ECE / OVERVIEW

Culturally responsive pedagogy in ECE

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Summary

Culturally responsive approaches emerge from an understanding of families' backgrounds that connects families' cultural heritages to the setting and effects more equitable opportunities for both children and families. Children's cultural backgrounds are drawn on to determine teaching approaches, selection of materials and environments, and interactions with children and their families. It looks different in different contexts and will be constantly adjusted to meet families' and children's needs.

What is cultural responsiveness?

Rather than just focusing on the celebration of differences and the harmonious co-existence of diverse groups, culturally responsive teaching and learning in early childhood education involve teachers' deep engagement with diverse cultures and worldviews in order to transform practice. Cultural responsiveness goes beyond affirming and valuing children's cultures to also include active work on the maintainance and development of children's cultures (some researchers offer the term culturally sustaining pedgogy to better represent these intentions to support the perpetuation of minority cultures). Multicultural contexts hold significant potential for new possibilities for learning and living that empower children, families and communities. They enable non-dominant discourses and non-mainstream practices to be integrated into curriculum and pedagogy, and offer ongoing potential for transforming the practices of the early childhood setting.

What is culture?

The term culture here refers to the lived practices, beliefs and values of particular individuals, families and groups: that is, the taken-for-granted customs, ways of being, and acting and communicating of a group. Culture influences families' everyday interactions with children, and family practices, beliefs and values are acquired by children during these interactions. These cultural understandings and associations are the foundation of children's understanding of the world, as well as providing children with a 'toolbox' of symbols, language, values, beliefs, rituals and objects that help them to deal with situations in life. The cultural socialisation of practices, values and assumptions also shapes play preferences, and research finds that children prefer the style of play that they have been socialised to value and enact.

While we are all familiar with aspects of ethnic macro culture, such as the festivals and diets of major national groups, individuals are also guided at a micro level by cultural beliefs, values and norms for their everyday actions and interactions. The concept of micro culture highlights that there is an everyday notion of culture in which there is much potential for individual idiosyncrasies. Cultural identities are fluid and multiple rather than fixed by tradition, nationality or ethnicity, and they continuously evolve as they are renegotiated and rearticulated.

Why is it important for early childhood settings to be culturally responsive?

Given that early childhood education experiences are the first experiences that children have of education outside the home, curricula and values that empower children's identity and values, and uphold their rights, are of paramount importance. Children have a right to a flexible and responsive curriculum in which they can access and engage with the cultural practices of their homes and communities.

However, research finds that the majority of teachers enact static monocultural discourses for early childhood education, despite multicultural principles for inclusion and equitability in education. Taken-for-granted practices in centres can unwittingly serve to marginalise particular groups of children and families, such as expectations for familiarity with particular equipment, experiences or communication strategies. For example, children may enter the early childhood setting speaking and having heard languages other than English, or having been exposed to different types and amounts of language, or without experience of free play environments. Cultural differences between home beliefs and practices and those of the early childhood setting may affect children's adjustment to the setting and their subsequent learning, and lead to children's disaffection in the early childhood setting. Families can often feel silenced and alienated when their perceptions and experiences are not represented or included in their children's education.

Culturally responsive teaching is an approach that is successfully used with all students due to its focus on knowing children and their families and adapting practices to suit them. Adjustments and adaptations can support all children and families more widely, and the work done in recognising and reducing the difficulties of one child and family will likely benefit many other children and families.

While there is currently a lack of empirical evidence to link culturally responsive practices to increased learning and achievement, research does show that stereotypes are reduced and teachers are more supportive of families and children when teachers view children as individuals and engage in interactions with children and families to learn about their culture. Researchers argue that families who are not from the dominant Western/Pākehā culture are more likely to build relationships and become engaged in early childhood education programmes if teachers offer culturally responsive pedagogies and meet families' expectations. For example, research in New Zealand has shown that the incorporation of aspects of children's home culture into the setting works to successfully mediate the learning experiences of Chinese immigrant children.

Cultural responsiveness:

- Provides all children with authentic and appropiate social contexts in which to develop to their full potential

- Supports children to maintain their personal culture whilst also supporting them to participate fully in the dominant culture, and to use the cultural tools of both cultures to aid learning

- Validates children's identities, so that they can negotiate cultural differences with confidence and stand up for themselves

- Helps children from the dominant group feel secure about their cultural identity without feeling superior to others and respond positively to differences

- Supports parent partnership and collaboration

- Develops both children's and teachers' cultural intelligence[1]

What makes the implementation of culturally responsive practices challenging?

Developing culturally responsive pedagogies can be difficult due to a variety of factors including the complexities of culture, family and teacher attitudes and knowledge, and institutional practices. It is important to be aware of some of the most common impediments to the development of culturally responsive pedagogies and practices in early childhood settings, which include:

Complexities of culture

- Generalised and simplified understandings of cultural group identities rather than unique and complex individual identities

- The discourse of diversity, which assumes a normative standard (for example, identifying only groups that deviate from the norm as diverse)

Family attitudes

- Beliefs about teachers' power, control and expertise which can affect relationships and negatively affect children's learning

- Parents' desire for a mainstream ECE experience rather than a style of education associated with their culture

- An insistence on play-based pedagogies, which may leave families feeling alienated if they value different experiences for children other than the early childhood setting's play-based approach

Teacher attitudes and knowledge

- Understanding difference in terms of deficiency

- Using general information about cultural groups to stereotype individuals

- Lack of awareness about the importance of culture to children's meaning-making

- Lack of detailed knowledge about children and their families, their cultural resources and strengths, and families' differing goals for their children's early childhood education

- Treating all children and families the same

- Minority culture teachers embracing mainstream dominant practices and minimising use of their own cultural tools (including language)

- Focusing exclusively on home language use, and neglecting other important cultural tools

- Lack of awareness of the social inequality engendered by the education system, curriculum and pedagogies

Institutional discourses and practices

- Normative notions of quality, assessment, knowledge and pedagogy, which privilege some cultural groups and, at the same time, may compromise success for children from minority cultures

- Developmental theories of child development which universalise ages and stages to apply to all children

- Discourses of child-centred education and free play, which may not match the learning discourses employed and valued by families, such as learning through observation and skills-based learning, and may encourage teachers to view children as disconnected from their cultural lives by focusing only on what children do in their ECE setting

- Western aspirations for independent and autonomous learners which may not match the aspirations of minority families

- Commitments to biculturalism

- Limited opportunities for meaningful and in-depth communication with families

- A lack of teaching resources and professional development support

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Further Reading

Chan, A. (2009). Critical multiculturalism: The challenge of multiculturalism within a New Zealand bicultural context - A Chinese perspective. *International Journal of Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood, 7* (1), 29-40.

Rivalland, C. M. P., & Nuttall, J. (2010). Sameness-as-fairness: Early childhood professionals negotiating multiculturalism in early childhood settings. *Early Childhood Folio, 14*(1), 28-32.

Endnotes

[1]Cultural intelligence involves the motivation, interest and confidence to adapt cross-culturally, an understanding of and reflection on cross-cultural differences, issues, and strategies, and appropriate adjustment of verbal and nonverbal behaviours in cross-cultural interactions.