

Commentary

## Creating a culturally safe learning environment for young children in institutionalised childcare (a personal reflection on current practice)

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*With rapid globalisation taking place in the past few decades, and as a result of opening doors to migrants and refugees from all around the world, early childhood centres in Aotearoa New Zealand are rich in cultural diversity. Although the early childhood curriculum is a treaty-based bicultural document, it also recognises children’s unique individualities and sociocultural backgrounds as a valuable source of learning. The childcare centre involved in this reflection is blessed with children and their families and staff from rich culturally diverse backgrounds. The learning program in accordance with the centre’s philosophy is designed to be as equitable as possible in order to respond positively to this diversity. This includes language, cultural artefacts, music, celebrations and parental involvement in the centre. This Reggio Emilia inspired centre has implemented an inclusive culture for global citizenship using a number of strategies discussed in this reflection.*

### Introduction

The Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum (Te Whāriki)* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) is a bicultural curriculum that emphasises inclusive practice. In our childcare centre, we recently reviewed our current practices in order to enhance them. This was guided by the recent amendments to our early childhood education curriculum giving emphasis to acknowledging children’s sociocultural background for learning and development. The new version informs us of the need to create more culturally inclusive practices and to establish global citizenship while adhering to the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi. It also acknowledges and empowers kaiako (teachers) as powerful actors of change (MoE, 2017). This article will discuss what cultural diversity looks like in our centre, and how culturally inclusive practice and pedagogy untangles the complexities of cultural diversity.

### Background

In the curriculum *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017), it is emphasised that every child should be culturally, physically and emotionally safe in their learning environment and their funds of knowledge should be valued. To make the learning environment culturally safe, it is imperative to find strategies in order to embrace the diversity of cultures. In the community of practice of our childcare centre, cultural diversity includes European, Māori, Samoan, Fijian, Niuean, Tongan, Chinese, Indian and African. The staff of the centre (18 in number) also bring a wealth of cultural capital that is useful for intercultural relations. In an attempt to respond to these cultures, the centre encouraged professional development programs for the staff, parental involvement in the centre program, celebrating cultural events and using language and other resources from the cultures of the children and the staff.

The *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) objectives uphold a culturally responsive environment for early childhood education through its four principles and five strands. Written in both English and te reo Māori, it connects every principle and strand with Māori concepts. What is more important is it states “those working in early childhood education respond to the changing demographic landscape by valuing and supporting the different cultures represented in their settings” (MoE, 2017, p. 3).

## Commentary

The curriculum goes on to say that it “supports children from all backgrounds to grow up strong in identity, language and culture” (MoE, 2017, p.7). In support, Mitchell et al. (2015) state that *Te Whāriki* “plays a critical role in strengthening identity” and “biculturalism is a foundational principle” (p. 34). The curriculum also acknowledges children’s rights as global citizens who need to be “adaptive, creative and resilient” in a rapidly changing and increasingly connected world (MoE, 2017, p. 7). Thus, their learning journeys should be shaped by optimistic views in order for them to adjust to new contexts, opportunities and challenges.

Children’s rights are fundamental in our Reggio Emilia philosophy and in our curriculum as emphasised by the United Nations documents. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) states in Article 2 that no child should be discriminated against due to their cultural beliefs and values and in Article 30 that children of the minority should be able to enjoy their own culture in the society they live in (United Nations Human Rights, n.d.). Responding to other cultures within a dominant culture is established as a goal in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). The United Nations SDG 10 (see appendix) emphasises the importance of empowering marginalised people in every country to “ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities” (United Nations SDG, n.d.). Establishing a culturally safe environment as emphasised in Aotearoa New Zealand curriculum affirms equity in socially sustainable development.

### Objectives

The recent curriculum revisions in early childhood education influenced our centre towards the objectives for reviewing the practice and pedagogy in including children’s funds of knowledge and cultural capital of the kaiako. The greatest challenge was to learn about other cultures and languages in order to respond to them. The objective of this reflection is to review our current practice for a full-fledged inclusive learning environment.

I believe a high level of cultural diversity in the centre opens the doors to think and rethink non-discriminatory, inclusive practices in the context of human rights and sustainable development goals. Reflecting on our own practice will enable us to implement transformational measures in order to move ahead from the current practice to a more profound and robust approach.

### Reflective question

How might kaiako (teachers) take responsibility of steering the daily program in order to create a culturally responsive and culturally safe learning environment for the infants and toddlers and in what ways (using cultural capital, professional development)?

### Reducing inequalities

According to Mitchell et al. (2015), promoting first language and cultural practices in the centres is the basis for good communication, learning and development. Cultural diversity in a learning environment reflects the wealth of learning experiences children bring through their funds of knowledge. The tangible and intangible aspects of their cultures are shared with the others. As Vygotsky (as cited in MoE, 2017) described, children learn from their peers and adults, and learning is a collaborative effort. Children will feel comfortable and become confident learners if they see their cultures ‘living with them’. When children experience how to be sensitive and responsive to other cultures, they will create a more harmonious living environment for others and for themselves. Culturally responsive approaches ensure “effective advancement of the right to education” (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2009, p. 107).

## Commentary

**How do we respond to the other cultures within a dominant culture?**

Learning about another culture is a challenge and is not effective unless we immerse ourselves in it, such as living in that culture. In my opinion, educational practitioners face the biggest challenge in promoting first language and cultural practices, which is vital for the learning and development of a child (MoE, 2017) in institutionalised childcare. The foundation for knowing the cultures can be achieved in several ways. For example, communication with the families about their values and beliefs and incorporating those into the program are among the constructive methods to create a culturally safe environment. As a starting point, to break down boundaries, a few phrases from children's native languages could be used daily; and the availability of their cultural artefacts is fundamental. Teachers are the driving force here to make the learning environment culturally safe for those children. The curriculum *Te Whāriki* suggests that kaiako (teachers) should take the lead by actively learning about other cultures and prioritising each individual child's cultural values and using them as a foundation for learning (MoE, 2017).

**Restoring intercultural dialogue: Pluralistic approach**

Mitchell et al. (2015) state that teachers need to position themselves as learners "removing deficit thinking about the children of 'other' cultures and power imbalances" (p. 52). When responding to cultural diversity, there are challenges to overcome such as the risk of miscommunication, prejudice, stereotypes and conflict. In order to facilitate learning about other cultures, openness to the views of other cultures is an important avenue. Pluralistic approaches, which are democratically conceptualised, recognise the "right to diversity of all linguistic and cultural varieties". According to Giselbrecht (2009), "Pluralistic concepts support attitudes of openness, tolerance and understanding towards the cultures, social structures and values of other communities" (p. 12).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2009) suggests the following be considered as pedagogical approaches in order to respond to other cultures in early childhood settings: reinforce community-based practices; use local languages for initial literacy; create culturally responsive programs for children and adults; and increase the number of teachers from indigenous groups and ethnic minorities. Moreover, incorporate skills specific to indigenous cultures (for example weaving, art, music, dance) into general skills; develop appropriate learning materials; link education to the other aspects of learner's life; and use and integrate formal and non-formal learning styles and teaching methods.

**Background of the centre program**

The planned program was implemented in the under two (U2) area of the centre in 2017. This centre is licensed for 90 children both in under two and over two areas. The centre roll for under two is 20-22 children but daily attendance varies. With the minimum adult: child ratio of 1:5 there are seven teachers including the team leader, with five on the floor at any given time. The aim of this program was to improve the quality of the practice.

**Reviewing current practice**

The recently revised curriculum *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) informs us about strengthening culturally inclusive practices for more equitable learning outcomes for our learners. It also emphasises the role of kaiako as a facilitator promoting and ensuring each individual child's participation in the learning program. The current internal evaluation process in the centre caters for the teachers to reflect and research in depth about diverse cultures and find ways to include all celebrations and languages in their program. We reviewed our current practice in order to find out what our current practice is like and how we should change in terms of teacher professional development and cultural capital. The

## Commentary

conclusions based on pedagogical discussions aim at implementing new strategies and reinforcing current strategies in order to demonstrate inclusion and to develop intercultural competencies.

Our centre has a range of material resources from several cultures, including Māori, Samoan, African, Chinese and Indian. These include dress-up materials, books and music CDs. In addition to the above, we gathered information about each child's language, culture and the parents' information through the *All About Me* page which is displayed in children's portfolios. This information was used to create an adapted and blended version of pepeha and mihi to display on the wall. This included the name of the child and the parents, their greeting and the flag of their native country.

### Teachers' cultural capital and professional development

Teachers' intercultural competencies as identified in the centre can be analysed according to Bennett's model of acquisition of intercultural competence (1986).

#### Ethnocentrism:

1. Denial of cultural differences (disinterested in cultural differences).
2. Defence against cultural differences (where one views one's own culture as the only viable one).
3. Minimisation of cultural differences (where one's own cultural view is experienced as universal).

#### Ethnorelativism:

1. Acceptance of cultural difference (accepting one's own culture is experienced in the context of other cultures).
2. Adaptation of cultural difference into one's own identity (one's worldview is expanded to include relevant constructs to form other worldviews).
3. Ability to move in and out of different worldviews in a constructive manner (Bennett, 1986).

Teachers used their cultural capital to organise cultural festivals throughout the year in the centre. This cultural capital of teachers was also used to communicate with the new parents who had limited English. Funding issues for professional development set limitations for creating learning opportunities for exploring other cultures.

Continuous display and use of culturally specific materials by the teachers enhanced children's positive engagement in their own culture and the culture of the others. Thus, we gathered evidence for children's ability to acquire new knowledge and their responsiveness to diversity. Continuity of greetings by the teachers in the children's own language seemed effective as children responded to them enthusiastically. Although parents were positive about it, most of them seemed to use English. Some migrant parents were more interested in western culture and teaching their children English. Getting parents' support to collect cultural materials and using their expertise for inclusive practices required persistence due to several reasons such as time allowance and level of interest.

Skelton and Schaeffer (n.d.) introduced the 3Rs of culturally responsive education which are respect, responsive and relevance. Arising from these three aspects, they suggested good practices should include incorporating multicultural resources into daily activities and affirming language and cultural background of children. The team at our centre is at the rudimentary stage of incorporating native languages of our children into instructions in our teaching. Instructions were given in English and Māori but only once or twice in another language. There was significant progress during the language week in terms of using children's native language in the centre.

Te reo Māori and Samoan language phrases were posted on the wall to encourage the teaching staff to use them frequently. Several teachers used their own languages to talk to the children from the same culture which showed the

## Commentary

effectiveness of employing staff from diverse cultural backgrounds. This approach clearly demonstrated children's confidence was growing in their new learning environment. The most used cultural approach was teaching children to sing songs from Māori and Samoan cultures.

### Conclusion

According to the observation records and narratives, the centre's pedagogy and practice include a range of strategies in responding to cultural diversity although most of them were event-based. Cultural capital of the teachers was used to a certain extent and there is potential to expand it. The evidence suggests kaiako are active agents of change but their agency can be affected by motivational factors and level of confidence. Within the year 2017, there was only one professional development opportunity for kaiako to understand Māori culture, however, attendance was minimal. The medium of instructions is still in the dominant language of English although the use of te reo Māori has been improved. As for next steps from here, we are looking to create supportive environments for our kaiako and work more with parents in partnership. The centre management has a responsibility to support and empower kaiako to take the lead by actively learning about other cultures. Another constructive way to achieve this would be the provision of professional development opportunities to learn a culture in an authentic setting.

Recommendations for new strategies for a more equitable community of learning:

- Teachers take the lead to use their cultural capital to celebrate festivals
- Use greetings of each child's native language more frequently
- Play music CDs from children's first language
- Work with parents in partnership at cultural celebrations
- Use different languages as the medium for instructions on a regular basis
- Language week for each different language

Commentary

Appendix

Figure 1: Sustainable Development Goals United Nations



<https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/envision2030.html>

## Commentary

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