42 languages other than English, with many participants speaking multiple languages fluently.

Of the 29 parents sampled, more than 65 per cent had intermediate proficiency in spoken English and potentially much lower levels for literacy, given the level of difficulty encountered filling in forms. More than 70 per cent had lived in Australia for over five years and were either Citizens or Permanent Residents. Over half the parents had received only a rudimentary education due to long periods in refugee camps. In contrast, more than 17 per cent had university degrees. Mothers engaged in this research had predominantly been enabled to enroll in their children in ECEC services whilst studying English because they could access the free childcare subsidy.

Represented within the ECP profiles are two kindergarten directors, one coordinator of a family day care service, two coordinators of family support services, four senior service managers, and four adult educators who provided professional development to ECEC educators. Fifteen participants had experience as kindergarten directors and/or ECEC/primary school teachers, but most were now working in other roles within the sector.

Of the nine ECPs with refugee experience, 78 per cent had attained a university qualification, mostly since arriving in Australia, with the other 22 per cent having achieved a vocational qualification.

2.4. Participants Sampled for This Paper

Participants sampled for this paper were a subset of 28 participants, comprising 17 refugee mothers and 11 ECPs, drawn from the larger dataset described above. ECPs were interviewed, and parents participated in a focus group, with some additionally interviewed. Two of the ECPs with refugee experience also discussed their own experience as parents accessing ECEC services. Of the ten ECPs, roles included Diversity Advisor, Team Leader,

Inclusion Facilitator, Program Coordinator, Community Support Worker, Community Leader, Family Support Worker, Bicultural Support Worker, and a Kindergarten Teacher.

Participant quotations were transcribed in the vernacular to convey authentic voice. As such, they contain language use and word order that may sound unusual to a native English speaker. All names are pseudonyms to protect participant identity. Due to the small sample size, I refer to a participant as being from a continent, such as Africa, or a region, such as the Middle East. For ease of reference, I refer to participants as either a parent or an ECP and explain when a participant fits into both categories for the purpose of reporting on the findings.

The research sub-questions explored in this article are, for parents, 'Tell me about your experience accessing ECEC programs in Australia?' and, for ECPs, 'What barriers do families with refugee experience have in accessing ECEC?'

2.5. Data Analysis

This research was conducted within a critical/interpretive paradigm. Constructivist grounded theory (CGT) was selected as a methodology because it provides a good fit for social justice research (Charmaz et al. 2018); a step-by-step guide for the collection and analysis of data; and a theoretical platform for pursuing emergent ideas, which are used to construct theory (Charmaz 2014). In grounded theory methodology, researchers develop theories through inductive interaction with data rather than deductive methods involving the development and testing of a hypothesis, enabling openness to the discovery of new concepts (Charmaz 2014). In CGT, the researcher is not an objective observer, but forms part of the world under investigation and enables theory to be co-constructed between the researcher and participants. This methodological approach enabled me to work in the field and simultaneously conduct research.

In analyzing the data, each piece of evidence was collected, transcribed, and collated in a fit-for purpose NVivo database. It was then coded into pre-existing and emergent themes. Codes were grounded in the data and compared to one another in an iterative manner, then triangulated with data from other sources to inform subsequent data collection. This process of 'constant comparison' is integral to grounded theory methodology because it is the first analytical step that grounds theory formation in the data. As such, it serves to verify the link between data and theory, thus increasing the transparency of analysis and the reliability of findings (Charmaz 2014).

"In an Informed GT approach, the researcher takes advantage of pre-existing theories and research findings in a substantive field in a sensitive, creative and flexible way" (Thornberg 2012, p. 255). This acknowledges multiple perspectives and realities and the incorporation of prior knowledge and theoretical preconceptions, all of which are subjected to rigorous scrutiny (Charmaz 2017). In this research, CGT enabled a multistage nonlinear approach to data analysis which involved incorporating literature into the data analysis to generate meaning and plausible theory. This means that the findings do not look the same as those in many scientific papers because participant narrative was used to document and legitimize the experience of refugees, who are more commonly defined by negation, illegality, or invisibility (Pulitano 2013), and research from relevant fields was used to make sense of and legitimize lived experience and to construct theory.

To ensure the evidence presented was valid, reliable, credible, and trustworthy, I employed measures recommended by Brantlinger et al. (2005), which included the triangulation of data, disconfirming evidence, researcher reflexivity, member checking, audit trail, prolonged field engagement, thick detailed description, and peer debriefing.

2.6. Researcher Positioning

Researchers cannot be free from social positions, access to resources, gendered experiences, or political views (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002). I am a non-Indigenous, White, Anglo-Australian with no experience as a refugee. I have worked with refugees for more than 25 years, founding and facilitating programs and services to promote equitable participation in ECEC, schools, and family support services. Coinciding with the initial 18 months of this research, I managed a state-wide program supporting practitioners in the early childhood sector to increase kindergarten participation for families from refugee and migrant backgrounds. During that time, I led a team to deliver professional development to increase cultural capability within the sector, a role which involved no direct contact with families.

I began this research with 'insider status' because I led a program that privileged my access to a large group of practitioners in a variety of roles over multiple sites. I was able to gain a holistic view of the nature of my research topic through the direct observation of participatory barriers and enablers. Being an 'insider' is generally helpful and affects the way people respond to questions (Morris 2015). Primarily, I understood the politics, the precarious nature of funding programs for marginalized peoples, and the impact of the refugee experience. Thus, I was accorded some degree of what Robson and McCartan (2016, p. 399) term "street credibility", which was evidenced by being granted access to agency staff and clients.

My position as a researcher undertaking cross-cultural research is that refugees have the right to be heard (Correa-Velez and Gifford 2007; Zion et al. 2010) and to have influence over the formulation of policy and practices that impact their lives. Refugees are considered to be a vulnerable population within a research context (Block et al. 2013; Hugman et al. 2011; Pittaway et al. 2010), but they also have autonomy, agency, responsibility, and resilience (Halilovich 2013; McDowell 2013), and should be respected as such (Gifford 2013). Pittaway et al. (2010, p. 231) state that the ethical challenge is "for researchers to add value to the lives of people they are researching, recognizing them as subjects in the process, not simply as sources of data". In conducting ethical research, I carefully considered the potential vulnerability of all research participants, particularly the vulnerability of former refugees. I was mindful of power differentials and unequal relationships and employed an 'ethic of care' as recommended by Marzano (2014). I did this by working with participants respectfully, honestly, and confidentially, by caring about participant welfare, and by supporting refugee-related causes. The driving factor was, ultimately, to ensure the integrity of the research to assist refugee families to settle successfully into ECEC services in Australia. I chose not to interview asylum seekers at all, so as not to prejudice their visa determination status.

2.7. Critical Race Theory (CRT)

At no point did I ask participants about their experiences of racism, nor did I use the word. All responses were unsolicited and largely unexpected. Forty-eight out of fifty-five participants, twenty-five of whom were from Africa, said that skin tone, cultural differences, and religion contributed to their exclusion. They informed me that discrimination and or culturally insensitive practice was a major reason for parental discontent with ECEC services. The centrality afforded to the lived experience of racism revealed by participants is powerful and confronting. Parents like Sanaya, for example, who asked the question which forms the title of this article, perceived that the care given to her 'Brown' children was inferior to the care given to their 'White' counterparts and consequently removed her children from harm.

In order to make sense of much unsolicited data, I searched for an explanatory paradigm. Critical theory seeks to identify and explain the structural sources that lead to the oppression of marginalized groups (Allan et al. 2003) by locating the root causes of oppression and inequality within the realms of class, gender, and race (McDonald 2006). CRT became central to my analysis because it provided a lens through which "to theorize, examine and challenge the ways race and racism implicitly impact on social structures, practices and discourses" (Yosso 2005, p. 70). Emanating from the legal scholarship movement in the USA, CRT opposes inequality based on race and racism and was introduced to the field of education in the mid-nineteen nineties by Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate (Gillborn and Ladson-Billings 2010).

Racism can be defined as organized systems within societies that cause avoidable and unfair inequalities in power, resources, capacities, and opportunities across racial or ethnic groups, manifesting through beliefs, stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination; and racism can encompass everything from open threats and insults to phenomena deeply embedded in social systems and structures (Paradies et al. 2015). Racism occurs despite the fact that there is no meaningful biological basis to define the human 'race', but only socially constructed and reinforced categories, subject to change over time and across societal boundaries (Delgado and Stefancic 2012). Ladson-Billings (2000) explained that systemic or institutional racism shapes the epistemological basis of institutions, in so far as to define whose knowledge counts and whose knowledge does not.

Early childhood environments are not neutral spaces. Robinson and Jones Diaz (2016) argue that exclusionary practices are based on race and ethnicity interacting with gender and class and that diversity and difference are seen to undermine Western values, leading to the creation of a cultural binary opposition of 'us' and 'them', perpetrating fear of the 'other'. Building upon Yosso's (2005) application of CRT, which expands its focus in education from a traditional Black/White binary towards increasingly nuanced race-related oppression, I explored multiple layers of subordination experienced by refugees in Australian ECEC settings. The main principles of CRT that underscore my analysis are the inter-centricity of race and racism; challenging the dominant ideology of White privilege; a commitment to social justice; the centrality of experiential knowledge and storytelling; and the use of intersectionality, that is, the intersecting roles of race, class, and gender to analyze race and racism (Delgado and Stefancic 2012; Gillborn 2015; Yosso 2005).

CRT theorists explain the invisible package of unearned assets known as 'White privilege' that occasion a multitude of unrecognized advantages that "shape the world in the interests of White people" (Gillborn 2008b, p. 35). White privileges, as expounded by McIntosh (2011), are seemingly everyday entitlements such as acceptance in a new neighborhood, shopping without harassment, finding protective environments for children, the ability to offer individual opinions that are not generalized to one's race, and the list continues almost exponentially.

In the Australian context, Whiteness is perpetuated by the creation of a myth that Anglo-Australians are 'normal,' and all other Australians are different and deficient (Robinson and Jones Diaz 2016). Pini and Bhopal (2017) found that in rural areas, race has been described as an 'absent presence', with non-Whites constructed as 'the other', and Whiteness remaining largely unchallenged. For people who identify as White, normative self-positioning may include perceptions of being cultureless, raceless, post-racial, or post-cultural, that is, having exceeded the boundaries of culture in an increasingly globalized world; and further perceptions may include the belief that only 'people of color' have 'culture', thus, perpetuating the invisibility of Whiteness (Walton et al. 2018). Refugees do not form a homogenous group, and as such, it is argued, some experience more or less racial discrimination and negative stereotyping than others, depending upon various

proximities to the dominant group in the mainstream population (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2007; Sulaiman-Hill et al. 2011).

3. Findings

As a professional working in the early childhood sector to facilitate professional development, I routinely asked educators what was important to them about Australian culture. Apart from multiple references to beach and barbeques, the clear majority responded that Australians were 'fair' and 'treated everyone the same'. Berman and Paradies (2010) make the point that equality is not the same as equity, and, therefore, equality is not always fair. This explanation was born out in my research data because all 38 participants with refugee experience unanimously revealed that their own children, and other children in their cultural communities, were singled out as different and treated unfairly, and the majority of ECPs, who did not have refugee experience, concurred.

The word 'culture' was frequently used by refugee participants as a euphemism for racism. It is generally considered impolite to mention racism in mainstream Australian society. Vandenbroeck et al. (2011) explained that old discourses on race have simply been replaced by new discourses on culture.

In Lamb (2024), I outlined the exclusionary practices employed by ECEC services which included disqualifying children of color from enrolment by pretending there were no vacancies, by incorrectly stating that overseas-born children were ineligible for kindergarten, that long waiting lists existed (with refugees never surfacing to the top), and that Muslims were not always welcome.

The reasons provided for consequently withdrawing children fell into three main categories: 1. Their circumstances changed, which generally meant that they could not afford early childhood education; 2. Families moved away from the region to look for work or to join friends and family (secondary migration); and 3. Parents were unable to resolve conflict with staff in ECEC services and chose to care for children at home. I will focus on the third category in unpacking these findings.

3.1. Busting the Myth About Refugees Not Valuing Early Childhood Education

A myth propagated by educators that I observed whilst facilitating training pertains to the perceived low value placed on education by refugee parents. I was able to examine this assumption as a researcher. A particularly prevalent construction of this myth, in both the literature and amongst some ECPs, is the "cultural barrier [relating to] parental attitudes and beliefs, such as [non-English speaking background] parents preferring to have young children at home" (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2015, p. 21). Whilst this may be true for some families, I found that most parents in this study wanted to gain employment to lift their families out of poverty, and they were actively seeking safe, affordable, and 'culturally credible' ECEC. Furthermore, I was informed by three bilingual African-Australian ECPs that many mothers from African communities would have engaged in food production or other employment in their counties of origin, and their children were cared for collectively by relatives and friends; so, parents did not hold 'cultural' beliefs about being sole carers for their children.

I found that parents with refugee experience held the same high hopes and educational aspirations for their children as all Australian parents, and possibly more so, because they understood the meaning of loss and of renewed opportunity. When parents learned about the educational component of kindergarten, they often elevated this above the care component, which could be provided by family and community. Bettina, an ECP/Kindergarten Teacher, explained in her interview that when refugee families were appropriately supported to access kindergarten, they settled in very well (Lamb 2020). Garang, an ECP/FSW

and former refugee from Africa, explained that people in his community generally accorded teachers as people with elevated status and "as the mentor person for their life".

Disturbingly, most parents in this study unanimously and simultaneously expressed minimal trust in ECEC services. In exploring their main sources of distress, they discussed racial discrimination, a lack of cultural safety, a lack of respect for parents by educators, concerns about quality of care, a fear of state intervention, children losing their cultural identity, and the enforcement of dominant cultural values that were not made explicit by educators or were not well understood by parents.

3.2. "Why Are the White Kids Clean and the Brown Kids Still Dirty?": Parental Perceptions of Race-Based Exclusionary Practices

The overwhelming majority of African-Australian children and mothers I observed when conducting this research were immaculately dressed, whether they chose to wear traditional or Western garments. My understanding is that they expected their children's educators to have the same high standards of cleanliness they exhibited.

To illustrate that racial discrimination is a daily reality for families participating in ECEC services, I report a narrative that Sanaya, an African-Australian mother, shared in a focus group. Sanaya named an ECEC service where two of her children were enrolled while she was studying English at a nearby college. She said most of the children in attendance were 'White', and she believed that her children were treated differently and in an inferior manner because they were 'Brown'. Sanaya explained that each afternoon when she collected her children, she noticed that they, along with other African children, were crying. Sanaya said the 'Brown' children were always in a filthy condition in the afternoon, whilst the 'White' children had been 'cleaned' in preparation for their parents' arrival and that the 'Brown' children were physically separated from their 'White' peers. She thought that one reason for the enforced isolation was because the food in their lunch boxes was different. The 'regime of food conformity' was outlined in Lamb (2020).

Sanaya, an assertive parent, despite English not being her first or second language, was brave enough to vocalize her concerns to staff, hopeful of improving conditions for all children attending the service. She explained that

> *"When I saw the other kids cry, and all their faces sad, I asked them [the educators], "Why do you let those kids cry like that? You need to look after them and clean them. Don't leave them like that… Why are the White kids clean and the Brown kids still dirty? Something is not right here. You need to fix it"* (Sanaya, Parent).

The educators allegedly responded "Oh, there are too many kids, and we can't look after them all". Sanaya said "No, this is your job. You must do it. If you do not have enough teachers here, then you need to bring more teachers to look after the kids". After further complaints and no action, she became quite angry and her relationship with her child's educators deteriorated. The next response she received was that she was complaining too much, to which she appealed to the educators' duty of care by saying "You need to show the kids your respect and your love, otherwise the kids are going to cry. But if you push the kids away and you don't show them respect, the kids are going to be scared of you".

Sanaya perceived that the educators did not respect the 'Brown' children, and even though the staff agreed to her requests, their actions did not change. Whilst recounting her story, Sanaya became visibly upset and angry. I asked if she removed her children and she said "yeah, I took them away", and she continued to tell me about her angry conversational exchange with the educators, ending with, "no, I can't respect your sorry . . . and I walked off. The childcare is not good".

Continual worry about the inferior treatment of her children based on their skin tone caused Sanaya to withdraw from her English course and remain at home to care for her

children. As she continued her story, she repeated the same facts and built her case to emphasize her distrust of ECEC services in general, which she used to warn other mothers in the focus group. At this point, three other African-Australian mothers, Haniya, Talia, and Mumtaz, who had received similar treatment in different ECEC services, nodded in agreement and echoed "the childcare is not good". Sanaya finished with an appeal for equity within the ECEC sector by saying "All the kids are the same. It doesn't matter what colour they are".

Despite Sanaya's plea that all children are the same and that skin color does not matter, the racialized ideology that is inherent in Australia, flowing from the establishment of the White Australia Policy in 1901, designed to limit non-British migration, suggests that skin color and 'Whiteness' matter very much.

3.3. "It's About How They Welcome You": Disrespect Shown to Parents

In the same focus group, mothers discussed the quality of care that they perceived their children were likely to receive if they attended, or remained in, certain ECEC services. Amer, an African-Australian mother, when searching for the best service for her child, assessed the quality of care according to the way in which she was personally welcomed. She said

"So, it's because sometimes people are bad. It's about how they welcome you. You know, if these people are not okay, you would not be happy for your kids to be there. How you see them is maybe how they treat the kids!" (Amer, Parent).

Alek, an African-Australian mother, said

". . .and the staff, I didn't like the staff . . . like quick, quick, quick, [she felt hurried], *and then I asked them, can you show me the place where my kids are going to be?", but they didn't take me around . . . I didn't want to be angry with them every single week, so I just moved her to another childcare [centre]"* (Alek, Parent).

These comments were insightful because people who are not native speakers of a dominant language are forced to make decisions based on body language and observations of the actions of others. So, for Amer, it was quite clear. If an educator did not welcome her, she refused to leave her children in their care because she feared for their safety in her absence. Mothers said they were afraid that their children would be abused, both in a physical sense due to the alleged bullying and fighting amongst the children and because they thought their children were frequently viewed by staff as inferior to their 'White' peers. Parents not only feared for the care of their children, but often felt disrespected and ignored when they approached educators about their concerns.

Mary, an ECP/FSW with extensive experience assisting refugees access early childhood services and a qualified teacher, provided an explanation in her interview:

"Sometimes they [parents] are just not comfortable with the people there, or the atmosphere. But mostly it's just how they feel about the place and the staff . . . It's definitely the attitude of the staff . . . how they're greeted, and how welcome they're made feel" (Mary, ECP).

Other ECPs mentioned in numerous interviews that it is customary for ECEC services to lock parents out in the morning only to let them in at prescribed times to pick up their children. Over the years, I have personally witnessed mothers standing outside in the heat or the cold when they could have been invited inside and engaged in their child's learning. These mothers could have become a valuable and valued resource for their child's ECEC service. Their knowledge of language, cultural practices, and their reassuring presence would have provided the continuity between home and school culture that their children so desperately needed (Whitmarsh 2011).

Parents who believed their children did not receive equitable treatment in ECEC services said they hid outside and sneaked looks through windows to see how their children were treated in their absence. They were often unimpressed. For example, Maryam, a mother from a middle eastern country who had been in an Australian Immigration Detention Centre (IDC), disclosed in an interview that since attending childcare, her four-year-old son was displaying self-harming behaviors. She said he had become "upset and suicidal ... and he wanted to kill himself". Her window peeking observations led her to conclude that he was neglected by staff in her absence. She was devastated because they allowed him to sit by himself while the other children were playing together, so she removed him. It could be argued that her son's suicidal thoughts and behaviors had deeper causal factors related to Maryam's own anxieties accumulated through her refugee experience in an IDC, but the point here is that Maryam believed his problems to be the direct result of staff neglect. Maryam's observations about the isolation of her son echoed what most of the African women had said.

3.4. "Families Think That Their Children Are Actually Being Abused": Perceptions of Abusive Practice

For many families with refugee experience, ECEC is a very new concept (De Gioia 2015; Tadesse 2007, 2014; VFST 2016; Whitmarsh 2011). The fear of leaving children in the care of strangers is heightened by parental fear of their children being neglected or even abused. Rachael, an African-Australian mother said "Uh oh, I was scared sometimes, maybe they are going to do something bad with my son".

Angela, an ECP/Inclusion Advisor, with considerable teaching experience, who supervised ECPs over a wide geographical area, confirmed that feedback from her case managers and bilingual CSWs led her to believe that a major reason children are withdrawn from ECEC services by their parents is fear of abuse by staff. She said "The [refugee] families think that their children are actually being abused because their child rearing practices are different. They may not have a voice to, or feel confident enough to complain, based on their experiences of being persecuted, so they won't actually complain. What they will do is they just remove the child from the service and that is often a sign, and they won't feedback".

Several examples citing reasons for parents withdrawing their children were provided by Angela and her Team Leader, Berrak. In one example, several African-Australian children referred to their service for cultural support wore amulets of great cultural and religious significance, and their educators had either removed these without parental permission or had not cleaned and replaced them properly after nappy change or toileting. This omission was considered by parents to be abusive, endangering their child's spiritual wellbeing, which was considered just as important as physical wellbeing, and is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF 1996).

In another example, Angela explained that some parents believed that placing children on individual mattresses during rest time was abusive because children in many cultures are used to co-sleeping. Latika, an ECP in a state-wide advisory role, and also a highly qualified and experienced teacher, explained that co-sleeping was a common practice in her culture too and that she hated the practice of separating and isolating children. Their views were reinforced by Australian research conducted with Chin refugee families from Burma, where the practice of co-sleeping was common, and parents were afraid of the new cultural practice which separated children in Australian ECEC services (VFST 2016).

Despite most research participants reporting negative participatory experiences, I was heartened that parents such as Alek and Rachael, who had initially experienced discrimination, persevered and eventually found services where they had positive and

even "awesome" experiences because the "staff were fantastic" and went out of their way to welcome them and to develop positive intercultural relationships.

3.5. "Authorities Usually Take Their Children Away": Fear of Child Removal

The fear of educators abusing children was elevated by the possibility that they might also report parents to the state child protection authority. When Sanaya, cited above, explained why she withdrew her children from their ECEC service, she also said that "My kids are not going to stay here, if I looked after my kids like that, they would be taken off me", revealing her fear that ECEC staff might report her as an incompetent mother if she continued to complain about the care they were providing. She was incredulous at the hypocrisy between the standards that she knew were expected of her as a mother and the lack of adherence to the same standards by educators, whom she believed had been neglecting her children.

Berrak, an ECP who managed bicultural support for ECEC services over a wide geographical area, provided context for this fear in her interview:

> *"The idea of childcare is something new, and building trust [is important], because in many cases [ECEC] is part of government. It is an authority, and authorities usually take their children away, so their fear is still there. They [refugee parents] don't want to send their children [to childcare], but they [will] send them when they must. But there are other issues and barriers that come with it"* (Berrak, ECP).

Berrak provided an example of a family who had been living in Australia for 18 months, having been referred to her service by a Child Safety Officer who wanted to avoid removing children from their mother. Barrak said

> *"The four-year-old boy was described by his educators as 'aggressive and disruptive', and his mother was reported as neglectful, unknowledgeable, and unfit to be a mother…she wasn't doing the shopping the way that we do. She wasn't doing the cleaning the way that we do. She wasn't packing up the lunch. She didn't know [how to]"* (Berrak, ECP).

A bilingual support worker was contracted for the best part of a year to build a relationship with this family and to teach the child's mother basic living skills. In the process of getting to know the family, the worker discovered that the mother had entered a refugee camp at the age of two and remained there for the next 22 years. She was repeatedly raped, bore several children of rape, and cared for those children as well as she could. Shame had caused her to be ostracized by her cultural community in Australia, and consequently, she had no support. Berrak continued

> *"All her life, she never paid rent, she never managed her money, and she never looked after children by herself, but she managed somehow until the problem was raised by the childcare service to the [Department of] Child Safety…. That mum looked after her children, survived in the jungle, [but] wouldn't have survived in [Australia], the most secure place on earth. She was also afraid of the new cultural practices which separated children…. In the camp environment she wasn't safe, but she managed to protect her children. In the camp environment she didn't earn any money, but she knew how to protect herself and her children; but in the 18 months of living in this country, she was in fear of losing everything"* (Berrak, ECP).

After significant long-term intervention through Berrak's team, coupled with the involvement of multiple specialist services, this family began to thrive. Berrak and her team worked with the educators to become more reflective about their own practices, and, in particular, to change the language they used to blame and label families. The children were integrated into the ECEC service, and their mother used her skills to help the Child

Care Centre staff build a vegetable garden. She arrived dutifully at 4 o'clock every day to water it, a role that she relished because it was "her task". Berrak summarized

> *"So, from being an isolated, completely uninterested mum, she became a productive member of that [early childhood] community—giving back. . .. When we started, she was closed, she wouldn't talk to us, and we were not welcome in her house. There was no emotion on her face. But eight months later, it was a totally different story"* (Berrak, ECP).

This narrative demonstrates the importance of building relationships of trust and of being trustworthy. Early childhood professionals are mandated to report child safety concerns; however, reporting can manifest discriminatory undertones, as evidenced by the disproportionate numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Out of Home Care (Australian Government Productivity Commission 2024). For families to be treated without discrimination, it is imperative for educators to partner with families so they can learn the difference between individual preferences, established cultural practices, and child abuse. This narrative also highlights the benefit of engaging with an appropriate bilingual/bicultural support worker to act as a cultural broker between the family and the service (Lamb 2020).

3.6. "If You Feel You Don't Belong Somewhere You Will Turn Your Back": No Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging is a major indicator of successful refugee resettlement in Australia (Piper 2017). Belonging is important for all families who engage in ECEC services, but it is especially important for children from refugee backgrounds who have experienced loss of family, home, and country. In this study, some participants who were interviewed as ECPs recalled negative experiences as parents when they enrolled their own children into ECEC services. For example, Mai, an ECP, explained her frustration as a Vietnamese-Australian parent who felt like she did not belong and feared her children would lose their cultural identity in a new environment. She extrapolated upon this to explain the isolation experienced by other Vietnamese-Australian mothers with whom she has worked. She said

> *"Not knowing what is inside that gate. Is this something for my kids and for me? But some of these parents also want to hold onto their own culture as well. They don't necessarily want to lose all of it. . .. If I send my kids there, if they come home and speak only English to me, what do I do? It is more than just the language itself; it is a sense of losing who they are as well, and a sense of not belonging. You know, when you walk in and sense, 'Oh, this is not for me', and 'I don't think I belong here', and 'I don't think my kids belong here'. That is the main thing we are quite fearful of. That loss of identity is the barrier that they cannot cross because of fear"* (Mai, ECP).

Latika, an ECP with considerable teaching experience, who migrated to Australia as a child, explained how she felt as a bicultural person:

> *"As someone who is multicultural, who is bicultural, I know the importance of knowing who you are and how you belong, and that if you feel you don't belong somewhere then you will turn your back on that and you will move away and find who your people are—who you do belong to"* (Latika, ECP).

Latika said that during her career, she had personally witnessed many children who were excluded and made to feel that they did not belong: "If we are doing this [excluding children] from when children are really young, that makes me feel sad for those kids who know the moment that they step into a kindergarten program that they don't belong there, because not just the children, but the teachers are telling them that they don't belong".

Angela, consistent with most ECPs, considered the main reason that refugee parents did not think that their children belonged in some ECEC services was because their cultural

practices were not respected. Teachers thought that there was "only the language barrier" but did not consider the importance of cultural maintenance. Angela said

> *"I think for the mono-lingual and mono-cultural educators, and there are quite a few of them in Australia, it is very hard to see a different perspective and understand the importance of culture. Often, they get quite challenged, "Well there is only the language barrier", whereas there is so much more—the culture"* (Angela, ECP).

3.7. "They Expect Our Families to Be Like Their Families": Dominant Cultural Ideology and Mandatory Assimilation

If families conformed to the unstated norms of the ECEC services, then their children were able to complete kindergarten and move on to the preparatory year. This was a one-sided bargain that involved considerable compromise on the part of families and did not require the system or the services to adapt or change to meet the needs of the child, nor did it address the expectations of new cultural communities or shifting norms within society. An unspoken set of assumptions appeared to exist on the part of educators that both children and parents would conform to taken-for-granted cultural norms and rules, and that values and practices pertaining to the dominant Anglo-Australian culture would likely remain unchallenged and consequently unchanged. Families were rarely consulted, informed, or taught about these expectations. Berrak, an ECP/Team Leader, stated that "everything is in the parameters of the main culture". Angela, an ECP/Inclusion Advisor whose team worked tirelessly to integrate children from refugee and migrant backgrounds into ECEC services, expounded that "what I find, and I've seen with some services that do accept them [refugees], then they are just expected to thrive in a dominant culture, and it's "oh, they will settle down".

The perspective of Garang serves to highlight the pressure that families from his cultural community were under to conform to these expectations. He reported that families he worked with "did not feel comfortable" or had "difficult experiences" in ECEC environments. He explained that African-Australian children did not always "fit into the system" and were under significant pressure at a young age to conform to assumed normative behavior. He said

> *"I think some of the kindergartens have a very good understanding too. They have been working with our community for a very long time. Some have a very good understanding. Others don't have a clue at all. They expect our [African-Australian] families to be like their families"* (Garang, ECP).

For parents who were new arrivals to Australia, educators sometimes deterred them from enrolling children by their eagerness to reduce their child's exposure to their home culture, traditions, and language, whilst assimilating them into the mainstream culture. A pertinent example of this approach was provided by Mai, an ECP who described her experience assisting a newly arrived Vietnamese mother to enroll her child in kindergarten. Mai, in recalling the teacher–parent interaction, who said

> *"I remember the teacher saying, "well, he will just have to learn, and other kids will accept him, and you will see; but your child needs to be in an environment where it is not just him and you or just his group, but he needs to learn other people's cultures, that is the school culture"* (Mai, ECP).

Whilst the educator was trying to communicate the importance of fitting into school culture, this type of interaction was frightening for a parent with no prior knowledge of the ECEC system in Australia. The educator assumed Western cultural dominance by providing an ultimatum where the child would need to change. Mai continued to explain the problem from a parental perspective: "but the school culture over here is absolutely

different to the Vietnamese one . . . I think for her it was quite a scary prospect because she didn't know what to expect". Despite Mai being available to support this mother, the teacher's hegemonic style of engagement exacerbated fear that the family would need to relinquish their rich cultural heritage, so she shied away from completing the enrolment process and prevented her daughter from participating in an important foundational education program.

Children were expected to 'thrive' and 'settle' without cultural or linguistic support, but this was problematic because it led to alienation and a lack of belonging. A lack of open-minded and welcoming behavior on the part of educators was found to seriously impact upon the sense of belonging felt by many of the families who participated in this research. This is consistent with other research into the participation of refugees in ECEC services (Rutter 2006; VFST 2016; Whitmarsh 2011).

3.8. "But You Don't Want Your Child to Be Excluded": Compromise and Conformity

The clear majority of parents with refugee experience in this study, especially those with high levels of education themselves, wanted their young children to be educated because they not only understood the intrinsic value of early childhood education but also its link to future academic success. To minimize the racism, bullying, and discrimination they knew their children would encounter, they made personal sacrifices to conform to the system, or mitigate its harmful effects, so that their children could belong.

Two ECPs reflected upon their own experiences as parents. Parbeen, an ECP/Cultural Advisor/Teacher, arrived in Australia with young children after fleeing her country of origin in the Middle East due to war and civil unrest. She spoke about her struggle to retain her children's cultural heritage whilst trying to integrate them into an Australian kindergarten. She said

> *"I want to keep my identity because this is my heritage. I want to keep it for my children to carry on with. But then you don't want your child to be excluded because it looks different, behaves differently, eats differently, and wears very different clothes from others. You don't want them to be excluded. So, that's another kind of duality there"* (Parbeen, ECP).

Having lived and worked in several countries prior to her arrival in Australia, Parbeen was acutely aware of the cultural losses she had to incur for her children to integrate in their educational settings. She said that she made compromises in the areas of food, clothing (including her own), and parenting style because she understood that these changes would facilitate her family's inclusion and benefit her children's long-term future.

Mai, an ECP, also recalled her own experience as a mother placing her first child in kindergarten:

> *"I guess that I am very lucky in the sense that I have experienced a lot of racism myself . . . because I know who I am. So, a lot of the time I am intentionally teaching my kids that they are Vietnamese. So, I have a sense of purpose already. When my child was in kindergarten, . . . the room was very, should I say, very Aussie . . . but because I have lived here for that long, I knew the importance of the social side of things, and I knew that when my child came home to me that I had a lot more work to do because I needed to teach her that she is Vietnamese. I was not comfortable putting my daughter there, so I shortened her day quite a bit"* (Mai, ECP).

Mai believed her own experience of racism had instilled in her a sense of identity as a Vietnamese person. She needed to ensure her daughter gained the same sense of belonging within her cultural community as a shield to protect her from the detrimental impacts of racism. Like Parbeen, Mai understood the importance of kindergarten for her child's social life and her acculturation into mainstream society, but she felt uncomfortable

with the non-inclusive environment and the standard Western-orientated curriculum. Her compromise was to pick her child up early and to spend time teaching her home language and cultural practices. This strategy of parental sacrifice paid off, and both Parbeen and Mai's daughters completed university degrees and entered professional employment.

4. Discussion

4.1. Systemic Racism Is Endemic in ECEC Environments

Findings from this research exposed concerning levels of discriminatory practices enacted against refugee families in ECEC services. Racial discrimination was coupled with assimilationist practices, limited interpreter usage, inadequate levels of cultural competence, and patchy applications of trauma-informed practice (Lamb 2020). I did not fully anticipate the extent of these findings when designing this research, and the findings may not be palatable to the sector, perhaps explaining why racism is rarely mentioned in the early childhood literature.

In line with observations made by ECP's in this research, a study by Szente and Hoot (2013) found that some teachers were limited by their lack of understanding or exposure to the language, customs, and culture of children from refugee backgrounds. Other researchers concurred that a lack of exposure to people from diverse cultures frequently lead to bias against children because of their race, culture, and religion (McBrien 2003, 2005; Tadesse 2014). Tadesse (2014) found that Head Start teachers who worked with African children from refugee backgrounds regarded parents more highly if they were well educated and spoke English. Speaking English was considered to be "the main source of a smooth relationship . . . inspiring a positive outlook about the parents" (p. 302). If parents spoke English, teachers were more likely to provide additional support to their children.

In my study, educators who were unable to find out about parental values, beliefs, and expectations directly from parents ran the risk of insulting them and denying children the right to quality ECEC. Withdrawing children from ECEC deprived them of critical foundational education and their mothers of the opportunity to participate in paid employment. Both missed out on host language acquisition. This is a subtle form of invisible systemic racism that favors educated White middle-class families over those who are not (Robinson and Jones Diaz 2016). When this subtle form of racism occurs over several decades, as reported by members of long-standing refugee communities, such as the Australian-Vietnamese community, the life opportunities for children from particular ethnic groups are reduced (Gillborn 2008a, 2008b).

4.2. Parents Protected Their Children from Harm and State Intervention

Parental decisions to withdraw their children from ECEC services in the circumstances discussed may have prevented their children from harm. It could be argued that parents engaged in positive parenting to buffer their children from the harmful and toxic effects of racial discrimination that they perceived to be pervasive in ECEC services. Parents conducted critical assessments of ECEC environments, and when they feared that poor quality care was negatively impacting their children's health and wellbeing, they sought to protect their children by removing them.

A review by Priest et al. (2013) provided an explanation with strong associations between racial discrimination and mental health for older children, but with limited evidence for detrimental mental health outcomes in preschool-aged children. The researchers considered that one of the major reasons that poor health outcomes had not yet accumulated for the younger children was because parents and carers "are able to effectively buffer children of this age from the detrimental effects of racial discrimination" (p. 125). They also found

that "positive parenting and socialization, as well as social support and ethnic attachment may be effective in ameliorating the detrimental effects of racial discrimination" (p. 124).

Fear of intervention by child protection authorities is real, and an increasing number of refugee families in Australia are subject to such surveillance (Kaur 2012; Lewig et al. 2009, 2010; Renzaho and Vignjevic 2011). Many refugees live in fear of government intervention, which increases their reluctance to participate in ECEC programs (Signorelli and Coello 2011; Signorelli et al. 2017). Parents regularly struggle with knowing how to discipline their children appropriately in a Western society and, particularly, with what constitutes child abuse (Dachyshyn 2013; Renzaho et al. 2011; Renzaho and Vignjevic 2011). This has led to heighted anxiety among many sub-Saharan African refugees, whose "traditional knowledge and norms that govern parenting . . . may be incompatible with the legal protection and rights of children that the host culture of high-income countries imposes upon family processes" (Renzaho and Vignjevic 2011, p. 77).

Vandenbroeck and Lazzari (2014, p. 330) cited a similar example from Roma communities in Europe, "where a lack of trust toward authorities and public services combined with discrimination and hostility encountered in educational environments tend to undermine children's participation in ECEC". It is unsurprising then that parents in my study also reported poor relationships with their children's educators, leading to their withdrawal from ECEC services.

4.3. Families Struggled to Retain Cultural Identity and Form Attachment to Their New Environment

For families with refugee experience, the retention of cultural identity and connections with one's country of origin are important components for creating an attachment to a new environment (Whitmarsh 2011). However, if expectations between home and school cultures differ significantly, then a child's adaptation to their new host society will likely be impeded (Hamilton and Moore 2004). Achieving an authentic sense of belonging should not only be about children fitting into the dominant culture of the ECEC environment but having the freedom and support to maintain and nurture their home culture within that dominant culture (Gonzalez-Mena 2008). Children do not thrive in environments where there is no sense of belonging; consequently, any pedagogical approaches need to not only be holistic, ecological, and child-centered, but also to involve parents and bridge the cultural gap between families, communities, and the ECEC service (Vandenbroeck et al. 2011). De Gioia (2009) recommends that staff find ways to have conversations with parents about children's sleeping, eating, and routine practices to ensure continuity between home and ECEC settings.

4.4. Recommendations for Policy and Practice to Increase Enngagement

Systemic and individual cross-cultural competence need to be improved within the ECEC sector to embed inclusion and increase the engagement of refugee families. To build an ethos of inclusion, eliminate racism, and better equip and support educators, I recommend

- Building 'cultural credibility';
- Developing collaborative relationships with parents;
- Skilling a culturally competent workforce; and
- Engaging in reflective practice.

4.4.1. Building 'Cultural Credibility'

I have constructed a new term, 'cultural credibility', by incorporating the concepts of cultural safety, cultural security, and cultural competence from my research findings, sensitized by the literature, using CGT methodology. The explanation is as follows:

Cultural safety provides "…an environment that is safe for people: where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience of learning, living and working together with dignity and truly listening" (Williams 1999, p. 213). The concept of cultural safety is focused on the way in which cultural group members view services as meeting their needs by feeling listened to and that their culture is respected (Zon et al. 2004).

In my research, ECP and Inclusion Advisor Cathy was adamant that culturally safe environments were not sufficient to engage culturally diverse families. She said "we actually have to create a safe and 'secure' space for families". Cultural security is a rights-based approach that requires a shift in emphasis from attitudes to behaviors, in which practitioners both acknowledge and demonstrate respect for cultural difference; furthermore, change needs to occur at a systemic level (Thomson 2005).

"Cultural competence is a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes and policies that come together in a system, agency or among professionals and enable that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross cultural situations" (Cross et al. 1989, p. 13).

When searching for a collective term to incorporate and build upon all of the above, I considered the wisdom of ECP Garang, who, admired educators who not only enrolled, but supported African-Australian refugee families to participate in kindergarten. He said

> *"Some kindergartens have a very good understanding . . . [they] are lucky to have [cultural] credibility, to have kids from our community"* (Garang, ECP).

Practitioners in ECEC services who gained 'cultural credibility' built trusting relationships with families: engaged in community-based outreach and recruitment; worked through bilingual culture brokers with parents and cultural support workers in the classroom; utilized established cultural hierarchies; created culturally appropriate place; demonstrated family friendly attitudes; and adopted an ecological model of care (Lamb 2020).

Moreover, building cultural credibility takes time, hard work, openness to listening to families without judgment, and working and socializing with people in a cross-cultural context. When effective bilingual outreach to marginalized groups is provided to cultural communities through a culturally diverse workforce, information is more likely to be received and acted upon by parents. When ECEC services became 'culturally credible', they were rewarded by being entrusted by parents to care for children from refugee backgrounds (Lamb 2020).

4.4.2. Developing Collaborative Relationships with Parents

There is strong evidence to demonstrate that parental involvement in ECEC services has multiple positive impacts on the learning and development of children from refugee backgrounds (De Gioia 2015; Drugli and Undheim 2012; Hujala et al. 2009; Sims et al. 2008). Dau (2016) discussed the importance of ECPs demonstrating respect for families, relating to them from their own perspectives, and focusing on their competencies and strengths rather than deficits. De Gioia (2015) found that for refugee mothers who were transitioning into childcare, educator attitudes can be supportive of families "when educators are open to listening and moving beyond judgement" (p. 669). This finding was enhanced when educators were from similar cultural backgrounds to the parents and the services adopted an ecological approach.

With reference to Maryam's conundrum outlined in Section 3.3, Maher and Smith (2014, p. 22), in a study about the role of ECEC educators in the inclusion of child asylum-seekers

post-release from Australian Immigration Detention Centers, highlighted the "pivotally important role that educators in the early years can play" to assist families seeking asylum to reintegrate after periods of incarceration. They demonstrated multiple ways that educators can respond to a child's interests by capitalizing on teachable moments, infusing their learning, developing language, celebrating their achievements, building bridges, and boosting parental efficacy and confidence (Maher and Smith 2014).

In my study, parents Alek and Rachael, who had initially experienced discrimination, searched for, and found, ECEC services where they were treated with respect and had very positive experiences with educators. I also found that educators who developed collaborative relationships with parents discovered important health and developmental issues impacting upon children and were able to negotiate aspects of children's learning accordingly. It is important to be mindful, however, that parents differ in their capacity, their linguistic ability, and the time they have available to develop and maintain partnerships with teachers (Hujala et al. 2009).

4.4.3. Training a Culturally Competent Workforce

Sawrikar and Katz (2008) define effective, culturally appropriate services as those that are built by staff that are culturally aware, culturally sensitive, and culturally competent. My findings indicate that ECEC services did not have the requisite level of cultural competence to meet the needs of a diverse community. Apart from the professional development embedded in the time-limited government initiative that prompted this study, training in cultural awareness, cross-cultural communication, and cultural diversity were considered by participants to be non-existent or inadequate for educators at both pre-service and in-service levels. A recurrent problem discussed by participants was that ECEC services generally had small budgets for staff training and that cultural training had to compete with many other essential staff training requirements, which were more likely to affect their assessment and rating scores. The most effective way to remove this obstacle would be to establish mandatory pre-service and in-service teacher/educator training in cultural competence and anti-bias approaches. This would need to be sustained though ongoing professional development to maintain and increase cross-cultural competencies. In keeping with the principles of the EYLF (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA] 2024), universal professional development requires adequate state government investment, and collaboration with universities and vocational training institutions to ensure coverage across the entire ECEC sector, including people in regional areas who may have had limited exposure to cultural diversity.

4.4.4. Engaging in Reflective Practice

Multiple ECPs in this study, such as Berrak, Angela, Latika, Parbeen and Cathy, worked with early childhood educators to assist them to engage in cross-cultural reflective practice. Miller and Mascadri (2016) suggest that for educators to achieve integrity in cross-cultural interactions, they require commitment to self-reflexivity, learning, and the use of practical and theoretical tools. Examples from my research included ECPs who joined a professional page on a social media platform; facilitated transdisciplinary partnerships with workers in the education, health, family, and community support sectors; self-funded professional development when none was available; and engaged in collective reflective practice through professional conversations with peers. These strategies are considered good practice (Krakouer et al. 2017).

4.5. Recommendations for Further Research

I did not find any other Australian studies about racism or religion as barriers to ECEC participation with a specific focus on children from refugee backgrounds. Topics

worthy of further research include investigation into the extent to which racism impedes the participation of refugee families in Australian ECEC services (using larger population-based sample sizes); further research to explore how racism can be eliminated in the ECEC sector; and the strategies required to increase the inclusion and full participation of refugee families.

4.6. Limitations

There were several limitations pertaining to this study, notably

- The absence of refugee and migrant data, which were not collected by the state and ECEC services, making quantitative analysis difficult for the researcher, individual services, and the sector.
- Language and literacy levels of parents presented some barriers which were overcome by the use of a multilingual CSW as an interpreter for some interviews and focus groups. The university Ethics Committee permitted the verbal recording of consent for non-literate participants.
- There are no words for 'research' or 'interview' in Sudanese languages (Atem 2017), and many parents had only experienced White people presenting them with 'information'. This led to initial confusion about the purpose of a focus group. When explained, parents appreciated the consultative process and the platform to share their experiences and opinions.
- The size of the initial parent focus group was difficult to manage, with considerable background noise from children making it hard to hear participants or adequately facilitate the group process. The CSW/interpreter quickly provided a solution by moving groups of five or six women into an inner circle to facilitate small group discussion, then moving other women in and out of the circle. Further ethics approval was granted to interview parents individually.
- More time with parents in both interview and focus group settings would have afforded richer data, but logistical constraints prevented this from occurring.
- I engaged in first-level member checking, as encouraged by Brantlinger et al. (2005), by returning interview transcripts to participants (or their ECPs if prearranged). Second-level member checking was more problematic because organizational contact with parents was limited when program funding ceased and also when children aged out of early childhood services.

5. Conclusions

This article presents an in-depth analysis of encounters between parents with refugee experience and ECEC services to discover why children were withdrawn by their parents after enrolment. The consensus amongst participants was that many services sampled by parents were culturally unsafe, unsuitable, and unavailable to families of color. Refugee parents perceived that they were treated differently, and that their values, beliefs, and parenting practices were considered inferior. Children from refugee backgrounds were frequently marginalized and ignored. They were left to play alone, eat alone, and cry alone. The overarching message was that worth and value are framed primarily within the parameters of the dominant culture, which is taken for granted by educators who are predominantly White and, frequently middle class.

Refugee families were expected to conform to new norms and rules that were unfamiliar and non-explicit. Of concern were the smothering effects of assimilation and the imposition of a foreign culture which unsettled family life. Compromised identity and the nullification of cultural and linguistic heritage left children with little or no sense

of belonging. There appeared to be limited understanding in the sector of the negative long-term consequences of obliterating a child's cultural and linguistic identity.

It is important that systemic racism be exposed and adequately addressed within the ECEC sector because the compounding effects of racial discrimination upon a child, when connected with socio-economic disadvantages, bullying, and childhood trauma, compromise the healthy development, wellbeing, and social adjustment of children (Paradies 2006; Paradies et al. 2015; Priest et al. 2013, 2016). By confronting racial and religious discrimination in education, we can redress this disadvantage and create an ethos of inclusion, leading to an equitable future for all children. Presented in this discussion are ways that the ECEC system could be reformed to create welcoming, equitable, inclusive, and socially cohesive environments for refugee families, promoting acceptance, participation, and belonging.

As a closing statement during his interview, Garang (ECP) implored educators not to give up on children from refugee backgrounds and "not to be disappointed in their parents." Referring to African-Australian families from his community, he said

> *"They love your system. That is why they took their child there to be educated. Don't think that because I am from a different cultural background that I have different expectations. No, we have the same expectations as Australian families, and the same expectations of Australian society"* (Garang, ECP).

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