

Mono-Cultural Approach in Multicultural Education: Mapping the Contours of Multicultural Early Childhood Education in New Zealand

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Abstract

There has been an increase in research activities in multicultural early childhood education in New Zealand. This article provides a critical review of these activities. This is an attempt to unravel the aspirations and complexities associated with the educational policies and practices with children of culturally diverse backgrounds. The conclusion from this literature review is that despite the multicultural principles that support democracy and equitability in education in New Zealand, a mono-cultural approach is still pervasive in multicultural early childhood classrooms.

Keywords : early childhood education, multiculturalism, New Zealand, literature review

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Introduction

Multicultural early childhood education has assumed importance in policy agendas in New Zealand. This attention is accompanied by calls for enhanced teaching practice with children of culturally diverse backgrounds. Drawing on literature, this paper maps the contours of multicultural early childhood education. It seeks to consider how “a paradigm of diversity” (Mitchell, 2011, p.218) is implemented in the levels of policies and of practices within the context of New Zealand early childhood education.

Early Childhood Education in New Zealand

New Zealand is an island country in the South-western Pacific Ocean. Within the last two decades, rapid demographic changes have occurred as a result of significant changes in immigration policies. These new policies aim to address economic demand by contributing overseas skills and finance into the New Zealand economy (Department of Labour, 2009). With a population of four and half million people, there are more than eighty ethnic groups (Statistics New Zealand, 2006). The influx of immigrants contributes to a significant inflow of immigrant children in early childhood centres. Statistical data from the Ministry of Education in New Zealand (2013) suggests that between 2000 and 2013 the enrolment children of minority cultural communities, namely those of non-New Zealand European descent, has been increasing in early childhood settings.

Hence, the teachers’ work in early childhood services is marked by the influence of increased cultural and ethnic diversity. The need for multiculturalism to be embedded in early childhood education requires that dominant curriculum approaches are open to challenge and reworking. In New Zealand, the dominant mode of early childhood education is of that child-centred exploration and play. *Te Whāriki*, the national early childhood curriculum asserts that “the child will experience open-ended exploration and play” (Ministry of Education in New Zealand, 1996, p.82). There is a strong focus on children as competent learners on their own rights.

A cultural approach to learning and teaching is also included in *Te Whāriki*. This approach posits that the importance of children’s cultural heritage is highlighted in early childhood

programmes (Ministry of Education in New Zealand, 1996). Culture is conceptualized in *Te Whāriki* as the most essential influence on learning, giving rise to a demand that early childhood education provided to children should be relevant to children's own cultural values and practices.

Cultural diversity is another important concept in New Zealand early childhood education. According to Cullen (2003), an important theme in *Te Whāriki* is diversity. The document aims to enable the weaving together of a curriculum that embraces diverse languages, cultures and socio-economic conditions of all children in New Zealand. It states in *Te Whāriki*:

The early childhood curriculum supports the cultural identity of all children, affirms and celebrates cultural differences, and aims to help children gain a positive awareness of their own and other cultures. (Ministry of Education in New Zealand, 1996, p.18)

It can be seen from this statement, a move from the notion of child-centred development to culture-guided learning is evident in early childhood education. Over the past two decades, the concepts of cultural identity and diversity have become the subject of significant reorientation in early childhood programmes. The wider theme of 'multicultural early childhood education' is made up of these concepts and constructs a learning context within which teachers incorporate the different cultural beliefs and practices in their teaching programmes and they transform the learning environments into a site of democracy, equitability and social justice.

Characterizing Multicultural Principles

Critical Multicultural Education

The iconic discourse on multicultural education in New Zealand is May's (2003) concept of critical multiculturalism. With this concept, multicultural practice is interpreted at many levels from the broadest operations of power organization to the organization of personal experience on a day to day basis. May's critical multiculturalism provides four indicators of

multicultural practice:

1. Acknowledging the importance of ethnicity and culture in the identity formation of certain individuals and groups without essentialising them;
2. Recognizing unequal power relations as a part of life for most people and that “individual and collective choices are circumscribed by the ethnic categories available at any given time and place” (May, 2003, p.209);
3. Recognizing the ways in which certain cultural knowledges can become marginalized and misrepresented by more privileged discourses;
4. Recognizing “that all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular existence, a particular culture, without being contained by that position” (May, 2003, p.211).

To a large extent, May's critical multiculturalism has broadened the focus of many traditional multicultural paradigms on making different cultures 'harmoniously' live together to how minority cultures can be emancipated from unjust treatments so that the apparent harmonious multi-living is not the result of the marginalization of minority cultures. Rooted in the critical theory, critical multiculturalism acknowledges asymmetrical cultural relationships that exist in multicultural societies and problematizes the effects of power imbalance on cultural relationships. Chan (2011) described the concept of critical multiculturalism as a breakthrough because it involves an awareness that problems exist when power imbalances and social inequity are unexamined. This awareness is crucial as it makes possible confronting the lived life of cultural domination so that the pitfalls of multicultural superficiality can be avoided and multicultural practice is more meaningful and effective. According to Chan (p.68), critical multiculturalism subscribes to the notion of inclusion and equity and when applied in education it “comprises an inclusive curriculum that stresses equal learning opportunities for all, despite individual differences”. May (2003) argues that critical multiculturalism signals a shift from viewing education as only serving children's learning to a more complex and critical interpretation that reconstructs education as a social agent that challenges social structures which produce inequities.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

A second stream of discourse that highlights the inclusive and equitable education is culturally responsive pedagogy. Culturally responsive pedagogy is situated in teachers' attempts to understand students' social, cultural and language backgrounds and the power effects of this understanding in creating a democratic and equitable education (Morrison, Robbins & Rose, 2008).

'Right' is a key term within the discourse of culturally responsive pedagogy. For Morrison et al. (2008), culturally responsive pedagogy embraces the idea that accords with a rights-based model of education as composed of included, respected, autonomous and equal individuals. The emphasis is on children's rights to preserving their own identities. In this way, culturally responsive pedagogy can be seen to have similar connotations to the reconstructive and socially just approaches to teaching in that teachers transform pedagogical practice through questioning, examining and fixing inequities (Morrison et al., 2008).

This inclusive and equal pedagogy with its goals to maintaining children's cultural rights has also been described as the anti-bias curriculum (Gunn, 2003). Han and Thomas suggest that the central tenet of the culturally responsive pedagogy is the unbiased response of teachers to diverse cultures of children. According to Bennett (2012, p.3), "culturally responsive teachers connect learning programmes to home, sociocultural, and school experiences and create a community of learners with empathy and understanding".

Characterizing Multicultural Realities

In general, what is happening in multicultural early childhood settings is that many teachers who advocate multiculturalism and culturally responsive pedagogy are nevertheless engaged in non-multicultural practices (Bentley, 2012). Bentley (2012) raised a provocative question: "How can we translate these huge ideas [of multiculturalism] into meaningful practices for young children?" (p.195).

What is more dangerous is the current fashion to believe that culture consists of explicit practices, such as formal documents. However no one who has read Tobin's (2011)

challenging discussion of cultural beliefs and practices in approaches to early childhood education can take so simple a view. Tobin draws attention to the importance of implicit cultural beliefs and practices in guiding teaching practice. His writing serves as a springboard for identifying the rooted cultural beliefs about learning and teaching.

Context

Bicultural situation. Although New Zealand is a country of diverse ethnic and cultural groups, the national founding document, Treaty of Waitangi promotes the establishment and maintenance of cultural relationships between two groups of people, namely European New Zealander/Pākehā and the indigenous Māori. The treaty was signed in 1840 for a partnership agreement between Pākehā and Māori, the early settlers in New Zealand, and gave rise to the bicultural context of New Zealand (Rau & Ritchie, 2011).

Despite the obligations in the Treaty of Waitangi, relationships between Pākehā and Māori were turbulent ever since the treaty was signed. Pākehā disregarded the agreement and became the dominant power in all aspects of New Zealand society through the means of colonisation (Rau & Ritchie, 2011). The unmasking of naturalized white racial superiority is often an explicit aim in social, cultural, political and educational practices. However, as is the case with many colonized communities, such a deprivation of cultural rights was not passively accepted by Māori, who made numerous attempts to challenge the legitimated and institutionalized sociocultural inequalities. As a result of these challenges, in the last few decades, the Treaty of Waitangi regained its importance and bicultural movements became a significant commitment in New Zealand. Even so, Pākehā culture is still the dominant living framework (Rau & Ritchie, 2011).

The bicultural context has a significant effect on early childhood education. At the curriculum level, *Te Whariki* prioritises this context, regarding biculturalism as the key element in early childhood policies and practices. It states, “Throughout the document as a whole, the bicultural nature of curriculum for all early childhood services is contained” (Ministry of Education in New Zealand, 1996, p.7).

The bicultural commitment of *Te Whariki* has inevitably influenced the multicultural beliefs and practices in early childhood education. Due to its bicultural focus, *Te Whariki* is

unlikely to lead to multicultural practice (Duhn, 2008). Duhn argues that at the level of the wider 'cultural context', *Te Whariki* shows favour to the biculturalism, therefor overlaying the discourses of multiculturalism by bicultural issues. By downplaying the complexities of multiculturalism as simply an effect of differences, *Te Whariki* has limited its ability to address the sources of these differences.

Guided by their bicultural early childhood curriculum, early childhood teachers in New Zealand, therefore, are legitimately preoccupied with responding to the bicultural demands in their teaching practice. Rhedding-Jones (2002) saw the bicultural context in New Zealand both enabling and constraining the efforts to multiculturalism in early childhood education. It supports multiculturalism through moving beyond the dominant culture but complicates it by being binary.

Early childhood teaching community. Early childhood teaching team in New Zealand consists of mainly Pākehā teachers. The latest statistics shows that out of the total number of 20,644 early childhood teachers, 14,427 are from the European Pākehā ethnic group (Ministry of Education in New Zealand, 2013). Because of the long-term Pākehā dominance, one effect of this 'white' teaching team on early childhood education is that "Pākehā educators, as representative of the dominant culture, are able to exercise power because their discourses have become institutionalised as normal, right, and desirable, thus privileging these people and silencing and marginalizing alternative discourses" (Ritchie, 2003, p.3).

There have been attempts to develop a culturally diverse workforce of early childhood teachers in New Zealand. Guo and Dalli's (2012) metaphors of 'bridge' and 'boundary object' are useful for understanding the purpose of these attempts. The role of bilingual teachers as bridging and cultural brokers was also a clear finding in Harvey's (2011) study on bilingual teachers' practice in English-speaking early childhood centres.

Guo and Dalli (2012) reported that bilingual teachers facilitated the intercultural connections between children's homes and the early childhood settings. As a consequence of the use of community languages, bilingual teachers supported the establishment of socially just early childhood environments (Harvey, 2011). Haworth, Cullen, Simmons, Schimanski, McGarva and Woodhead (2006) also saw Samoan children's positive learning experiences in English-speaking early childhood settings as relating to the support of Samoan teachers

through the use of their common language and the teachers' appropriate understanding of the children's needs and interests.

A major issue associated with bilingual teachers' work as cultural brokers has come from Guo's research (2010), reporting that Chinese-speaking teachers embraced the mainstream cultural practices and minimized the use of Chinese cultural tools with Chinese immigrant children. In many cases, this was the conscious purpose of the teachers themselves in fear that their minority cultural identity might inappropriately interrupt the privileged practices. Bilingual teachers' focused attention to children of diverse cultures was also considered as an issue of concern because this encouraged the "problematic dependency" of children on these teachers (Harvey, 2011, p.97).

In the absence of support from their Pākehā colleagues in marking multicultural changes, unless they are very determined to become change agents, bilingual teachers only use their home language with children of the same cultural backgrounds or spend time with these children during the children's transition to the centres (Guo, 2010). This finding shows that in mainstream cultural contexts, bilingual teachers may not be able to support children of the same cultural communities in a way that they wish or they do so without worries.

Practice

Maintaining children's home language. Early childhood teachers in New Zealand are open minded towards the use of the home languages of children (Guo, 2010; Schofield, 2007).

The bilingual movements of New Zealand towards the Māori language revitalization can be considered to have played an important role in developing teachers' belief in the importance of home language maintenance of young children (Barnard & Glyn, 2003). *Te Whariki* conveys a clear message that "curriculum in early childhood settings should promote te reo [Māori language] and ngatikanga Māori [Māori culture], making them visible and affirming their value for children" (Ministry of Education in New Zealand, 1996, p.42). Harvey (2011) found that "the aspirations for children's development of the two national languages appear to welcome each child's use of a home/community language" (p.1).

Children's use of their home languages, for this reason, has become pervasive in New Zealand early childhood centres. Verbal communications are exercised not only in English,

Māori but other languages, for the purpose of helping children of linguistically diverse communities (Harvey, 2011; Schofield, 2007). This accepted practice in early childhood centres is usually achieved through teachers' encouragement of children's communication in their home languages and some teachers' efforts to learn alternative languages (Schofield, 2007).

However, encouraging children to maintain their home languages is also problematic if this is not supported by teachers' efforts to include other diverse cultural resources. This could mean that language becomes synonymous with culture, but also that multicultural pedagogy is cast adrift from a sociocultural perspective. If the practice of multiculturalism is too strongly influenced by the language use, there could be a tendency to neglect the importance of many other cultural sources (Guo, 2010).

Focusing on children. As noted early, a legacy of New Zealand early childhood education in the past years is a strong emphasis on child-centred education. Guo (2010) and Chan (2006) have both provided evidence about early childhood teachers' efforts to uphold the child-centred tradition in their work with children of diverse cultures. Guo's study with Chinese immigrant children revealed a strong theme that early childhood teachers considered 'focusing on children' to be an important practice in multicultural settings.

The child-centred pedagogy has been considered as an obstacle in multicultural practice. Fler (2003) noted that by drawing and relying on the Western child-centred pedagogy, and thus decontextualizing children, teachers lose sight of children and their cultural lives. Barron (2009) pointed out how early childhood programmes "appeared to be experienced by the children [of minority ethnic heritage] but marginalize and illegitimate their participation" (p.341). Burman (1994) explains that the child-centred teaching philosophy is an approach that teachers and schools use to separate children from their social relationships, particularly those with their families. In this philosophy, the goals are couched in terms of what children do in their schools or preschools. For this reason, the implementation of a child-centred approach could lead teachers to work with children in the absence of children's families.

A sameness approach. The sameness approach focuses on the mainstream cultural practice in multicultural early childhood settings (Rivalland & Nuttall, 2010). According to

Schoorman (2011), the sameness approach seeks to “dissemble a one-size-fits-all approach” (p.341).

Early childhood teachers in New Zealand have shown interests in the sameness approach in their teaching practice with children of diverse cultures. In Guo’s (2010) study, the most striking finding is that many teachers were prepared to live with the traditional teaching practice instead of making curriculum innovations.

The teachers’ sameness practice was also identified in another early childhood study in New Zealand (Chan, 2006). When reporting early childhood teachers’ beliefs in working with diverse cultures, Chan wrote, “some early childhood teachers believe that they do not differentiate in their treatment of children because all children are the same” (p.34).

The sameness approach to multiculturalism was implemented, to some extent, by teachers’ desire to minimize cultural differences of children. According to Gunn (2003, p.138), “well-meaning adults often teach children to ignore differences and to focus only on people’s similarities”. By ‘well-meaning’, Gunn means that a focus on diversities has a danger of labelling differences as ‘others’ that need to be excluded from the mainstream. Rivalland and Nuttall’s study (2010) lends support to this idea, reporting that for early childhood teachers, treating children the same way is synonymous with being fair.

Another reason why early childhood teachers adopted a sameness approach to their culturally diverse practice is for the sake of easy work. Banks (2006) conceptualises school as a microcultural system that constitutes many norms, values, roles, statuses, and goals, and that student and teacher cultures are too diverse to be integrated into a school culture.

On a conceptual level, the main challenges regarding implementing diversity are those of power and identity (Ritchie, 2003). The idea of cultural diversity finds resistance because people of the predominant cultural group are afraid that bringing other cultures into their own cultural group threatens the legitimacy of their current power, identity and social systems. May names this resistance as “cultural essentialism” (1999, p.12), in that the fluid feature of life contexts is ignored and a single culture becomes “necessary” (p.32), “fundamental [and] immutable” (p.34).

The sameness approach is problematic in multicultural practice. Chan (2011) discussed how immigrant children might have trouble getting adapted to a self-directed playful early childhood environment because that is not what they do at home. Therefore, to limit

children's access to the cultural products that their cultures have created is to deny the important role of different cultures in supporting early childhood education (Cullen, 2003). The sameness approach to multicultural education, therefore, is a fundamental marker of monoculturalism because it tends to separate children from their cultural background and to shape children's learning experiences in a universalised way (Burman, 1994).

Tokenistic multicultural practice. In the current drive for multicultural education, some early childhood teachers in New Zealand adopted a tokenistic multicultural practice. In Guo's study, tokenistic multiculturalism was manifested in the occasional introduction of multicultural songs in children's learning activities, the display of diverse languages on the walls and the celebration of some cultural festivals. Multicultural resources were not embedded in the daily programmes of the children (Guo, 2010).

It is from many implicit cultural beliefs that we derive our construction of practices (Tobin, 2011). The explicit form of cultural practices cannot always explain the distribution of beliefs of minority cultural communities. It may not explain, for example, why some children avoid eye contacts. Tobin recognized the great complexity of culture, and that teaching practice does not always stem from the explicit ways of cultural operation. It is therefore possible to say that multicultural practices concerning the incorporation of multicultural resources in children's learning programmes are somewhat superficial in New Zealand early childhood settings.

Similar to the sameness practice, tokenistic multicultural approach also takes the view that the dominant cultural knowledge provides effective means to multicultural issues. The focus of the tokenistic approach is less on diverse culturally practices or the needs and interests of culturally diverse children than on the status of the domain culture. It reflects early childhood teachers' struggles of maintaining the traditional status quos within the growing multicultural demands.

Cultural generalization. Culture is not well conceptualized by early childhood teachers in New Zealand. Williams (1958, as cited in Ryan, 1999) contends that, "'culture' is one of the three most complicated words in the English language" (p. 55). Banks (2006) claim too, that a significant issue in relation to multicultural education is that teachers, policy makers and the

general public oversimplify the concept of 'culture'. Sleeter (2011) points out educators' simplistic conceptions of what culture means.

In line with this simplistic conception of culture, 'cultural diversity' is seen as a singular term in early childhood education (Rhedding-Jones, 2005; Siraj-Blatchford, 2001). That is, diversity within a culture has been overlooked in the early childhood sector. Guo's research concurs with Rhedding-Jones and Sirja-Blatchford in reporting that early childhood teachers conceptualized Chinese immigrant cultures as a Chinese culture, but not 'the cultures' which were diverse, evolving and dynamic.

The study by Yim, Lee and Ebbeck (2013) justifies and legitimizes the evolving nature of culture. Through the example of Confucianism in Chinese culture, they argue that cultural values are more than simply a system of ideas and beliefs. They are essentially the conversion of beliefs into actions. Cultural values are maintained only when beliefs are related to actions, and they are therefore dynamic.

In the absence of appropriate interpretations to cultural values, early childhood teachers in New Zealand have thus overlooked the heterogeneous needs of diverse immigrant children and families (Chan, 2011; Guo, 2010). According to May (2003), teachers in New Zealand have trouble understanding the complexities of culture. Instead of treating culture as something to live, they believe that culture is an object to be valued.

Limited parenting support. Early childhood education in New Zealand promotes a model of teaching that accords with parents' aspirations and needs (Ministry of Education in New Zealand, 1996). There is, however, strong evidence about the lack of involvement of parents of diverse cultures in early childhood education (Chan, 2011; Guo, 2005; Zhang, 2012).

A set of problems arose from early childhood teacher's work with parents of diverse cultures. Apart from parents' general uncertainty about how to communicate with teachers of different linguistic and cultural groups, and parents' reticent attitudes to children's education in early childhood settings, it seemed that early childhood teachers in New Zealand were not keen on involving parents of diverse cultures in their teaching programmes (Chan, 2010; Guo, 2005). Instead of working with the parents, teachers tended to focus on children and took a sameness approach to their culturally diverse practices.

Early childhood teachers' limited cooperation with parents of diverse cultures was also the

result of the structural arrangement of early childhood settings which hindered the opportunities for in-depth and meaningful communications between them (Guo, 2010). Guo believed that early childhood teachers expected to make a difference in culturally diverse settings, but the lack of teaching resources and professional development support constrained their attempts to implement diverse cultures. Early childhood teachers' difficulties of working with parents of diverse cultures were reminiscent of Cullen's argument (2003) that a lack of competence in identifying diversity, variation in teachers' knowledge base, and the contexts in which teachers work all limited teachers' effectiveness in implementing practices that respect cultural diversity.

Conclusion

It has been found that the implementation of multicultural practice via the guide of multicultural principles is what is needed to make multicultural early childhood education and in particular the focus on inclusive and equitable education. By this I mean providing a way of bridging the gaps between principles and practices so that early childhood teachers in New Zealand can avoid the pitfalls of tokenistic multiculturalism and a sameness approach to diversity.

The argument that has been provided in the past studies is therefore essentially upfront. The gap between principles and practices is not an issue to be ignored. Efforts in early childhood policies to implement multicultural education have called in teachers to engage in practices in critical ways so that they create culturally diverse innovations.

One strategy is to enlist early childhood teachers as co-policy makers. Instead of viewing policies as something which exist out there, critical multicultural education stresses that educational practice is a sociocultural construction, resulting from the interaction between policy makers and teachers. The implementation of multicultural education is not only about policies or practices but about how teachers take account of the policies in constructing their teaching strategies.

The idea of implicit cultural practice has led to the view that teaching beliefs can be located along a continuum from 'implicit' to 'explicit' (Tobin, 2011). Thus, we would expect teachers

to construct a belief that guides them to connect the implicit and explicit forms of cultural practices. It needs to be noted that New Zealand, as a multicultural context, harbours enormous potentials that can be maximized by multicultural education to their youngest citizens. Critical multicultural education empowers children, families and communities to actualize new possibilities for learning and living.

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