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INQUIRING ABOUT CULTURAL COMPONENTS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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Teaching and Learning



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ABSTRACT

Culture and diversity are familiar yet challenging concepts for early childhood kaiako (teachers). This is a background paper to stimulate thoughts and queries around cultural components in early childhood environments. The author presents findings from a completed research that supports culturally responsive practices within the early childhood teacher education context. The completed research applies a Teaching as Inquiry model to formulate queries for the lecturers. The author then proposes a future research project within the early childhood education context to explore the components of culture. Under a sociocultural research framework, the proposed research aims to collect data from a range of early childhood settings in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. Convenience sampling will be used to select willing centres from the initial teacher education (ITE) providers' database. With the collected data, the proposed study is aimed at enabling participants to develop a reusable reflection model for early childhood kaiako who seek to embrace culturally relevant pedagogy. In support of the proposal, the author theoretically applies a Teaching as Inquiry model to selected questions for reflection listed in Te Whāriki, the early childhood curriculum. The discussion may extract thoughts to help kaiako to formulate focus queries, learning queries and teaching queries within the early childhood education environment.

KEYWORDS

Culture, cultural responsiveness, early childhood teacher education, reflection and reflective practice, Te Whāriki

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a proposal to study early childhood education (ECE) services in terms of understanding their own ways of valuing culture. The expected outcome is to develop a reusable reflection model with queries that are deemed important to current practice and result in changes in thoughts and in actions. The Teaching Council sets standards of practice that all registered teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand should adhere to, and Professional Learning is one of the six standards that asks teachers to have ongoing reflective queries (Ministry of Education, 2017). This resonates with the idea that teaching cannot be based on theories and research alone, as the understanding of these has to be filtered through every teacher (Hedges, 2012). One of the other standards, Learning-focused Culture, suggests that kaiako should manage the education setting in a way that ensures every learner's physical, social, emotional and cultural safety. Cultural Safety can be linked to valuing cultural identities (Durie, 2003). Another standard, Design for Learning, also suggests to value learners as rich cultural capital and therefore to provide culturally responsive learning contexts. Culturally responsive pedagogy is more than the practice of teachers that encompasses continuous growth of knowledge about the culture of the student groups within the authentic contexts. While that could be appreciated as culturally relevant pedagogy aiming for better achievements for all, culturally responsive pedagogy asks teachers to use cultural knowledge with the purpose of supporting students, but also for altering social inequality and promoting social justice through education (Lynch & Rata, 2018). Within the same document of code and standards for teachers, the council also discusses commitment to the profession, to the learners, to the families and whānau, and to society and the community. Every teacher should have a commitment to all learners that encourages respect for their diversity, heritage, language, culture and identity. Reflection on these commitments and standards can question the early childhood teachers in their day-to-day

practice, and thereby help them to develop to be more effective in implementing the curriculum. The practice of reflection may or may not lead to a culturally responsive pedagogy but will initiate a journey towards culturally relevant pedagogy.

Culturally responsive pedagogy is also discussed in relation to tuākana–tēina relationships within the context of early childhood (Rameka & Glasgow, 2017). Understanding the origin of a cultural practice such as tuākana–tēina (the supportive relationship between an older and a younger person) emerging from communal child-rearing practices opens up a door to integrate cultural knowledge into teaching. Similarly, reflection can initiate from seeking the origin of cultural practices of the diverse whānau and families with whom kaiako work. The early childhood education curriculum, Te Whāriki (a Māori word, or kupu, that means the woven mat) (Ministry of Education, 2017), lists reflection as one of the 15 responsibilities of a kaiako, stating that people working in an early childhood setting should be “thoughtful and reflective about what they do, using evidence, critical inquiry and problem solving to shape their practice” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 48). However, with the professional growth of kaiako, reflection becomes integral in many ways to carrying out all other responsibilities. The idea of the proposed study comes from a completed research project by the author on cultural components of early childhood teacher education programmes (Afrin, 2017).

SNAPSHOTS OF THE COMPLETED RESEARCH

The completed research mentioned above had the objective of finding out the cultural components of early childhood teacher education programmes, and to see how these components impact the student teachers in their learning, and how these components impact the teaching of the lecturers. The study, therefore, was based on early childhood teacher education programmes involving initial teacher education (ITE) providers. At the time of the research (2014–17), 33 ITE providers were listed as offering qualifications leading to teacher registration (Ministry of Education, 2014; 2017). There were two factors to consider while approaching the providers with the invitation to participate. The first one was that these providers were from the Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland region. The second consideration was that these the providers were from different categories of tertiary education organisations (TEOs): private training establishments (PTEs), polytechnics, universities and wānanga. The first consideration of limiting the providers to the Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland region was in line with convenience sampling (Lavrakas, 2008). There were eight TEOs (in 2014) in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland that offered early childhood education (ECE) programmes at the time of the study. Except for one, due to ethical considerations, all the other seven TEOs were sent a request to participate in this research. Initial communications (by email) were made to already-known contact persons or the programme leaders of ECE at different TEOs, as informed by webpage searches and phone calls. Among these seven TEOs, only three responded. The three TEOs who became the participants in this research were from only two of the categories noted above: one participating TEO was a university and the other two TEOs were polytechnics.

Under the sociocultural theoretical framework, the researcher then involved these three TEOs in a qualitative research project in which the intention was to derive rich and informed data from a smaller sample of participants (Ingleby, 2012). Twenty-eight lecturers and student teachers participated in the completed study. Interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Opie, 1999) and focus-group discussions (FGDs) (Krueger, 2009; Morgan, 1997) were the research tools for this study. There were no predetermined responses (Howard, 2011) for FGDs or interviews. The interviews were for 30–45 minutes duration each and FGDs were for 45–50 minutes. They took place in unused classrooms in different TEOs, as indicated by the initial contact persons of the relevant TEOs. In the data collection, both interviews and FGDs were found to be appropriate, as participants shared a wide range of data.

The researcher used the four steps of data collection, data reduction, data organisation and data interpretation, as suggested by Davidson and Tolich (2003). Data collection was conducted in face-to-face encounters where the responses were audio-recorded with participants’ consent. At the data-reduction stage, some topics were found to be irrelevant to the research topic, such as reference to books or own research, knowledge content related to home-based and centre-based early childhood settings, participants’ experiences of other jobs, or comparisons between TEOs. While data reduction was going on, the researcher simultaneously organised the data. Quotes that could

explain a particular theme more accurately were kept. Data interpretation was the last step, in which the researcher discovered patterns and regularities in the expected and unexpected findings. At the data interpretation step, the researcher formed arguments using similar and contrasting data under each theme.

To analyse qualitative data is quite a complex task (Edwards, 2010). Thematic coding was applied and an assortment of critical themes emerged from the repeated data (Patton, 2015). These include biculturalism, multiculturalism, professional identity, female dominance, nuance of technology, and comfort zone for individuals. Each of these themes prompts questions and debates. Participants suggested biculturalism was a well-practiced component, yet there were misconceptions that bicultural practice is only relevant to Māori children.

Multiculturalism was found to be another component specific to the context of Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. Participants suggested that increased in-depth knowledge about diversity could broaden future employment contexts for the student teachers. Participants were proud of the fact that they were either teachers or teachers in training, and their own professional growth was often incorporated in the classroom *kōrero* (discussion). Some components of culture such as childcare, shopping and household responsibilities were also identified by the participants due to the dominance of women studying early childhood education. Technology was identified, too, not only as a tool for *ako* (teaching), but also as a way of changing classroom culture. Lastly, participants suggested creating a comfort zone for individuals where they felt safe to share stories from their own cultures. An existing model for reflection, Teaching as Inquiry (Aitken & Sinnema, 2008), was applied to the discussion under these concepts. The Teaching as Inquiry model has three types of queries that were utilised. Focus queries urge the lecturers to ask questions, such as: what is important to teach? Teaching queries create curiosity about which way to present the concept to the learners. Learning queries ask whether the teaching–learning of the chosen concept has brought any outcomes for society and the community. An example of using the model in terms of biculturalism is discussed to follow.

Biculturalism in Aotearoa New Zealand does not imply individual's own culture or identity but refers to the commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi) (Orange, 2013). Therefore, there is a discussion as to whether the appropriate term to use in education is Tiriti-based practice rather bicultural practice (Jenkin, 2017). However, for this paper, bicultural practice is used throughout to refer to the committed practice of *kaiako* to promote *tikanga* practices of *tangata whenua*. The term 'biculturalism' acknowledges Te Tiriti o Waitangi as Aotearoa New Zealand's founding document, signed in 1840 by the representatives of Māori and the Crown. Te Whāriki confirms that central to this relationship between Māori and the Crown lies the spirit of partnership, and the obligations for participation and protection. Te Whāriki also draws attention to the welcoming of immigrants in Aotearoa New Zealand in the context of Tiriti-based partnership (Ministry of Education, 2017). The findings of the research show participants having a flawed understanding that the relevance of biculturalism is limited to a child or families from Māori ethnicities. With the application of the Teaching as Inquiry model, a focus query for lecturers is to find out what the learners already know and feel about Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Teaching queries include how to use the knowledge and attitudes to motivate learners to create a commitment towards bicultural practice. The learning queries are to ask questions such as to where and to what extent the learners are able to take the refined knowledge, skills and attitude in terms of bicultural practice.

PROPOSED RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

The proposed research is to create similar opportunities for early childhood educators working in early childhood services. Te Whāriki is a curriculum document that emphasises learning processes rather than knowledge outcomes (Soler & Miller, 2003). Learning from each other, learning from *tamariki* (children), and learning from *whānau* (family) is a process encouraged within the early childhood community. Te Whāriki indicates the teaching and learning practices in Aotearoa New Zealand to be reflective of *ako* (a Māori *kupu*, or word, which means to learn and to teach) (Pere, 1994), as seen in the use of the word 'ako' or 'akoranga' (the place of learning) in all four of its principles.

The following table shows the use of 'ako' and 'akoranga' in the principles of Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017, pp. 21–23).

TABLE 1: THE CONCEPT OF AKO WITHIN TE WHĀRIKI PRINCIPLES.

Principles	Explanation in te reo Māori	Explanation in English
Ngā hononga / Relationships	Mā roto i ngā piringa, i ngā whakahaere i waenganui o te mokopuna me te katoa, e whakatō te kaha ki roto i te mokopuna ki te ako.	Children learn through responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places and things.
Whakamana / Empowerment	Mā te whāriki o te kōhanga reo e whakatō te kaha ki roto i te mokopuna, ki te ako, kia pakari ai tana tipu.	The early childhood curriculum empowers the child to learn and grow.
Whānau tangata / Family and community	Me whiri mai te whānau, te hapū, te iwi, me tauwiwi, me ō rātou wāhi nohonga, ki roto i te whāriki o te kōhanga reo, hei āwhina, hei tautoko i te akoranga, i te whakatipuranga o te mokopuna.	The wider world of family and community is an integral part of the early childhood curriculum.
Kotahitanga / Holistic development	Mā te whāriki o te kōhanga reo e whakaata te kotahitanga o ngā whakahaere katoa mō te ako a te mokopuna, mō te tipu o te mokopuna.	The early childhood curriculum reflects the holistic way children learn and grow.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS WITHIN THE PROPOSED FRAMEWORK

To create a meaningful, documented place of ako, early childhood kaiako reflect on their practice. The proposed study is to create a model that the participants can fill and re-fill using queries. The research questions can be very similar to the completed research, but within the context of early childhood education:

- What are the cultural components acknowledged, incorporated and celebrated in the early childhood education services?
- What impact do these components have on tamariki in terms of learning?
- What impact do these components have on kaiako in terms of reflective practice?

METHODS AND METHODOLOGIES WITHIN THE PROPOSED FRAMEWORK

Sociocultural theoretical framework will be applicable to this research. The sociocultural theory of development was pioneered by Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (Ball, 2012). His theory explains how we learn from the context of the submerged knowledge of our culture from birth or even from before birth (Vygotsky, 1986), which he describes as ‘cultural mediating.’ In the context of adult teaching and learning, Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of human development suggests that people construct knowledge through experiential learning (Fry et al., 2009; Vygotsky, 1986). Experiential learning refers to the learning that happens from experience. The reflections of kaiako are thus dependent on experiencing first. Sociocultural theories are extended to ecology in Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) theory. Bronfenbrenner, in his ecological theory of development, identifies several systems, such as the microsystem, mesosystem, exo-system and macro-system (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Individuals exist in relation to these systems at varying proximities. Each of these systems influences one’s life either directly or contextually. Bronfenbrenner (2005) extended his theory to become a bioecological theory of human development. In the bioecological theory, Bronfenbrenner adds that the complex intertwined systems around individuals can produce different results due to the biological make-up of an individual over time. To use this umbrella of sociocultural or bio-ecological circumstances can be relevant, as learning from others within several interchangeable contexts is intended when inquiring into cultural components.

The samples will be from the early childhood centres that are listed in the ITE provider’s database. The author may invite several ITE providers to join in. Depending on the number of providers who become involved, the number of early childhood settings can be decided. At the current stage, the proposed study could involve the early childhood services from Unitec’s database. Under a qualitative research framework, five to ten services might be chosen to share their day-to-day stories, from a range of settings. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the range of diverse settings that are teacher led includes community and privately-owned centres, kindergartens, Montessori schools, Steiner

schools, Te Kohanga Reo and Pasifika language nests. The research participants could be tamariki, early childhood kaiako, centre managers and parents. Convenience sampling might be used as per availability of the participants. Interviews with centre managers might reveal the sector expectations. At least two parents from each centre could also be invited to join a group discussion to understand their perspectives of cultural growth of their own tamariki. A rich discussion can result in queries that are deeper in meanings and more relevant to the early childhood kaiako. From each centre, an observation/discussion with at least two tamariki groups could be conducted to understand the use of cultural components by tamariki. Three kaiako from each centre could also be interviewed to find out the spontaneous and attempted components of culture being used in early childhood pedagogy. Interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Opie, 1999) and FGDs (Krueger, 2009; Morgan, 1997) are likely to be appropriate research tools for this study. There will be no pre-determined responses (Howard, 2011) for FGDs or interviews. The interviews would be of approximately 30 minutes duration each and FGDs could be for 45–50 minutes each. They will take place at the premises of participating early childhood services. Thematic coding can also be applied in the proposed research. Ethics approval will need to be obtained for the study.

CURRICULUM-BASED DISCUSSION

While the data is not available to discuss further, an analysis of reflective questions indicated in Te Whāriki is examined here with the purpose of finding contextual ways to reflect. Te Whāriki has indicated five areas, or strands, under which tamariki learning can be identified and promoted. These areas are: Mana Atua or Wellbeing, Mana Whenua or Belonging, Mana Reo or Communication, Mana Tangata or Contribution, and Mana Aotūroa or Exploration (Ministry of Education, 2017, pp. 24–25). Reflective questions for kaiako are suggested under each of these strands. In total, there are 59 questions to stimulate thought, as indicated in the following table.

TABLE 2: TE WHĀRIKI STRANDS AND QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION.

Strand	Number of questions for reflection
Mana Atua / Wellbeing	12
Mana Whenua / Belonging	11
Mana Tangata / Contribution	12
Mana Reo / Communication	12
Mana Aotūroa / Exploration	12

In this article, two questions from each strand, a total of ten questions, are selected to be discussed.

Example questions for Mana Atua or Wellbeing:

- In what ways might kaiako work to ensure that feeding, toileting and nappy-changing practices are familiar to children?
- What cultural considerations are/should be taken account of when promoting children’s health and wellbeing? (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 30)

These questions create opportunities for kaiako to notice the components of culture in practice. Feeding, for example, can be reflective of differences in families and their ethnic groups. The common items in a lunch box can be a source of ako, not only for tamariki, but also for kaiako. The concept of karakia kai (a blessing said or sung before eating), hāngi (a traditional Māori method of cooking) and kūmara as a traditional food item in Aotearoa are components of culture, as the services are located in Aotearoa New Zealand where Te Tiriti o Waitangi is seen as a foundation document (Orange, 2013). Religious requirements around food intake are another element that is commonly documented in ECE services. The Māori model of health and wellbeing, Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1998), captures emotional, spiritual, physical and whānau health to be the four important aspects. This model has

universal relevance and shares similar cultural values of many cultures around the world. Considerations as such can be linked to the celebrations of religious and cultural festivals in the early childhood services.

Example questions for Mana Whenua or Belonging:

- How do kaiako learn about the languages and cultures of all families, and in what ways are these affirmed in the [early childhood] setting?
- How might kaiako help children and families learn more about the local area? (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 35)

These questions may refer to the use of community languages with the support of whānau. However, in many cases the parents of tamariki in early childhood education settings are working (Kamerman, 2006). It might take extra efforts for teachers to capture funds of knowledge from busy parents who notice and appreciate tamariki in their own culture. If possible, kaiako can work together with whānau to plan experiences acknowledging their language and culture. Greetings and displays might represent and affirm these. The reflection here can also reveal components from community resources, such as visits to parks, zoos and museums. Further, centres often invite people from the local area who represent a career, such as the Police and the Fire Safety Department.

Example questions for Mana Tangata or Contribution:

- Do all children experience fair and equitable access to, and participation in, play and learning opportunities?
- What do kaiako do when children are excluded by others? (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 40)

These questions will allow the teachers to see the stereotypes that are commonly present in society (Rubin et al., 1998). Teachers, while planning for experiences, can reflect on how the materials to be provided, stories to be told and strategies to be used can include a range of voices and perspectives that challenge the ones that are frequently available. Teachers can also ask themselves whether they are contributing to empowering Māori and Pasifika learners. Reflection on these questions may also lead to thoughts on supporting tamariki with additional needs.

Example questions for Mana Reo or Communication:

- In what ways and to what extent do kaiako identify and respond to children's non-verbal communication?
- In what ways is te reo Māori used and encouraged in this setting as a living language? (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 40)

Reflection on these questions may lead to ways of communication that are commonly used for infants. Sign language, as one of the official languages of Aotearoa, can be given importance. Bicultural practices, including the use of te reo Māori both in displays and in interactions, could be examined. It has been questioned that other languages are used more from a tokenistic approach in the sector (Jenkin, 2017). This claim can also be scrutinised locally. How much of the local history of the location of the centre is incorporated in planned teaching-learning experiences can be considered by the kaiako.

Example questions for Mana Aotūroa or Exploration:

- In what ways might kaiako show children that their play and imagination are valued?
- What domain knowledge would help kaiako to recognise, respond to and extend children's generation and refinement of working theories? (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 50)

Reflection on these questions might introduce challenges in presenting play in the form of learning to families, as some might see play as a waste of time. Families who might value structured learning need to be considered, and can cause dilemmas for teachers. Connecting with children can also require the use of components from contemporary media for children. Increased use of technology within the ecological systems of children can be an area of reflection on the changes in the ways we live (Johnson, 2010). Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes the

ecological systems that children are immersed in. The microsystem is the child's closest system, in which they spend a significant amount of time and create crucial relationships. Examples of the microsystem can be the home as well as early childhood services. Increased use of technology in both microsystems is usually noticeable. This might influence the factors that are part of the macrosystem, which is the outermost layer surrounding the child, including subtle but important processes such as politics and cultural values. The systems within the macrosystem are the mesosystem (relationship between two microsystems) and exo-systems (systems that have indirect influence). Reflective queries can be made to see how this generation of children is adopting and using technology and media knowledge to develop working theories.

CONCLUSION

Within the very busy environment of early childhood education, teachers are likely to be engaged with reflection in action (a type of reflection that happens when you are on the floor with tamariki) (Schön, 1983, as cited in Golubich, 1997). However, reflection *on* action (a type of reflection that happens more formally after the event has occurred) can also reveal information and methods that are useful in the lives of tamariki. Both retrospective and prospective approaches (Hayes, 2010) can be valuable, formulating future queries directed by past experiences of teaching and learning.

The proposed study might introduce ideas that are useful within the early childhood context of Aotearoa New Zealand. The findings of the proposed research will provide the sector with sets of examples of conducted reflections that reveal focus query, teaching query and learning query on the components identified by the local teams. Another idea to consider (as indicated by one of the participants in the 2021 Unitec/MIT Research Symposium) is to conduct comparative studies with other countries; for example, a study with the Bangladeshi early childhood community. It might be interesting to do so, as in Bangladesh children are quite oppressed by adult superiority, especially in terms of independent decision-making (Mohajan, 2014). This idea was raised because both the author and the other symposium participant are from Bangladesh.

If implemented within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, the findings will be helpful for early childhood teachers to stimulate reflective thinking. They will also interest people working in schools to understand the process of transition. Educators, lecturers and kaiako of any field of education who would like to think more about culture within their profession will be informed by this study. This study can also add to the knowledge of early childhood centre supervisors, managers and teachers. Researchers whose research interests involve culture in education, professional growth and/or reflective practices will be interested in the findings of this study. Limitations of the study might be that, if conducted in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, the findings might be less relevant to services that are located in other centres and regions, due to differing diversity within different geographical locations in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Inquiring about components of culture in early childhood services can open the gate to explicit knowledge for teachers (Hedges, 2012). In this shifting world where teaching is imbued with uncertainty, unpredictability and even anxiety, it is worth getting to know the context better and more deeply (Hansen, 1997). A simple definition of reflection is to "stop, think and change," so that educators are able to reconsider their actions to improve future practices (O'Connor & Diggins, 2002, p. 9). However, a more complex explanation might be more useful, knowing that many aspects of sociocultural perspectives are invisible and intangible, and critical reflection is needed for the exploration of culture and its components (Sanchez & Thorp, 2008). In the area of reflection, the following quote may be old, but it is worth mentioning here: "If the artist does not perfect a new vision in his process of doing, he acts mechanically and repeats some old model fixed like a blueprint in his mind" (Dewey, 1934, p. 50). A fixed blueprint in the mind of the kaiako cannot lead to successful teaching and learning for tamariki (children). In a rapidly changing society, it is important for kaiako to look at practices and rethink their actions (Sinnema & Aitken, 2012). Reflection helps kaiako to grow, be resilient, be more positive, and focus on solutions rather than problems. It also emphasises professional criticism rather than environmental criticism (Leroux & Thèorêt, 2014). The proposed

study may open doors for early childhood kaiako to reflect on concepts that are otherwise ignored. The study may also motivate the participants to knock on doors that are difficult to open.

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