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### **Reflections**

#### **Critical multiculturalism: The challenge of multiculturalism within a New Zealand bicultural context - A Chinese perspective**

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##### **Abstract**

For decades, notions of multiculturalism have been embraced by many countries in order to acknowledge and include diverse cultures and ethnicities. It has been assumed that the learning needs and rights of ethnic minority children will be catered for by implementing multicultural education. This article argues that multiculturalism cannot address the complexities of ethnicity, culture and identity, instead it perpetuates stereotypical views of ethnic groups and fails to bring about social equity. New Zealand's social and political landscape, its national early childhood curriculum and strategic plans, have further contributed to the difficulty of implementing successful multiculturalism within New Zealand and its early childhood education provision. Being the cultural 'other', Chinese traditional and conventional macro beliefs can be applied to counter dominant discourses and practices within New Zealand early childhood settings. This article argues for critical multiculturalism to address the inequity between ethnicities that multiculturalism perpetuates.

As in other English-speaking countries, such as Australia, United States, Canada, and England, New Zealand is becoming increasingly multiethnic due to global migration. According to the 2006 New Zealand Census, Europeans make up 67.6% of the country's population, whilst ethnic groups such as Māori (the indigenous people of New Zealand), 'Pacific Peoples' and 'Asian' make up the rest (Statistics New Zealand, 2006). The term 'Pacific Peoples' refers to immigrants from the various Pacific nations, such as the Cook Islands, Niue, Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Tokelau, Tuvalu and so on, and 'Asian' includes peoples from diverse countries in Asia, ranging from Afghanistan in the west to Indonesia in the east. Chinese is the largest Asian group in New Zealand, making up 44% of the Asian population (Statistics New Zealand, 2001).

Statistics further show that 37% of the Auckland population were born overseas (Statistics New Zealand, 2006) and there has been a 22.6% and 16.5% increase of Asian and Pasifika child enrolment respectively in early childhood services between 2004 to 2008, which is the highest increase among the four major ethnic groups mentioned in the above (Ministry of Education, 2008). As an early childhood teacher educator who often visits student-teachers at early childhood centres in Auckland, I have also become aware that many centres are filled with immigrant children and families who have limited English and little understanding of the mainstream New Zealand education system and practice. In response to the diverse needs of children and families of different ethnicities, multiculturalism is commonly incorporated within early childhood learning programmes.

This article will first problematise conventional multiculturalism and theorise key concepts related to multiculturalism and critical multiculturalism. An examination of multiculturalism in New Zealand will follow, applying critical perspectives to deconstruct some of the discourses related to the country's multicultural early childhood education. This will include critiquing some of the common teaching practices and official documents published by the Ministry of Education, and their role in perpetuating stereotypical views of ethnic groups and social division. As a Chinese immigrant from Hong Kong, I will throughout this article make reference to Chinese ways of learning and parenting, using Chinese as the cultural 'other' to counter some of the dominant discourses in New Zealand. It is not the author's intention to devalue any ethnic group or any culture, particularly Māori, the indigenous people of New Zealand and their native culture. It is also important to emphasise that although Chinese is only one Asian group and does not represent all Asians, statistical data of Asian and Chinese will be used interchangeably throughout the article. This is because statistical data of Chinese is buried within statistics pertaining to the wider Asian group and Chinese people constitute almost half of the Asian population in New Zealand.

### **Multiculturalism views each ethnic group as homogenous and static**

Policies espousing multiculturalism have been widely used within education settings in an attempt to include all ethnic groups. However, according to May (1999a), "multicultural education has had a largely negligible impact to date on the life chances of minority students and the racialized attitudes of majority students" (p.1). May (2000) identifies

multiculturalism as 'corporate pluralism' in which each minority group is considered as a legal entity whose members behave homogeneously, thereby undermining individual differences and personal autonomy. Furthermore, Rhedding-Jones (2002) believes multiculturalism promotes ethnocentrism, and it upholds stereotypical and universal representation of individual members of ethnic groups. Within the context of education, teachers may assume all children of the same ethnic group have homogeneous and common learning needs.

Although each ethnic group has some common distinguishable attributes which Becher (2004) identifies as "culturally essentialising categories" (p. 81), one must be cautious of over-generalising these commonalities or allowing them to be essentialised as the authentic representation of that ethnic group, thus delegitimising historical and localised variations and specificities. The case study undertaken by Chan (2006) suggests that there are some common Chinese parenting and children's learning styles and that Chinese epistemology can be used to explain these traits. For example, many Chinese children, whose parents believe in Confucianism, do not learn through play (Chan, 2006, Mellor, 2000) because these Chinese parents believe in *Qin you gong, xi wu yi* (Diligence reaps rewards, play yields nothing) which is a proverb they use frequently to remind their children of the virtue and vice of hard work and play respectively. These parents value effort and industriousness and believe that the processes of learning and teaching "do not have to be enjoyable, or even interesting" (Mellor, 2000, p. 105). It is, however, important to point out that many Chinese parents, especially those who

have chosen to migrate to English speaking countries, may prefer their children to experience the western approach of learning and subscribe to the notion of learning through play.

Essentialising members of an ethnic group does not allow specificities of ethnicities and identities. Very often when people of the same ethnic origin do not share the same worldview and identity, they use 'hyphenated identity' to claim a specific ethnic identity within the larger common ethnic group (Modood, 1992 cited in Short & Carrington, 1999) and to indicate their dual identities. As an example, *Hong Kong-Chinese*, who have experienced colonisation and colonised education, have had exposure to a huge amount of western ideology and culture; they therefore hold different worldviews to *Mainland-Chinese* who have experienced the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and governance by the Communist Party. Furthermore, many Chinese immigrant children who are brought up in New Zealand label themselves as *Kiwi-Chinese* to claim a specific identity within the larger Chinese ethnic group. Due to the different historical and political backgrounds that mainland and overseas Chinese have experienced, not all Chinese share the same macro beliefs. The validity of Chinese or any other ethnic group having homogeneous identity and culture is therefore challengeable.

Identity, culture and ethnicity are fluid and they are continually being negotiated and shifted. The concept of hybridity has been used by Becher (2004) and May (1999b) to highlight the fluidity of culture and cultural boundaries. May also uses the term 'cosmopolitan alternative' to argue that ethnicity and culture are "continually negotiated and recreated"

(1999b, p. 21). He believes each individual has "multiple, shifting and, at times, nonsynchronous identities" (May, 2000, p. 9) shaped by gender, socio-economic status, religion and political preferences, and the social rights of an individual may be determined by any of these identity alternatives. Rhedding-Jones (2001) uses the phrase 'shifting ethnicities' to represent transnational people who have more than one ethnicity, one language and one set of cultural beliefs and practices. She believes that these diverse and multiple ways of being and doing represent today's ethnic hybridities and diasporas, and "given sufficient critique, all discourses give way to other discourses, and all practices transform" (Rhedding-Jones, 2002, p. 103). Hence the cultural ways of life of any person or ethnic group do not remain static.

May (1999b) explains Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' as the way of material life that a person chooses to practice. Habitus is not merely about values and beliefs, it is embodied in an individual's disposition and operates at an unconscious level. Bourdieu also argued that "habitus does not determine individual behaviour. A range of choices, or strategic practices, is presented to individuals within the internalised framework of the habitus" (cited in May, 1999b, p. 28). At the same time, Short and Carrington (1999) highlight the risk of reinforcing racist attitudes if multicultural education is simply used to learn about the lifestyle of ethnic groups. To incorporate multiculturalism in practice, it is not uncommon for early childhood teachers to set up a mini corner of the 'United Nations' by displaying a world map, a list of greetings in different languages, a range of cultural artefacts, such as

chopsticks, saris, Japanese paper fans and so on. I would suggest that, when setting up the corner, early childhood teachers consider: to what extent will children be engaged in critical dialogue so they become aware that each family is different and people choose how to live their lives within the options available to them? Will the display of artefacts merely perpetuate stereotypical and racialised views of different ethnic groups?

### **Critical multiculturalism to enhance equity**

Multicultural education that looks at lifestyle and cultural differences between ethnicities perpetuates stereotypical views of ethnic groups, social segregation and inequity. According to Bader (2007), multiculturalism policies will only succeed if they focus on addressing inequities (cited in Biles & Spoonley, 2007). Hence a critical and postmodern form of multicultural education, critical multiculturalism which is grounded in social justice (Nieto, 1999), is the preferred pedagogy to teach multicultural education without perpetuating the existing stereotypical and racist views of ethnic minority children and families, instead it advocates justice and equity for them.

Research shows that many teachers do not have adequate skills and knowledge to teach ethnic minority children because they are teaching 'other people's children' (Delpit, 1995), and many do not know how to include multicultural perspectives in their practice (Reiff, Neuharth-Pritchett & Pearson, 2000). Ukpokodu (2003) claims that many teachers, majority and minority alike, are unaware of the social inequality hidden within the education system, curriculum and teaching practice, whilst others display "dispositions of

resistance” (p. 18), denying the existence of injustice when they are informed about this, and refusing to improve their level of critical consciousness. These teachers see themselves as the norm since they are the dominant social group and consider that all others must be measured against them (Reiff et al, 2000; Rhedding-Jones, 2001). They don't see themselves as the ones that need to change. Some may even believe that they are living in a very *tolerant* country, denying the existence of racism or any other forms of discrimination because they have not experienced any in their life! The term 'tolerant' in itself contains negative connotations – if you do not perceive my beliefs and practices as inferior to yours, why would you need to *tolerate* them? As identity is complicated by intersections of ethnicity, social class, gender, religious and sexual orientation, teachers who are unable to recognise their own multiple identities fail to accept the equally diverse cultural identities that others may have (Eunsook, 2001). A critical multicultural education requires teachers to “engage critically with all ethnic and cultural backgrounds, including their own” (May, 1999b, p. 33).

Furthermore, teachers need to challenge commonsense assumptions and realise that they are shaped by, albeit without them knowing, dominant social discourses (Giroux, 2001). If they simply maintain the status quo, they are indirectly supporting the marginalisation of minorities. Teachers who belong to the dominant group must become aware of their conscious and unconscious imposition on others. Critical pedagogy aims at establishing pluralistic teaching and learning, and directing teachers to empower children and parents by supporting them to participate in

decisions that affect them and construct knowledge in their own ways. Parents who have limited English need to be assured that they will be 'listened' to, and early childhood teachers need “to develop the knowledge and confidence to work with parents who have limited English” (Hooks, 2008, p.98). Ethnic minority children need to know that there are equal learning opportunities in the centre, and that their unique learning styles will be recognised and accepted.

Teaching in a multiethnic society requires critical pedagogy to best serve the heterogeneous interests of each child (Eunsook, 2001). Being citizens of a multiethnic society, it is important for New Zealand early childhood teachers to practice critical forms of multiculturalism in order to address issues of inequity and to advocate for social justice. Yet implementing multiculturalism within the unique socio-political landscape of New Zealand is not without challenge.

### **Multiculturalism versus biculturalism in New Zealand**

In honouring the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi, Māori, the indigenous people of New Zealand, and the British Crown, the co-signatory of the Treaty, were to govern New Zealand in equal partnership. Māori as the *tangata whenua* (people of this land), are entitled to the same rights as Pākehā (New Zealanders of European descent). As a result, New Zealand is committed to biculturalism which acknowledges the cultural heritages of both partners to the Treaty. Over a hundred years later, a significant number of Pacific Peoples settled in New Zealand from the late 50s to 70s to contribute to the country's labour force (Spoonley & Macpherson, 2004). Following on from this wave of migration, it was the turn of

Asian immigrants to arrive in the country, and they eventually outnumbered the Pacific Peoples. Asian is now the third largest ethnic group in New Zealand. The New Zealand population census of 2006 indicates that European is the largest ethnic group, Māori being the second largest, followed by Asian and 'Pacific Peoples' (Statistics New Zealand, 2006).

As New Zealand becomes increasingly multiethnic, multiculturalism has often featured within "state-sponsored policy" to acknowledge and accommodate the diverse needs of ethnic minority groups in order to ensure that the country remains "attractive to immigrants" (Spoonley & Macpherson, 2004, p.178). Yet, due to its Treaty commitments, multiculturalism in New Zealand can only be situated within a wider bicultural context, and many academics have written about the conflicts between multiculturalism and biculturalism in New Zealand (Lunt, Spoonley & Mataira, 2002; Marotta, 2000; May, 2004). For example, Marotta (2000) claims that multiculturalism can be seen as a political agenda to subordinate Māori, treating Māori as just another ethnic group and "denying the unique importance of Māori people" (p. 181) in New Zealand, and that it can also be considered as allowing the dominant group, Pākehā, "to hold onto their power and wealth and avoid dealing with Māori-Pākehā relationships" (p. 181).

The dominant Pākehā and the indigenous Māori, moreover, become intimidated by the increasing number of multiethnic groups residing in New Zealand. As an example, discriminations against Asian immigrants in New Zealand have well been documented (Bedford & Ho, 2008; Ip, 2003; Ip & Murphy, 2005; Spoonley & Macpherson, 2004). A survey that

examines attitudes of New Zealanders to immigrants and immigration further indicates that "Māori attitudes to immigrants and immigration were consistently less positive and more negative than those of non-Māori" (Gendall, Spoonley & Trlin, 2007, p. 33). It seems that immigrants are challenged by both the national majority and minority. Integrating multiculturalism remains a challenge in a bicultural New Zealand society, and this challenge extends to its early childhood education provision.

### **Multiculturalism in New Zealand early childhood education**

Another hurdle in implementing multiculturalism in New Zealand, this time within early childhood education, lies with its renowned early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, which has earned national and international recognition. *Te Whāriki* states that, "this curriculum is founded on the following aspirations for children: to grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9). It has, however, been suggested that despite its socio-cultural intentions, the principles, strands, goals and learning outcomes of *Te Whāriki* work together to create the 21<sup>st</sup> century ideal children of a globalised economy and western enterprise society, and it supports "predominantly the interests of those in power rather than challenging existing power relations" (Duhn, 2006, p. 195). Thus, the aspirations of ethnic minority families may not be well served by this curriculum.

*Te Whāriki* is a bicultural document written in both English and Māori. It is

“the first bicultural curriculum statement developed in New Zealand. It contains curriculum specifically for Māori immersion services in early childhood education and establishes, throughout the document as a whole, the bicultural nature of curriculum for all early childhood services” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 7). *Te Whāriki* claims that it can be applied to different early childhood care and education contexts, but it specifically highlights the Māori immersion and ‘Tagata Pasefika’ programmes as two distinctive contexts where the curriculum can be used. It also states that although some of the examples used in the document refer particularly to Pacific Islands early childhood centres, ‘other’ ethnic groups may use them as models “to support their cultural heritage within the early childhood curriculum” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p.12), but no specific suggestions or explanations are provided. While *Te Whāriki* contains the statement that it “actively contributes towards countering racism and other forms of prejudice” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 18), it assumes that issues of diversity will be addressed by teachers, and “it does not challenge teachers to develop teaching strategies from a critical perspective” (Duhn, 2006, p. 196).

Rhedding-Jones (2002) also agrees that the curriculum still has a long way to go when it comes to acknowledging children and families with multiple ethnicities, even though *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) highlights its commitment to recognise and respond to diverse cultures and to provide equitable learning opportunities for all children. She believes that in terms of its bicultural and multicultural nature, *Te Whāriki* manages to prove itself as a bicultural curriculum that looks after the indigenous language

and culture of New Zealand, but that it fails to cater for the needs of children who are neither Māori nor Pākehā (Rhedding-Jones, 2002). Many teachers may be unaware that some ethnic groups are not being considered within the curriculum, and therefore they may not make a conscious effort to include *all* children and families. At the practical level, the curriculum has not provided pluralistic teaching strategies to cater for the diverse needs of children and families of different ethnicities. Dominant ways of teaching and learning are found throughout the document.

For example, within the exploration strand in *Te Whāriki*, children are expected to learn through “active exploration of the environment” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 82). In a tokenistic manner, the curriculum recognises Māori may have different ways of knowing and making sense of the world, but some of the goals in this strand pose particular challenges to some ethnic minority children. Also, *Te Whāriki* would like to see “children experience an environment where their play is valued as meaningful learning and the importance of spontaneous play is recognised; they gain confidence in and control of their bodies; they learn strategies for active exploration, thinking, and reasoning; they develop working theories for making sense of the natural, social, physical, and material worlds” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 82). These discourses expect children to become autonomous and independent learners who are responsible for their own learning; yet some ethnic minorities may find these “desirable” beliefs, practices and pedagogies not so desirable. Some Chinese parents, who believe in collectivism and Confucianism, do not expect their children to make decisions

based on their individual's needs and, as mentioned previously, they see no value in play. As a result, many Chinese children are expected to conform to the group, they are not encouraged to make decisions because decisions are to be made by parents who understand what the family or extended family needs; and they do not know how to learn through play (Chan, 2006). Mainstream teachers who apply cultural norms to assess children may assume that Chinese children fail to initiate play and to explore the environment, thus positioning these children within a deficit paradigm. Without highlighting and recognising the diverse ways of learning that are upheld by ethnic minorities, *Te Whāriki* runs the risks of perpetuating hegemonic learning discourses and silencing other possibilities such as learning by observing and skills-based learning.

Another cultural assumption or imposition on ethnic groups comes from the concept of parent-teacher partnership, which is a key feature of *Te Whāriki*. This form of partnership poses particular challenges to some Chinese immigrant families as well. The importance of parental participation in and contribution to observation, assessment and evaluation of the curriculum is highlighted within the principle of 'Family and Community' (Ministry of Education, 1996). Teachers are expected to work closely with parents to enhance the learning of children. However, despite the positive intentions of *Te Whāriki* and the possibilities of parent-teacher collaboration suggested by the curriculum, many Chinese parents who have different perceptions of teachers and hold high regard for them may not feel confident to become involved in their children's learning at childcare centres. This is because the

majority of Chinese raise their children according to Confucianism which accords teachers with great social status, authority and power that students and parents submit to. "It is very rare that Chinese parents challenge the teacher's strategies or raise their children's learning concerns with teachers" (Chan, 2006, p.37). Of course it is crucial not to essentialise Chinese parents as a homogeneous group. Nonetheless, since *Te Whāriki* does not identify possible cultural or individual differences in the perceptions of teachers, Chinese parents who do not actively collaborate with teachers due to their cultural worldview may be considered as not interested in their children's learning.

Furthermore, Chinese immigrant parents who are new to the country and have limited English may not feel that they know the education system and teaching practice well enough to contribute to the early childhood centres (Chan, 2006). Without critical awareness of the possible insecurity and isolation these parents may experience, teachers may not make a conscious effort to initiate partnerships with these parents; once again they may think these parents are not interested in their children's learning. Research shows that teachers provide fewer resources and literacy learning experience for ESL (English as a Second Language) children and do not reach out to families when they perceive these ESL parents as not interested, demonstrating how teachers' perceptions of ethnic and linguistic minorities' parental involvement influence the actual learning and achievement of minority children (Huss-Keeler, 1997). It will be even more worrying if these teachers think that providing fewer resources and less challenging activities is *culturally appropriate* or if they simply



give up trying to communicate due to language and cultural barriers, perpetuating the status quo, rather than advocating for ESL children.

The *10 Year Strategic Plan for Early Childhood Education* is another important document that highlights “specific strategies for the building of an ECE sector responsive to the needs of Māori and Pasifika peoples” (Ministry of Education, 2002, p.2). The plan stresses the need to promote collaborative relationships for Māori and Pasifika families and to increase participation of Māori and Pasifika children in quality early childhood education services. In doing so, the Ministry considers Māori and Pasifika families as homogenous groups and it essentialises the needs of their children. It suggests that the Ministry assumes early childhood centres are better places than homes as sites for the learning and development of young children from these two ethnic groups. Rhedding-Jones (2002), with regard to her Norwegian context, talks about how minority parents keep their children away from childcare centres to avoid being Norwegianised too early. Perhaps some of the collectivist Māori and Pasifika families do not agree with the culture and practice of childcare centres and they prefer to have their extended families to provide the childcare rather than sending their children to centres to be ‘Kiwi-ised’? Furthermore, just like the ethnic families in Norway, some Māori and Pasifika families may also have a belief that they are unable to influence what happens in childcare centres.

In highlighting Māori and Pasifika children and families and not making specific reference to other ethnic groups, *Te Whāriki* and the *10 Year Strategic Plan*

*for Early Childhood Education* have created a binary ethnic division and implicated the notion of the ‘other’. These official documents imply that the culture, practice and needs of the ‘other’ ethnic groups do not share the same importance as Māori and Pasifika groups. Furthermore, Māori and Pasifika are seen as homogenous groups with universal needs. Their individual choices of habitus, and the hybridity and fluidity of their cultural beliefs and practices are not recognised.

### **Conclusion**

Due to its unique socio-political and early childhood education contexts, integrating multiculturalism within a bicultural New Zealand will continue to remain difficult. To overcome the number of concerns raised in this article, early childhood educators need to investigate the diverse challenges and injustices experienced by ethnic minority children and families, apply critical multiculturalism to deconstruct curriculum or regulatory impositions, engage in ongoing critical dialogues and reflections to resist practices and pedagogies that perpetuate the status quo, and allow and construct multiplicities of possibility. I would further suggest that educators actively communicate with ethnic families to explore the resources and knowledge that families can contribute to the early childhood community. However, families will only participate and contribute if educational policies, curriculum and teaching practices are equitable, and they perceive that their cultural ways of being and knowing are being valued and affirmed. As Jakubowicz (2007) believes, multiculturalism will only be successful “if it re-emerges as a dialogue of negotiation between cultural communities rather than a set of instructions handed down to

minorities" (cited in Biles & Spoonley, 2007, p. 195).

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