Culturally responsive pedagogy in ECE

Culturally responsive approaches emerge from an understanding of families' backgrounds, connecting families' cultural heritages to the setting and creating more equitable opportunities for both children and families[1]. Children's cultural backgrounds are drawn on to determine teaching approaches, selection of materials and environments, and interactions with children and their families[2]. Cultural responsiveness looks different in different contexts and will be constantly adjusted to meet families' and children's needs[3].

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 maintenance and development of children's cultures (some researchers offer the term 'culturally sustaining pedagogy' to better represent the intentional support of minority cultures[4]). Multicultural contexts are viewed as holding many possibilities for learning and living that empower children, families, and communities. They enable non-dominant discourses and practices to be integrated into curriculum and pedagogy, and offer ongoing potential for transforming the practices of the early childhood setting[5].

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 and ways of being, acting, and communicating of a group[6]. Culture influences families' everyday interactions with children. The cultural understandings and associations learned through family practices, beliefs, and values are the foundation of children's understanding of the world, and provide children with a 'toolbox' of symbols, language, values, beliefs, rituals, and objects that they will use throughout life[7]. 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[8].

While everyone is 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[9]. This everyday notion of culture also acknowledges 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[10].

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

Early childhood education experiences are the first experiences that children have of education outside the home, so it is of paramount importance that curricula and values empower children's identities and uphold their rights. Children have the right to a flexible and responsive curriculum in which they can access and engage with using the cultural practices of their homes and communities[11].

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[12]. Taken-for-granted practices in centres, such as expectations for familiarity with particular equipment, experiences, or communication strategies, can unwittingly serve to marginalise particular groups of children and families[13]. 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 feeling unhappy and unsettled[14]. 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 children due to its focus on knowing children and their families and adapting practices to suit them, and are thought to influence the success of children from non-majority cultures in education[15]. Adjustments and adaptations can support all children and families, 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[16]. Researchers argue that families who are not from the dominant 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[17]. 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[18].

Cultural responsiveness provides a foundation for teaching which:

- Provides all children with authentic and appropriate 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[19]

- Validates children's identities[20], so that they can negotiate cultural differences with confidence and stand up for themselves

- Helps children from the dominant group respond positively to differences and feel secure about their cultural identity without feeling superior to others[21]

- Supports parent partnership and collaboration[22]

- Develops both children's and teachers' cultural intelligence, including the motivation, confidence, and ability to adapt cross-culturally, as well as an understanding of cross-cultural differences, issues, and strategies[23].

What supports the implementation of culturally responsive practices?

Cultural responsiveness involves **using a range of important cultural tools,** including home languages, of children and teachers. 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. Attention to these areas will support the development of culturally responsive pedagogies and practices in early childhood settings.

the education hub

https://theeducationhub.org.nz/category/ece-resources/

It is important to start by **acknowledging the complexities of culture**, rejecting the generalised and simplified understandings of cultural group identities and recognising the unique and complex individual identities of children and their families. Teachers may believe that treating all children and families the same is culturally responsive, so building awareness about the importance of culture to children's meaning-making is important. Developing detailed knowledge about children and their families, their cultural resources and strengths, and families' differing goals for their children's early childhood education will support a more individualised response[24].

Teachers also need to **learn about and respect family attitudes about learning and education**. Families from different cultural backgrounds may hold beliefs about teachers' power, control, and expertise which can affect their relationships with teachers[25], so it is important to support parents and families to engage with teachers in equitable and productive ways. Parents may also desire an ECE experience that aligns with the dominant culture[26] rather than a style of education associated with their culture, so it may be necessary to share the value of making connections with home cultures in the ECE setting. Discourses of child-centred education and free play may not match the learning discourses employed and valued by families[27]. For example, some families may feel alienated by an emphasis on play-based pedagogies if they value different experiences for children, such as learning through observation and skills-based learning. It is essential to allow time for meaningful and in-depth communication with families, and listen to and respect their aspirations for their children.

It Is important to pay attention to **teacher attitudes and knowledge** in relation to culturally responsive practices. Some teachers may unconsciously understand difference in terms of deficiency, or use general information about cultural groups to stereotype individuals[28]. Teachers may be unaware how social inequality is perpetuated by the institutional discourses and practices of the education system, and that normative notions of quality, assessment, knowledge and pedagogy may privilege some cultural groups while at the same time compromising success for children from minority cultures[29]. Being able to surface and reflect on these beliefs and assumptions in a trusting professional environment is crucial.

To learn more about culturally response pedagogy, read *Principles for culturally responsive teaching in ECE*.

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 Guo, K. (2014). Mono-cultural approach in multicultural education: Mapping the contours of multicultural Early Childhood Education in New Zealand. Asia-Pacific Journal Of Research 8 (1), 19-35.

2 Allen, R., & Steed, E. A. (2016). Culturally responsive Pyramid Model practices: Program-wide Positive Behavior Support for young children. Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 36 (3), 165−175. https://doi.org/10.1177/0271121416651164

Chen, D. W., Nimmo, J., & Fraser, H. (2009). Becoming a culturally responsive Early Childhood Educator: A tool to support reflection by teachers embarking on the Anti-Bias Journey. Multicultural Perspectives, 11 (2), 101-106. https://doi.org/10.1080/15210960903028784

Glover, C. P., Harris, C. N., Polson, B., & Boardman, A. (2017). Creating supportive and subversive spaces as professional dyads enact culturally relevant teaching. Early Years, 37 (1), 47-61. https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2016.1242117

3 Bennett, S. V., Alberton Gunn, A., Gayle-Evans, G., Barrera, E. S., & Leung, C. B. (2018). Culturally responsive literacy practices in an early childhood community. Early Childhood Education Journal, 46, 241–248. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-017-0839-9

4 Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. Educational Researcher, Vol. 41 (3), 93-97. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41477769

5 Guo, 2014. Chan, A., & Ritchie, J. (2016). Parents, participation, partnership: Problematising New Zealand early childhood education. Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood 2016, Vol. 17 (3), 289–303. https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949116660954

6 Ang, L. (2010). Critical perspectives on cultural diversity in early childhood: Building an inclusive curriculum and provision. Early Years, 30 (1). https://doi.org/10.1080/09575140903562387

7 Ang, 2010. Guo, K., & Dalli, C. (2012). Negotiating and creating intercultural relations: Chinese immigrant children in New Zealand early childhood education centres. Australasian Journal of Early Childhood, 37 (3), 129-136.

8 Leaupepe, M. (2011). Pasifika perspectives of play: Challenges and responsibilities. He Kupu, 2 (4).

9 De Gioia, K. (2013). Cultural negotiation: Moving beyond a cycle of misunderstanding in early childhood settings. Journal of Early Childhood Research, 11 (2) 108–122.

10 Ang, 2010. 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.

11 Cooper, M., & Hedges, H. (2014). Beyond participation: What we learned from Hunter about collaboration with Pasifika children and families. Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood 15 (2), 166-175.

12 Chan & Ritchie, 2016; Guo, 2014.

13 Barron, I. (2009). Illegitimate participation? A group of young minority ethnic children's experiences of early childhood education. Pedagogy, Culture & Society, 17 (3), 341-354. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681360903194350

14 Ang, 2010.

15 Glover et al., 2017.

16 Allen & Steed, 2016.

17 Chan & Ritchie, 2016.

18 Chan, 2009.

19 Allen & Steed, 2016.

20 Allen & Steed, 2016; Cooper & Hedges, 2014.

21 Chen et al., 2009.

22 Chan & Ritchie, 2016; Singh, P., & Zhang, K. C. (2018). Parents' perspectives on early childhood education in New Zealand: Voices from Pacifika families. Australasian Journal of Early Childhood, 43 (1), 52-58.

23 Davis, K., & McKenzie, R. (2017). Children's working theories about identity, language, and culture: Summary report. Teaching and Learning Research Initiative.

24 Barron, 2009.

25 Chan, 2009.

26 Guo, K. (2010). Chinese immigrant children in New Zealand early childhood centres. [Doctoral thesis, Victoria University of Wellington].

27 Barron, 2009; Guo, 2014; Hadley, F. (2012). Early childhood staff and families' perceptions: Diverse views about important experiences for children aged 3-5 years in early childhood settings. Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 13 (1), 38-49. Okagaki, L., & Diamond, K. E. (2000). Responding to cultural and linguistic differences in the beliefs and practices of families with young children. Young Children, 55 (3), 74-80. https://www.jstor.org/stable/42727802

28 Ang, 2010; Chan, 2009; Bernhard, J. K., Lefebvre, M. L., Murphy Kilbride, K., Chud, G., & Lange, R. (1998). Troubled relationships in early childhood education: Parent–teacher interactions in ethnoculturally diverse child care settings. Early Education and Development, 9(1), 5-28. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15566935eed0901_1

29 Chan, 2009.

PREPARED FOR THE EDUCATION HUB BY

Dr Vicki Hargraves

Vicki is a teacher, mother, writer, and researcher. She recently completed her PhD using philosophy to explore creative approaches to understanding early childhood education. She is inspired by the wealth of educational research that is available and is passionate about making this available and useful for teachers.

the education hub

https://theeducationhub.org.nz/category/ece-resources/