The challenge of intercultural competence in early childhood education

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Abstract

This article explores the challenge of forming intercultural competence for early childhood teachers. By drawing on relevant international and national literature it outlines the models and broad frameworks that guide teachers in forming intercultural competency. It makes the point, that as many of these models have been formed from a western perspective, although helpful, they are still limited. Alternatively, a review of recent research studies completed in Aotearoa by researchers who are immigrants themselves, provides insights into the perspectives of immigrant children and their families. It is concluded that it is important for early childhood teachers to be aware of their own cultural lens, and to initiate relationships with families that lead to intercultural competence and understanding, but that this is only likely to happen if families first feel that their culture is acknowledged and accepted.

Introduction

Like many countries throughout the world, Aotearoa New Zealand has become part of the global transnational migration movement. This wave of migration has resulted in a multicultural and multilingual society. Nowhere is this felt more than in Auckland, where 56 per cent of the Auckland population is made up of immigrants, signifying that what it means to be an Aucklander has radically changed (McCullough, 2013). The majority of migrants in recent years have come from Asia, and as part of the criteria for entry are that applicants at the early adulthood stage of the lifespan (the median age of overseas Chinese in New Zealand was 34.2 years old) and have a job offer, this suggests that most immigrants were of child-bearing age (Wu, 2011). The changing composition of society has an enormous effect on the mainstream education system (Gray, 2009), particularly for early childhood education, as this is the first transition for children into a setting beyond the family. For this reason, it is important that early childhood education teachers develop intercultural competencies that will support both teachers and children to interact positively within the early childhood setting. The following

discussion explores the challenges of intercultural competence for early childhood teachers.

The concept of intercultural competence

There is no clear definition for intercultural competence, and several different terms are used to describe this broad concept. Some of these are multiculturalism, cross cultural adaptation, intercultural sensitivity, cultural intelligence, transcultural communication, cross-cultural awareness and global citizenship. Each term has a slightly different nuance, but all refer to the same broad concept that in this article is referred to as intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2011). It has been suggested that there are several important aspects to consider in relation to intercultural competence: that it is an on-going process of learning; that it requires critical thinking; attitudes of respect, openness, and curiosity are fundamental to its development; and that it requires an ability to see the world from another's perspective. Furthermore, it is thought that an individual has intercultural competence when they can see relationships and connections between cultures, both within and outside of their own culture, and are able to mediate and interpret these for themselves and others (Bryam, 2000).

It has also been suggested that it is important to be aware of one's own cultural limitations, to acknowledge the integrity and value of all cultures and to regard cultural diversity as an opportunity for learning (Le Roux, 2002). Hence, intercultural competence involves lifelong learning where we learn about cultural differences and integrate them into our identity. It is important to also understand that intercultural competence has an affective domain that relies on trust and respect, a behavioural dimension that relies on aspects such as body language and a cognitive dimension that incorporates knowledge of and insights into the world (Risager, 2000). From yet another perspective, intercultural competence is seen to be made up of multicultural awareness, multicultural knowledge and multicultural skills (Han & Thomas, 2010). It has been stressed that intercultural competence does not involve adopting another culture's values, attitudes, customs or dress in a way that can be considered patronising or manipulative, as well as a sign of disrespect for one's culture of origin. Nor does it involve forming generalisations or stereotyping other cultures (Le Roux, 2002). Instead, it involves forming an interpersonal, intercultural space (Risager, 2000) where connections can be

built and learning can take place that contributes to a new cultural identity for all those involved.

A model of six distinct stages has been developed to explain the acquisition of intercultural competence (Bennett, 2004). The first three stages relate to ethnocentrism. These stages are denial of cultural difference (disinterested in cultural differences), defence against cultural differences (where one views one's own culture as the only viable one), and minimization of cultural differences (where one's own cultural view is experienced as universal). These three stages all reflect ethnocentrism, or lack of intercultural awareness and competence. The next three stages reflect ethnorelativism, where one's own culture is experienced in the context of other cultures. These three stages are acceptance of cultural difference (accepting one's own culture is experienced in the context of other cultures), the second is the adaptation of cultural difference (one's worldview is expanded to include relevant constructs to form other worldviews), while the third is the integration of cultural difference into one's identity. This third stage describes individuals who have the ability to move in and out of different worldviews in a constructive manner. This model does not suggest that individuals necessarily move from one stage to another, or that individuals who reflect integration of cultural difference are better people. It does, however, describe the differences in intercultural competence, and indicates that some people are more adept at experiencing intercultural relations than others.

It must be noted, however, that the above viewpoints about intercultural competence have all been written from a western perspective and so privilege western ways of knowing. As there is no acknowledgement of the possibility of other non-western perspectives (Oliha, 2012), individuals may be discouraged from exploring diverse viewpoints that provide deeper insights. The critical awareness that is an inherent part of intercultural competence should provoke an examination of the dominant ways of knowing that inform our understanding. Additionally, continuous reflection must occur on ways to be more inclusive so that spaces are created for individuals and groups to connect across cultures.

Intercultural competence and early childhood education

It has long been recognised in early childhood education that effective teaching requires respect for diversity as a way to encourage children to

accept diversity and difference amongst individuals and groups in a positive way. For over twenty years, information on an anti-bias approach to setting up an inclusive environment for young children, culturally responsive teaching practice, culturally and linguistically responsive practices, and culturally responsive teaching have all influenced early childhood education. Despite such discourses on inclusive teaching practices, evidence suggests that teachers lack intercultural competency as they experience difficulty in incorporating diversity into their practice (MacNaughton & Hughes, 2007). Moreover, it is recognised that although the children in early childhood centres are becoming more culturally and linguistically diverse, the teachers are still predominantly white, middle class and female, and so have different values, beliefs and attitudes to the children they are teaching (Lee, 2010).

The lack of intercultural competence can be a concern because it has been suggested that the more difference there is between the teacher's and the child's beliefs, attitudes and values, the less likely it is that the child will learn successfully. MacNaughton and Hughes (2007) contend that the teachers' own racial and cultural identity influence their understanding of diversity, and if they belong to the dominant culture and have no personal experience of being marginalised, they feel less pressure to develop intercultural competence. Elsewhere, it has been suggested that intercultural competence is one of the most important factors in preventing the marginalisation of students (Hosoya & Talib, 2010). One viewpoint from the United States (Han, West-Olatuhji & Thomas, 2011) states that early childhood teachers are hindered from developing intercultural competence because they lack self-awareness as to the influences of their own beliefs and values on their teaching practice and how this impacts on the teaching practice of children. In other words, there was a denial of cultural differences (Bennett, 2004), and teachers failed to realise that they taught from who they were as a person. The evidence Han, West-Olatuhji and Thomas give to support this viewpoint is that African American children achieve better when taught by African-American teachers. Other evidence that supports the view that cultural misunderstanding can disadvantage children is given by the statistics from the United States that highlights the extremely high number of Latino children that are in special education services (Schoorman, 2011).

Early childhood teachers are ideally suited to include intercultural competence in the curriculum as the curriculum is drawn from the children's

interests (Schoorman, 2011). The development of social competence has always been considered an important part of a child's early childhood education. However, as social competence is always relative to culture, conflict can arise when the culture of the teacher differs to the culture of the children and their families. Teachers may misinterpret the children's behaviour if they do not have an adequate understanding of the cultural norms of a child's culture. This highlights the need for teachers to hold more than their own view of social competence, and to be able to view social competence as including more than western views only (Han & Thomas, 2010). It can also be emphasised that if early childhood teachers are able to understand that cultural differences are an opportunity to teach respect about diversity and inclusion, then they are adding a valuable dimension to the child's understanding of social competence. Using the children's interests and their own cultural values and beliefs gives an authentic basis in the curriculum for incorporating the values of diversity in a way that underpins social justice (Schoorman, 2011). This includes the important role that teachers play of integrating the children of immigrant families into the mainstream education system, and ultimately, into society.

It has been suggested that for teachers, awareness of one's own cultural identity is crucial as it impacts not only on the style of teaching, but also defines the way the teacher interacts with others. Moreover, it is suggested that cultural awareness and intercultural competency is not always a linear developmental process, but can be multi-faceted and situationally influenced, and that individuals do not become open and sensitive to others unless they have a positive sense of self, and an acceptance of their own cultural group. Gonzales –Mena sums up the situation by saying:

> You can't remove from your cultural framework the ways you relate to children and guide their behaviour, plan a curriculum, set up the environment, handle caregiving routines, and carry out parent education. Your behaviours are determined by your values, which are cultural, familial, and individual. They are also determined by what you consider normal, which can be influenced by your race, ability, social status, income, sexual orientation, religion, age, and/or the messages you have been given about yourself in regard to these aspects of your background and identity. (Gonzales-Mena, 2008, p.14)

The context of Aotearoa New Zealand

In Aotearoa New Zealand, cultural competency is an expectation for graduating teachers. The Graduating Teachers Standards outlined by the New Zealand Teachers Council (2007) state specifically that teachers:

- have content and pedagogical content knowledge for supporting English as a second Language (EAL) learners to succeed in the curriculum (Professional Knowledge Standard 1 (d);
- know how to develop metacognitive strategies of diverse learners (Professional Knowledge Standard 2 (c)
- Have an understanding of education within the bicultural, multicultural, social, political, economic and historical contexts of Aotearoa New Zealand (Professional Knowledge Standard 3 (c)
- Demonstrate high expectations of all learners, focus on learning and recognise and value diversity (Professional Practice, Standard 4 (c)
- Promote a learning culture which engages diverse learners effectively (Professional Values and Relationships, Standard 6 (e)

In the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, the document Tātaiako (Ministry of Education, 2011) further explains the significance of intercultural competencies for supporting Māori learners. The competencies outlined in this document are about "knowing, respecting, and working with Māori learners and their whānau (extended family) and iwi (tribe) so their world view, aspirations, and knowledge are an integral part of teaching, and of the culture of the school or ECE service" (p. 4). Reflecting the Māori world view, the intercultural competencies have been described as:

- *Wānanga*: participating with learners and communities in robust dialogue for the benefit of learners' achievement.
- *Whanaungatanga*: actively engaging in respectful working relationships with Māori learners, parents and whānau, hapü, iwi and the Māori community.
- *Manaakitanga*: showing integrity, sincerity and respect towards Māori beliefs, language and culture.
- *Tangata Whenuatanga*: affirming Māori learners as Māori; providing contexts for learning where the language, identity and culture of Māori learners and their whānau is affirmed.
- *Ako*: teachers taking responsibility for their own learning and that of Māori learners.

These intercultural competencies, although framed specifically for teachers to work with Māori children, can also form a broad framework for working with

all children.

Recently research studies have been completed in the context of early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand that provide insights specifically into the experiences of new Chinese immigrant children and their families. Chan (2006) conducted a case study of two Chinese toddlers and their families who attended a mainstream early childhood centre. It was found that many teachers deliberately treated all children the same, regardless of culture, because of a belief that stages of development were universal. Chan believed this was because the teachers themselves were monocultural and only had one lens, that of the dominant culture, to view the world. Chan further explained that the Chinese values of collectivism and Confucian beliefs teach children not to be assertive or self-interested, so it is normal for their families to make decisions for them. This is in contrast to the values held by many early childhood teachers who encourage individualism and exploration in children, so children are encouraged to learn through play. This led one teacher to conclude that Chinese toddlers were unable to initiate play, to be independent or explore because they were over-protected. Although Chinese families expect their children to play, they do not see this as a learning process; the mothers in this case study reported that they taught their toddlers at home in a more formal way. Chan also observed that although both toddlers spoke fluent Chinese, they did not speak, either to each other or to anyone else, nor did they use private speech. Chan points out that if Chinese children do not use any speech, it makes the teachers' role much more difficult. Although misunderstandings were formed by both teachers and families, Chan makes the point that if Chinese parents are to become more involved in early childhood education centres, the impetus to build the relationships must come from the teachers, because of the status that is afforded teachers in China.

Wu (2011) completed a study that investigated the perceptions of eight mothers who had recently arrived from China and their experiences of early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand. These mothers were quiet in their interactions with the early childhood education centres that their children attended, but were nevertheless aware of and involved in their children's early education. The mothers had all been middle class professional women in China, but were aware of the ethnic divide that existed in New Zealand society between Asian immigrants and the rest of society, so sent their

children to mainstream early childhood centres so that they would integrate more easily into mainstream New Zealand culture. The mothers had concerns about some practices in the early childhood education centres, such as small children in the woodwork area, or playing with water on a cold day, but stated that they did not complain to the teachers. One mother explained why she remained silent:

> The teachers are all professionals. They have their own way of teaching. Maybe the parents shouldn't interfere too much, otherwise why don't you just take care of your own children then? Anyway, they have different ways of teaching. If you want children to integrate into (local) society, you learn in their way. (Participant comment: Wu, 2011, p. 82)

The parents appreciated play as a medium for learning on one level, but had doubts on another: "I quite like their way of learning. For example, learn through play. But the learning is a bit slow. It looks like kindergarten hasn't taught anything except for telling some stories and singing some songs." (Participant comment, Wu, 2011, p. 96). Mothers were, however, able to recognise the learning that did take place. One mother reported:

> I should thank the Little Forest Centre. My son learned a lot in the centre. One day, to my surprise, he came and asked me: "Mummy, do you know which planet is the furthest away from the sun?" I knew in Chinese it was (Chinese characters), but I don't know the name in English. He said to me, "Do you know, Mummy, it is Pluto." (Participant comment, Wu, 2011, p. 96)

These mothers also complemented the children's learning from the centre by teaching the children at home. They felt it was important that Chinese language was taught and one mother used traditional Chinese methods of teaching, so the children were exposed to different learning and teaching methods. The mothers reported that early childhood teachers did not understand that many Chinese immigrant children speak more than one Chinese language at home, and that English was often their third language. They also felt that the wide ethnic and cultural diversity amongst Chinese immigrants was not understood. Wu advocates that early childhood teachers be supported to deconstruct their assumptions through critical analysis that would require them to move beyond their comfort zone of certainty.

Guo (2012) also investigated experiences of new immigrant Chinese parents in New Zealand early childhood education settings. Guo states Chinese

parents are challenged by how to parent their children according to the traditional Chinese values when these sometimes conflict with the new cultural context. These parents manage to retain their sense of self-efficacy by actively teaching their child within the family context, rather than openly voicing their disagreement to the teachers. The parents reported that language difficulties and their minority status prohibited them from discussing values with teachers, but they also said that their children needed to be aware of the mainstream values if they were to integrate into New Zealand society. All the parents interviewed by Guo said that academic skills were important, and that the early childhood curriculum did not provide for these, so the conflict was resolved by teaching the children academic skills at home. Guo makes the point that although the children were learning from both cultures, there was no connection between the two. Guo also stressed that the cultural conflict between the Chinese parents and the early childhood teachers was not addressed as it remained hidden. Furthermore, the funds of knowledge that the Chinese parents could have contributed to the centre remained unrecognised. Hence, although early childhood teachers pride themselves on building a partnership with parents, this did not really exist with the Chinese parents that Guo interviewed. Guo believed that the Chinese parents would share their cultural background if they had felt more empowered by the centre to do so.

In another study, Guo and Dalli (2012) conducted a multiple case study of the experiences of eight Chinese immigrant children's learning experiences in a New Zealand early childhood education centre. This study gave insight into how the children used the cultural tool of Chinese language to mediate their learning in the centre. It was observed that children are able to use critical thinking skills to allow them to boundary cross and culture switch from one culture to the other by using the strategies of mixing, transferring and borrowing from one culture to another. The children observed spoke Mandarin to other children in the centre and actively sought out Mandarin speaking children if they were unsure of something. The children gained their sense of belonging by playing with children who were linguistically similar, so the two languages formed complementary cultural tools to support the child's learning.

Chan (2009) explains that a superficial understanding of multiculturalism can reinforce ethnic stereotyping as it can negate individual differences by

presenting children with cultural universalisms. Often the diversity amongst Chinese people goes unrecognised. Chan believes this can result in early childhood teachers unconsciously imposing racist views on children. Chan explains that as immigrants experience transnationalism, their identities are constantly being negotiated and revised. Chan believes stressed it is important for early childhood teachers to critically reflect on their own culture as well as the cultural identities of the children and families they encounter. Chan believes that this would make it more likely that parents with limited English would be listened to, and that immigrant children are afforded the same opportunities as all other children. Chan warns, however, that inter-cultural competence will only be built if the families first perceive that their culture, values and beliefs are acknowledged by early childhood teachers.

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the literature that outlines models of intercultural competence, and the recent empirical research that has investigated the experiences of immigrant Chinese parents and their children in early childhood settings in Aotearoa New Zealand. The models of intercultural competence clarify the issue by categorising the dispositions, knowledge and skills needed by teachers in order to become inter-culturally competent. Although this provides a useful guideline, it perhaps oversimplifies the challenge itself. Moreover, these models have been critiqued as being formed by the voices of the dominant culture and therefore reflect predominantly the voices of the status quo. The research, on the other hand, reflects the dynamic complexity of the experiences of new immigrant children and their families. Each case study presents a different context and a challenge that is situationally defined. Moreover, the research has all been conducted by researchers who are themselves from the ethnic minorities being researched, so the nuances and insights they describe may not be visible to others. As they report, many of the conflict and disconnects that form a barrier to intercultural competence for early childhood teachers remain hidden and so unresolved. However, it is clear from the research that the ultimate challenge to form authentic relationships with new immigrant families lies with the early childhood teacher, because of the status of the teacher in comparison with that of the parents. It is also clear from both the literature and the research studies, that the challenge of intercultural competence will be met through respectful dialogue and continual striving for interpersonal understanding that can be

acknowledged as a place for new understandings and possibilities to be formed.

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