Practitioner Researcher

Can you see me? Critical multiculturalism within early childhood education

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There is an increasing number of families from diverse cultural backgrounds living within New Zealand, leading to a range of cultural backgrounds being represented by children within early childhood centres. In order to support a child's cultural identity and sense of belonging, within the centre teachers need to have the skills to effectively support the child's cultural background. This can be a challenge as it is easy to turn to tokenistic and cultural stereotypes as the only means of supporting cultural groups (Chan, 2009). This article reviews findings from literature concerning critical multiculturalism and how teachers can utilise this pedagogy to support the diverse cultural needs of children. This article will explore what critical multiculturalism is, the importance of partnerships for effective critical multiculturalism and how this supports children's learning and development. Through this understanding teachers are able to work towards a more inclusive and culturally supportive environment.

Introduction

One of the roles that teachers have is to support a child's culture within the centre, to aid children in their holistic development and their sense of belonging (Tabors, 1998). An essential aspect of a child's development is the development of a positive self and cultural identity (Gerrity, 2003). This is essential because children develop within a cultural context, so their culture will influence how they think and learn (Berk, 2006). One way to effectively support a child's culture is through critical multiculturalism, which is a pedagogy that supports social justice and power balance between cultures (Chan, 2011). Collaborative relationships and power sharing between teachers and families is also promoted through critical multicultural practice (Chan, 2011). Critical multiculturalism encourages teachers to explore a child's culture lens to support their holistic development more effectively (Berk, 2006). Critical multiculturalism is also supported within *Te Whariki*; it states that a child's culture and holistic development should be supported by teachers, and highlights the importance of culture for a child's well-being and development (Ministry of Education [MoE], 1996).

Critical multiculturalism and child well-being

Throughout *Te Whāriki* the importance of a child's well-being is recognised as an essential aspect of a child's learning and development (MoE, 1996). *Te Whāriki* notes that the well-being of children is linked to a child's sense of

belonging, which is supported through a respect and recognition of their culture and family background (MoE, 1996). An essential step towards supporting a child's sense of belonging within the centre are teachers who have respectful partnerships with families and work with families to support the child holistically (Hill, 2005). Critical multiculturalism is a pedagogy that supports collaborative relationships with families and encourages contribution from parents towards their child's learning and development (Chan, 2011). Critical multiculturalism encourages teachers to assess and support children holistically through exploring and developing an understanding of the child's cultural background (Chan, 2011). Through working in partnerships with parents and supporting their cultural background teachers are able to support children in their sense of worth and belonging which promotes their overall well-being (Clarke, 2009).

Exploring critical multiculturalism

The foundation of critical multiculturalism is social justice and equity, and it is about recognising the power struggles that can be found within educational curricula as the dominant social groups usually set the values and practices within a centre (Chan, 2011). Critical multiculturalism involves ensuring that the dominant culture is not imposing ideas on how to represent another culture; instead there should be a sharing of power (Maniatis, 2012). May and Sleeter (2010) state that critical multiculturalism is not about supporting cultural stereotypes or tokenistic practices but about focusing on creating equity within society amongst all cultural groups. This involves sharing knowledge and ideas cross-culturally to create a better understanding of other cultures to support social equity (Ponciano & Shabazian, 2012). Critical multiculturalism also recognises that each person will have different ideas and beliefs within a culture and that one person's views do not fully represent one culture (Ponciano & Shabazian, 2012). Another essential aspect of critical multiculturalism is recognising the cultural lens that families will have and utilising this respectfully to support and assess children's learning (May & Sleeter, 2010). This is important because, as Lee and Johnson (2007) explain, culture is not defined by nationality or race but by a shared system of understanding, such as values, beliefs and knowledge. Teachers can work towards effective partnerships with families through collaborating and promoting their contribution within the centre (Macfarlane & Macfarlane, 2012). Critical multiculturalism requires teachers to develop a multiple perspective approach to education which promotes cultural inclusion and ensures all cultures are represented within the centre (Maniatis, 2012). An important part of this is reflection: teachers need to explore assumptions they have that could be hindering their practice and to examine their own cultural identity (May & Sleeter, 2010). Therefore, reflection is an essential aspect of critical multiculturalism to explore areas of improvement, as teachers are able to explore prejudices and barriers they may have that could be influencing their teaching practice (Maniatis, 2012).

The importance of partnership for effective critical multiculturalism

One of the problems with implementing critical multiculturalism is that teachers are challenged to effectively include multicultural perspectives into their practice (Chan, 2009). This is a challenge as teachers need to develop a deep

understanding of a culture to recognise the cultural perspective and effectively utilise it (Chan, 2009). One way to achieve this understanding is through collaborative partnerships with families, where the family's culture is respected and their contribution promoted within the centre (Baldock, 2010). *Te Whāriki* states that teachers need to know the aspirations that parents have for their child and have the necessary understanding to assess children through their cultural lens (MoE, 1996). This enables teachers to develop a deeper understanding of the child and strategies on how to support their holistic development and well-being more effectively (MoE, 1996). Collaborative partnerships involve teachers valuing and supporting a family's contribution in their child's learning as they have essential cultural knowledge and experience (Guo, 2012). Teachers need to be non-judgemental and ensure they do not impose their own beliefs on others; otherwise, families may feel their opinion is not valued and that their contribution is not necessary (Chan, 2011). According to Chan, this is important when it comes to maintaining partnerships, as families bring essential cultural and linguistic knowledge that can enhance the centre. Partnerships need to involve power sharing between families and teachers. In this way, Chan states, teachers show that they are genuinely responsive to families and their culture. Another indicator of a critical multicultural early childhood environment is that teachers, families and children are all working together to support one another in improving the learning environment (Ponciano & Shabazian, 2012). Critical multiculturalism ensures that everyone within the partnership is learning from one another and all are working together to provide the best learning opportunities for children (Ponciano & Shabazian, 2012).

How does critical multiculturalism support children's learning and development?

Critical multiculturalism involves using a socio-cultural lens to view a child's learning, and assessing them from their cultural perspective, which is important as children learn within a cultural context (May & Sleeter, 2010). Critical multiculturalism is a more effective way to assess and plan for a child's learning as it encourages assessment through their cultural lens (May & Sleeter, 2010). Learning is an activity that is influenced by culture as knowledge is developed through one's cultural environment (Kroll, 2013). Through using a cultural lens, teachers are able to explore how children develop within their cultural context, which is essential as a child's cultural identity is an important part of their holistic development and well-being (Berk, 2006). Because critical multiculturalism promotes parental collaboration, it supports more effective planning and assessment, especially when exploring a child's learning from their cultural perspective (Chan, 2011). Collaborating with parents also allows teachers to develop their teaching strategies to be more effective in supporting the child holistically (Chan, 2011). One of *Te Whāriki's* goals is for children to develop a sense of identity and belonging within their early childhood centre, as a positive identity and sense of belonging are an essential part of learning (MoE, 1996). Through effective partnership with parents, teachers are able to support children in their sense of belonging and overall well-being which has a positive effect on a child's learning and development (Clarke, 2009).

Conclusion

For teachers to effectively support the learning and development of all children within their centre, they need to ensure they are actively promoting each child's culture. Through collaboration and power sharing with families, teachers are able to work towards effective critical multicultural practice (Chan, 2011). For children to receive quality education, they need to experience an environment where their holistic needs are met and their well-being is supported (Herczog, 2012). For this to be achieved, teachers need the skills to effectively collaborate with families, allowing them to utilise the cultural lens when planning for and assessing a child's needs and development (May & Sleeter, 2010). This may involve additional professional development to inform and equip teachers with the skills and knowledge to do this effectively, to create an environment that promotes social justice and equity.

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