

How to avoid a tokenistic or 'tourism' approach to diversity



ECE resources

Many early childhood settings approach multicultural provision through celebrating festivals, and exploring the foods and music of particular countries. While this reflects the good intentions of settings for including diversity in the early childhood curriculum, it is not usually indicative of genuine cultural responsiveness to families' needs, aspirations and desires.

Putting cultures 'on show' through festivals, songs, dances and foods, for example, could be said to reflect a 'tourist' or tokenistic approach to curriculum that reduces culture to a set of resources and undermines the culture more broadly. These kinds of showcasing approaches serve to position that group as the 'other' and relegate diversity to the margins of centre life¹. Approaches that focus on learning about the lifestyles of ethnic groups may even reinforce racist attitudes and perpetuate stereotypical views of ethnic groups², and moreover are reported to have very limited impact on improving the experiences of children from both majority and minority cultures³. The celebration of different cultures and festivals can be problematic⁴, as individuals' cultural identities are in fact fluid and multiple, and no particular practice or idea can be considered 'Chinese', for example.

Tokenistic practices include the occasional introduction of multicultural songs, the display of diverse languages or national flags, and the celebration of some cultural festivals⁵. When multicultural situations are handled in a tokenistic way, there is (albeit unintentionally) only superficial respect for diverse cultural practices, and families and children of minority cultures have limited access to their cultural values⁶.

A culturally responsive curriculum is not about world festivals or trying foods from different countries⁷, nor is it about surface aspects such as the inclusion of multicultural books or role play props⁸ in isolation from other culturally responsive practices. These kind of practices, developed to promote multiculturalism, currently fall short in their ability to provoke equitable and innovative pedagogies⁹ as they imply the absorption of minority groups into the dominant group¹⁰. Pedagogy and practice remain embedded in monocultural and monolingual practices¹¹ and celebrating differences does not serve to address issues of power and inequity by which some practices and beliefs keep families marginalised and disempowered¹².

In New Zealand, the Education Review Office states that provision for the diversity of families' cultures needs to move beyond tokenistic approaches towards a deeper understanding of the impact of the early childhood setting on the cultural practices of different families¹³. Sharing with children the different ways that diverse cultural groups define and celebrate their unique identities can support their understanding of, openness to, and tolerance for difference¹⁴. However, cultural responsiveness involves a deeper understanding of, and adjustment for, cultural diversity and difference that effectively reconstructs pedagogies and practices.

You might start by:

- Letting families make decisions about which cultural celebrations they would like to see reflected in the early childhood setting, and how.
- Ensuring that props and materials are non-stereotypical, and are integrated into everyday practice in the setting, rather than reserved for special celebrations (such as wearing saris for Divali) and

marked as non-typical. This point is also relevant to ethnic food, which should be regularly offered on the setting's menu, rather than just showcased for cultural celebrations.

- Getting to know your families' beliefs, practices, and aspirations in order to disrupt any assumptions you may have about them, and finding ways to adapt your practices to better reflect your families. We offer guidelines for culturally responsive practices [here](#).

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.

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Endnotes

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2 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.

3 Chan, 2009.

4 Robinson, K. H., and Jones-Díaz, C. (2006). *Diversity and difference in early childhood education: Issues for theory and practice*. Open University Press.

5 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.

6 Guo, K., & Dalli, C. (2016). Belonging as a force of agency: An exploration of immigrant children's everyday life in early childhood settings. *Global Studies of Childhood*, 6(3), 254–267.

Miller, M., & Petriwskyj, A. (2013). New directions in intercultural early education in Australia. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 45, 251–266. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13158-013-0091-4>

7 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>

8 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>

9 Robinson & Jones-Díaz, 2006.

- 10 Mitchell, L., Bateman, A., & Ouko, A. (2015). Teaching and learning in culturally diverse early childhood settings. Hamilton, NZ: Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research.
- 11 Robinson & Jones-Díaz, 2006.
- 12 Chan, 2009; Robinson & Jones-Díaz, 2006.
- 13 Education Review Office (2004). Catering for diversity in early childhood services. Author.
- 14 Durand, 2010.

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.