

## Chapter 5

# Re-thinking pedagogies: New immigrants in Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood settings

Sonja Arndt

### Abstract

*This chapter examines the importance of teacher orientations towards immigrant children, families, and teachers in early childhood education settings in Aotearoa New Zealand. Informed by a critical literature review and analysis, I highlight the complexity of cultural “otherness” and some tensions, risks, and dangers of superficial, simple interpretations of curriculum aspirations and guidelines. I argue that an orientation towards committed, sensitive, and accepting engagements is required to promote ethical and just practices. Following this, I argue that critical attention must be paid to interpretations of policy documents and guidelines for practice, and that ongoing questioning of possibilities for socially just professional practices are crucial to support diverse immigrants in early childhood settings.*

### Introduction

[E]arly childhood educators’ perspectives of diversity and difference impact upon their pedagogy and ... early childhood institutional policies and practices either disrupt or perpetuate the social inequalities that exist broadly in society (Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2006, p. 2).

Diversity and difference surround the relational space of early childhood centres in Aotearoa New Zealand. In this quote Robinson and Jones-Diaz (2006) allude to the importance of teachers’ orientations towards diversity and difference in considering appropriate, sensitive, and just opportunities in their centres. They highlight the influence of early childhood practices on either disrupting or perpetuating social inequalities that exist in the wider society.

This chapter recognises the crucial impact of early childhood teacher orientations and pedagogy towards immigrant children, families, and teachers. I draw on a critical analysis of the literature related to immigrant otherness in early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand, to highlight the unknown, and often unknowable, nature of living and working with cultural differences and diversity. The aim of the chapter is to provoke fresh insights, and an attitude of ongoing questioning, about the impact of the complex realities of being an immigrant. I use the term “immigrant” to refer to migrants, refugees, or foreigners from other countries, who are culturally different from the “locals”. Through such a questioning attitude I urge an openness towards possibilities and opportunities for socially just pedagogies that disrupt, rather than perpetuate, societal inequities. This chapter highlights some tensions between the research literature and some key aspirations and suggested practices. It warns of some of the risks and dangers of simple or misinterpretations. Connections between teacher orientations and practices that honour individual and collective differences are outlined here, to provoke critical thought about pedagogies founded on committed and responsible engagements with difference.

## Re-thinking cultural difference

Immigration is an inescapable and fundamental feature of the social and political landscape of Aotearoa New Zealand (Lewin et al., 2011; Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, n.d.; Tan, 2011, 2012). Rather than viewing diversity as a problem to be managed (Ho, Holmes, & Cooper, 2004), this chapter follows an orientation to difference that sees it as a natural part of social existence. It promotes a view that since diversity is inescapable and often unplannable, everyday encounters and relationships should consciously integrate and allow for, rather than set out to control and possibly dominate cultural difference (Baldock, 2010). A critical orientation towards cultural others in early childhood education is crucial to lead to increasingly committed, and sensitive engagements with immigrant children, families, and teachers.

The early childhood curriculum document in Aotearoa New Zealand, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), represents not only a national and political image of children as “competent and confident” (p. 9), it also promotes certain aspirations for pedagogy and practice related to cultural differences. Concern with the complex realities of immigrant individuals is heightened by an underlying expectation in *Te Whāriki* that diversity brings richness to early childhood settings. In this chapter I recognise that cultural differences can also create uncomfortable obstacles, which may block the

desirable positive, supportive, rich relationships and experiences that are promoted. Indeed, cultural differences and complications may overshadow teachers' perceptions of children's competence and confidence. Moreover, teachers' cultural differences may complicate their interpretation of curriculum aspirations and the ways that they are implemented.

Many aspects of immigrants' and locals' cultures impact on society in Aotearoa New Zealand, including diverse languages, religions, skills, and qualifications, various types of living arrangements, and individual motivations for migration (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, n.d.). The presence of multiple cultures and lifestyles within a society of diverse immigrants can lead not only to uncertainty and discomfort (Lewin et al., 2011; Rhedding-Jones, 2001), but to widespread resentment and anxiety (Ansley, 2010; Kristeva, 1991; Rivalland & Nuttall, 2010) towards those who are culturally other. Reconsiderations of ways of being and thinking about our cultural selves and others are therefore both vital and urgent.

The importance and urgency of re-thinking orientations to immigrant diversity in early childhood education arises from many angles. One of these angles lies in critical multicultural and philosophical suggestions that the diversity in educational settings can be "managed", for example by developing an understanding of and knowing cultural others, or through intercultural engagements and dialogue (Besley & Peters, 2011; Chan, 2009; May & Sleeter, 2010; Walsh, 2007). The danger in such suggestions is that they can lead to practices that, although aimed at achieving fairness, can end up being superficial and disconnected from individual realities and needs. This issue is further complicated by recent favourable government policies that have led to increased numbers of immigrant teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood settings (Immigration New Zealand, 2010, 2011), but little attention is given in the literature to immigrant teachers and their own often still raw and uncertain situations and struggles in their new teaching contexts. Implementing the strategies promoted through intercultural engagement could become problematic both for immigrant and local teachers. The risk of surface-level encounters that perpetuate the homogeneity of dominant, normalised, often already well established, practices in early childhood settings (Duhn, 2006; MacNaughton, 2005) becomes exacerbated.

A re-orientation towards cultural difference, or otherness, requires a re-confrontation of relational complexities. A personal acceptance by teachers of themselves as complex cultural beings may, for example, meaningfully inform ethical and sensitive orientations towards others. Most importantly, sensitive insights into the unknown nature of different cultural ways of being are urged, particularly to question the view that diversity can be managed, avoided, or

diffused (Besley & Peters, 2011; Rivalland & Nuttall, 2010; Todd, 2007). Questioning the notion of manageability is fundamental to provoking a more critical orientation towards cultural difference within early childhood settings.

## **Background to the research**

My research involved a critical review and analysis of literature surrounding cultural otherness, as located in the political and professional landscape of early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand (Arndt, 2012b). A body of philosophical, feminist, multicultural, and intercultural literature underpins the analysis that I draw on in this chapter, with a particular focus on the intimate rawness, struggles, and delights of being a foreigner (e.g., see Kristeva, 1991; Lewin, et al., 2011; Li, 2007; Silva, 2009), and tensions and implications that can arise (see Rhedding-Jones, 2001, 2002; Silva, 2009; Todd, 2004, 2007, 2011; Wise, 2000). Certain truths, experiences, and values, including my own, naturally and unavoidably influence the aims and provocations in this chapter (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Punch, 2009). Similarly, the connections and arguments developed represent my own working towards fresh conceptualisations, as we each work towards contextualising our own past, present, and future intricate realities, not in a prescribed way, but in a continually adjusting, re-fitting, re-forming way. It is in this sense that I hope to inspire readers as they form, transform, and re-form their own commitments and pedagogies.

## **Aotearoa New Zealand society**

Individual and collective realities are invariably entangled in a complicated web of historical, social, and political relationships. This means that the changing contexts in which people are situated continually impact on and influence, in individually specific ways, individuals' formation as cultural and social beings (Davies et al., 2012; Mohanty, 2003). An examination of cultural otherness in early childhood in Aotearoa New Zealand would be impossible (or naïve) without recognising that society as a whole is impacted upon by the wider socio-political, globalised context. In this sense, the lived experiences of recent immigrants are influenced by political, economic, and ideological forces that form this country as a desirable immigrant destination, such as offers of skilled migrant visas; “clean green” environmental messages; a perception of a “relaxed kiwi lifestyle” and a desirable English-speaking education system (Lewin et al., 2011; Statistics New Zealand, 2006; Tan, 2012). The recent recruitment of immigrant teachers to satisfy the growing demand for early childhood education is an example of such influences on the cultural landscape

in early childhood education (Duhn, 2010; Immigration New Zealand, 2010, 2011).

The re-orientations that I urge in this chapter are located within the problems raised by a neo-liberal early childhood panorama (Codd, 2008; Dale, 2008; Duhn, 2010), and the wider local and global political landscape. In this context, educational ideals must balance clear pedagogical aspirations to raise the future citizens of society, such as those promoted by *Te Whāriki*, with what can become a confusing mix of political ideologies and practices. This neo-liberal landscape has been labelled as an unpredictable, unreliable web of development, competition, and disarray, where society itself is barely able to adjust (Bauman, 2009; Marotta, 2002). Such a view raises the question of how there can be any certainty or stability for children, families, and teachers in early childhood centres, and further raises the likelihood of confusion and disorientation for new immigrants. In this context, flexibility appears to be valued to the detriment of perseverance, consistency, and long-term commitments. How then is it possible for teachers (and families) to commit to such an elusive ideal as to build up responsive, ethical engagements with others?

Alongside societal and global influences of uncertainty and instability, the cultural panorama of early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand is inherently grounded in its bicultural foundations (Orange, 1989). The obligations inherent in *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*, honoured in *Te Whāriki*, reflect indigenous understandings of relationships and belonging, of nurturing, support, and reciprocity (Ritchie & Rau, 2006). The notions of *whanaungatanga* and *manaakitanga* (Ritchie, 2008) underlie the *te ao Māori* notion of early childhood practices as an “*ahua hūmarie*, an ethical and spiritual way of being” (p. 207). They recognise engagements with others as reciprocal encounters, which demand commitment and respect. In this sense the bi-cultural obligations and aspirations in early childhood education not only underpin my provocations for reconceptualising orientations towards immigrant others, but they offer conceptual tools with which such fresh orientations can be supported.

## **Immigrant otherness in early childhood education**

*Te Whāriki*, and other Ministry of Education (1998, 2002) publications supporting its implementation, guide teachers towards pedagogies and practices aimed at supporting cultural otherness. Cederman (2008) and Chan (2011), however, are concerned that the curriculum document could be applied uncritically and unthinkingly in early childhood centres, instead of being

meaningfully investigated and contextualised. This concern further highlights the importance of considering immigrants' complicated individual realities, and how they can be ethically and fairly honoured in the early childhood context. It emphasises the possibility that uncritical responses to curriculum aspirations, and to immigrant otherness, may lead unintentionally to insensitive and superficial practices. The remainder of this chapter focuses on possible risks and dangers of uncritical, superficial applications of *Te Whāriki's* aspirations. Some key tensions are highlighted in an attempt to further provoke a re-thinking of sensitive and ethical aspirations and practices.

## **Dangers, risks, and possibilities...**

### **...in incomplete knowledge**

A tension arises in the compelling endorsement in the multicultural literature of acquiring knowledge as necessary for effective teaching within culturally diverse contexts (Chan, 2009; Ho, Holmes, & Cooper, 2004; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; May & Sleeter, 2010; Walsh, 2007). *Te Whāriki* mirrors this suggestion, for example, adults should have “knowledge and ... a clear understanding of the context in which they are working” (p. 41), and assessment practices rely on “knowledgeable adults” (p. 29) to observe learning. A broad, all-encompassing knowledge is portrayed in these statements as a vital foundation for appropriate curriculum delivery. Venturing further into the realm of culturally knowing others, it promotes “gaining knowledge of language and cultural tools” (p. 19) to enhance understandings of others. Whilst not necessarily worrying in themselves, these aspirations become problematic if they are applied uncritically and superficially. An unexamined application of such aspirations can lead to orientations such as to treat all children the same, in the expectation that this encourages fairness and equity. Careful consideration of individual situations, on the other hand, reveals that an expectation of sameness does not automatically lead to group coherence or reduce conflict, but that it risks disregarding difference in favour of superficial harmony and (disrespectful, unacknowledging) manageability (Chan, 2011; Rivalland & Nuttall, 2010). The realities of individual immigrants—often the immigrant teachers themselves, involved in their own “theatre of self-invention” (MacEinri, 1994, p. 3) and wound up in constantly shifting public perceptions—are, however, far more complex and different, than the same (Li, 2007; MacEinri, 1994).

Research suggests that the expectation that having knowledge of cultural others will support teaching engagements should be approached with caution

(May & Sleeter, 2010; Todd, 2004). In keeping with the fragility and uncertainty of the neo-liberal political environment, there is a danger that knowledge of another may always remain insufficient to relate meaningfully to, and work with, the realities of immigrant otherness. As the knowledge that an individual can have of another can never be as extensive as the complexities of their intimate cultural realities, there is a risk that any such knowledge is only ever likely to be incomplete, inappropriate, or even out of date. While some knowledge can give valuable insights into developing relationships with new immigrants, claiming to know another is perhaps not as important as it is for the other to feel accepted and acknowledged in all his or her unknown complexity. Furthermore, if teachers were consciously to resist “laying claim to another’s experience” (Todd, 2004, p. 349), they may possibly heighten their responsiveness and receptiveness to immigrants’ stories and lives. Early childhood practices may thus benefit from an open orientation by teachers to accepting a certain lack of knowledge of immigrant individuals’ complicated realities.

### **...in conceptualisations of home**

Creating a new home is fundamental to settling into a new country, combining past and present realities in a new place and space of comfort and belonging (Silva, 2009). Similarly to considering the importance of knowledge, this idea may appear on the surface to be simple. However, the notion of home is also infinitely complicated, and privileging particular orientations towards home carries a risk of excluding or marginalising others. The very idea of home, for example, raises another tension. Home may be conceptualised as a fixed physical place or locality or, alternatively, as an intrinsic, personal state of being. The dominant perspective in the early childhood literature considers home as a physical construct, as a geographically fixed abode and place in which children and adults live. This orientation reflects a strongly home-centred society (Silva, 2009) as opposed, for example, to one that is nomadic or transient, and constantly on the move. *Te Whāriki* reflects this orientation by speaking for example of environments as “... home-based” (p. 11), or set “in their own home” (p. 17), constructing home as a physical place. It also affirms the value placed on relationships with this physical home, suggesting that links “between home and early childhood education programmes are important” (p. 18).

By valuing caring, nurturing aspects, the curriculum acknowledges the intrinsic, emotional aspect of home, even within the dominant orientation of home as a physical place. Of course it is neither possible nor desirable to disregard the importance of a physical home, nor of the substantial historical

and cultural significance that a place of home holds for nations, communities, and families (Hooks, 2009; Ritchie, 2008; Wise, 2000). Home is thus undeniably entwined with emotional, affective ties, memories, and in-between spaces, often tightly bound with cultural beliefs, rituals, and values. For teachers, re-thinking the dominant idea of home can enhance their recognition of the emotional, passionate, and personal engagement with meaningful life practices and familiar, comforting habits, by which individuals create a sense of home. Such an open orientation may help to recognise the importance for immigrant others to “fill a void” (Wise, 2000, p. 297) and create a “space of comfort” (p. 300) in personally important ways, in their new environment. This orientation makes increasingly sensitive responses possible, acknowledging and allowing practices and rituals as immigrants’ intrinsic, intimate (and necessary) acts of comfort and home that may otherwise have been discredited or marginalised.

### **...in engagements in speech and dialogue**

In a similar manner to a sense of home, language use carries possible risks and dangers for immigrants in early childhood settings. Language is a strong bearer of culture, as it grounds and characterises individuals and groups. It is “at once the carrier of national and familial traditions and emblem of cultural and personal identity” (Bammer, 1994, p. xvi), and to speak is therefore an intensely personal act and revelation of the self. It is unsurprising then that immigrants’ linguistic and dialogic engagements in their new settings may risk being misunderstood, whether this involves learning a new language, or new ways of using a familiar one. Particular tensions arise in the promotion in intercultural literature, of speech and dialogue as a tool for “managing cultural diversity” (Besley & Peters, 2011, p. 2), when speech is potentially such a personally and culturally risky endeavour. Speaking may for example be seen as such a revelatory act, by which individuals risk disclosing more of their intimate self than they are prepared for, that it becomes far more complex than merely a happy “validation of the positive value”, or richness, “of otherness” (MacEinri, 1994, p. 2). Rather, it is in danger of becoming so frightening that to speak at all becomes impossible.

In addition to unintentionally exposing themselves by speaking, particularly in a still unfamiliar language, immigrants’ engagement in speech carries a further risk. From a philosophical reading of the revelatory nature of speech, Todd (2011) concludes that the meaning made of speech can be revealed only once and as it is interpreted by the listener. The speaker herself then is never solely responsible for the story told by her or his words. Such a danger poses a challenge for teachers as immigrant children, families, or colleagues faced with



these risks of dialogic engagements across differences, may recoil from the vulnerability of dialogue into a safer state of non-exposure and silence instead (Todd, 2011). A re-orientation by teachers may require recognition of the tension between engagements with immigrant others through speech and dialogue, and silence, as a preferred realm of safety. Perhaps enhanced relational possibilities lie in allowing individual complicated histories and lives to become slowly revealed, possibly even through silence, in meaningful, sensitive engagements that unfold over time.

### **...and in responsible acts of community**

A further tension arises within different conceptions of community (Arndt, 2012a). Community can be perceived in a variety of ways, for instance, and popularly, as a group of people connected in various ways as a particular entity. Alternatively community can be seen as a way for individuals to engage with others, as a “responsible mode of social togetherness” and as a “signifying encounter with difference” (Todd, 2004, p. 337). This latter suggestion, of community as an act of engaging with others, re-situates my provocations in this chapter on an ethically, socially, and individually difficult path, as a continuous process of engagement.

*Te Whāriki* clearly considers community as an important construct. It perceives community as a group of people, and dedicates one of its overarching principles to “Family and Community/*Whānau Tangata*” promoting, for example, that children should “have some knowledge about the wider community” (p. 55). It strongly affirms the dominant notion of community as an entity, to which children either belong or should belong, and to which teachers should encourage children to contribute. Seeing community as a relational concept involving an encounter with others requires moving beyond the expectations in the curriculum document, and the risk and danger of its implementation in harmonious expectations of simple “social wholeness” (Young, as cited in Todd, 2004, p. 338). Whereas the aspirations in the curriculum aim to allow for cultural differences, if applied uncritically they risk submerging all difference under a veil of commonality. Critically re-thinking community as a relational encounter could support ethical, socially just interactions where “difference ceases to be an impediment to mutual understanding” (Todd, 2004, p. 338). Conceptualising community as ethical encounters with others could therefore open possibilities for committed and responsible practices that cross barriers of difference. Perhaps taking the risk of letting go of familiar processes, and welcoming unpredictable differences and alterity, may be a powerful step towards an orientation that elevates

teachers to a personal commitment and openness towards respectful, accepting encounters.

## Implications and opportunities

A concluding provocation draws together my interweaving of curriculum aspirations, the tensions outlined, and the complex realities of immigrant children, families, and teachers in early childhood settings: the common call for celebrating diversity. *Te Whāriki* mirrors wider multicultural expectations (Ho et al., 2004) and common practices (Chan, 2011) when it claims that “[t]he early childhood curriculum ... affirms and celebrates cultural differences” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 18). Cultural feminist researchers such as Mohanty (2003) urge that a critical consciousness of others depends on differences being seen as more than a “benign variation (diversity)” (p. 193), that bypasses power, history, and social and political realities. They warn strongly against practices and orientations that risk becoming empty, comfortable, harmonious celebrations of likeable differences. Chan (2011) reinforces this warning, suggesting that uncritical celebrations are likely to promote “cultural essentialism and ethnocentrism” and to “perpetuate stereotypical and universal” (p. 68) representations of particular ethnicities or cultures. Following these warnings, celebrations of diversity may indeed appear to recognise some differences, but at the same time barely skim the surface of the complications and uncertainties involved in living with, or being an immigrant. Simple uncritical celebrations of diversity are thus most likely to serve and represent the hegemonic realities and ideologies of those in power, and could result in further othering of the subjugated immigrants that they intend to celebrate.

A reorientation towards immigrant differences is crucial. Throughout this chapter I have urged a critical confrontation of teacher orientations and an increased openness and receptiveness towards cultural others. I have highlighted tensions arising in the confluence of curriculum aspirations with critical multicultural and philosophical cultural literature, to disturb the possibility of simple interpretations of diversity as rich or beautiful. I neither pretend that engaging with cultural differences is simple or easy, nor do I attempt to suggest solutions that will solve the tensions outlined. Instead this chapter could be seen as similar to Sellers’ (2013) description of rhizomatic thought, as “multitudes of nodes, linked by paths and trajectories” (p. xv), which must be interpreted and re-thought afresh, for each individual, and for each setting. To acknowledge that by their very presence every individual within an early childhood setting affects and creates the nature of the space, it is crucial to negotiate freshly difficult ethical, socially responsible, and just

paths of engagements within each of those spaces. Complex encounters with immigrant children, families, and teachers are worth, and demand, traversing the risks and dangers outlined. That task depends on re-thinking orientations and disrupting social inequalities through meaningful commitments to diversity and difference.

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