In this issue:

Thirty-one is a lot! Assessing four-year-old children's number knowledge during an open-ended activity.

Organisational capacity building: Readiness for change in Australian child care.

Diversity in teaching and learning: Practitioners' perspectives in a multicultural early childhood setting in Australia.

and more...
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Diversity in teaching and learning: Practitioners’ perspectives in a multicultural early childhood setting in Australia

Sylvia Buchori
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ENCONTERS WITH DOMINANT sociocultural values begin with the early childhood classroom setting. This qualitative study reported the perceptions that early childhood educators in an Australian setting had of their culturally diverse classrooms and the pedagogic practices they implemented to address the needs of the children from diverse cultural backgrounds in their care. Findings highlighted the dilemmas that teachers face in trying to value and preserve children’s background cultures while at the same time enabling transition into the new dominant culture. Teachers in the study sometimes viewed children’s previous cultural backgrounds as a burden, being preoccupied with conformity into the dominant culture. At the same time, they were concerned for students who were not performing to curriculum standards and fearful of not meeting their own expectations, those of the system and those of the children’s parents.

Introduction

The Whitlam government first introduced policy on multiculturalism in the 1970s. By 2000, however, Australians had only ‘practical tolerance’ and ambivalence to the value of multiculturalism for Australia (Ang, Brand, Noble & Sternberg, 2006; Ang, Brand, Noble & Wilding, 2002). Recently, the Scanlon Mapping Social Cohesion Surveys (Markus, 2013) reported that, despite 80 per cent support for a policy of multiculturalism, there was less confidence in responses and lower levels of support if such support entailed Australian Government funding. Dandy and Pe-Pua (2010) reported Australians as focused on the negative consequences of cultural diversity and fear of minority groups such as Muslims and Arabs.

Children from immigrant families, Indigenous Australians and those from low socioeconomic groups have faced discrimination, inequity and social injustice in schools (Mansouri & Kamp, 2007; Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006). Moreover, refugees from Asia and the Middle East often fail to achieve at the same educational level as the rest of the Australian population (Cahill, 1996; Mansouri & Trembath, 2005).

In 2011 the Gillard Labor Government presided over a new multiculturalism policy designed to work in combination with a national anti-racism partnership and strategy. The policy stated that:

- Australians from all backgrounds will be given every opportunity to participate in and contribute to Australia and its social, economic and cultural life.
- Australians from all backgrounds are also entitled to receive equitable access to government services.
- The Government will strengthen its access and equity policies to ensure that government programs and services are responsive to the needs of Australia’s culturally and linguistically diverse communities (DIAC, 2011, p. 16).

Such policies have implications for early childhood education in Australia, the history of which is outlined briefly below in order to set the backdrop for the research reported here.

Early childhood education in Australia

Early childhood classrooms and settings in Australia cater for children from ages six weeks to eight years and can include public and private providers. Originating out of philanthropy, early childhood education providers turned their focus to the rights of the child (United Nations, 1959; United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), 2013). They considered doctrines of social transformation and critical pedagogy (MacNaughton, 2003) in an effort to generate new and innovative ways to involve
and empower children (Fleet, 2006; New & Cochran, 2007). Curricula were conceptualised from the child’s multiple perspectives, with an understanding of the interrelated nature of the child’s learning and individual development (Pigozzi, 1999). UNICEF (2011) advocated that children be given the opportunity to express their views, thoughts and ideas; to actively participate, associate freely and be comfortable within themselves.

In 2009, the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) was validated by the Council of Australian Governments to support educators in their quest to provide effective learning environments (DEEWR, 2009). Five principles formed the basis for the framework. The fourth principle was ‘Respect for diversity’. Although the EYLF does not use the term Multicultural Education (ME), respect for diversity is at the heart of ME. The latter encourages inclusive curriculum and aims to transform the wider society by providing students with educational experiences that are socially and culturally relevant (Keengwe, 2010). However, interpretations of ME can be focused on teaching children about other cultures in a tokenistic and superficial way that has been labelled a ‘tourist approach’ to teaching and learning (Schoorman, 2011).

Dealing with diversity in early childhood settings

Early research into teacher attitudes (McInerney, 1987) found that many educators felt their only role was to teach children the English language and immerse them in the dominant culture. More recently, immigrant children experience an informal socialisation process into Australian culture and the English language in early childhood contexts (Amigo, 2012) but are not encouraged to keep their cultural and linguistic background. This may be due to different understandings of central concepts such as culture, ethnicity, equity and participation as outlined in government policy and the lack of a standardised approach to ME (McInerney, 2003).

Studies have indicated a need for improving educators’ abilities to understand, respect and respond to diverse situations in the early childhood classroom (Han & Thomas, 2010; Montgomery, 2001; Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006; Souto-Manning & Mitchell, 2009). Educators sometimes socialise young children into their own cultural contexts (Fleet, 2006; Souto-Manning & Mitchell, 2009) sending the message that familial culture and language are unimportant or inferior.

Montgomery (2001) suggested that it was essential for teachers to establish partnerships with families and community resources in order to ensure a culturally responsive classroom. Collaboration and communication are also an important principle of best practice in early childhood education (Rice, Shortland-Jones & Meney, 2006). Most recently, Long, Volk, Baines and Tisdale (2013) have advocated that learning is only effective when it is ‘grounded in children’s existing knowledge, experience, perspectives and ways of knowing’ (p. 423), including knowledge of home, community and heritage. Other recent studies have suggested that educators take a critically syncretic approach to teaching in which they ‘privilege traditions and practices typically marginalized in schools’ in order to broaden worldviews (p. 418). Unlike a hybrid view of teaching, a syncretic view emphasises the creative or transformative process (Volk, 2013) rather than the product or new forms that are created.

To date there have been very few studies investigating the impact of early childhood educators’ perspectives of diversity and difference upon their pedagogy. Equally, there has been little reported on the effect of institutional policies and practices on the perpetuation or disruption of social inequalities (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006, p. 2). This article reports on a study which attempted to fill this gap.

**Research design**

Qualitative data was collected via ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews. A social anthropological approach to data analysis was adopted within an interpretivist paradigm. The following research question was the driver for the overall study:

How do early childhood educators perceive and respond to cultural differences in multicultural classrooms in Australia?

**Profile of the researcher**

The researcher was both ethnographer and interviewer in the study, spending time in the school context as an Educator Assistant (EA) during 2011 while also formally observing the interactions between teachers and students and speaking to the teachers. This dual role was made explicit in the ethics application. As an EA, the researcher was able to participate fully within the school context as a member of the group. Her identity as a researcher was known to the teachers and students and the dual role allowed for firsthand observation of participants and students in their lessons. It was explained to the participants that the purpose of the research project was to assess their relationships with students, their understanding of students’ cultures and their need to make critical decisions about how they embrace diversity in their classrooms and respond to the needs of their students.

**Profile of the participants**

A purposive sample of four early childhood teachers from the same educational institution was chosen for the research. This specific group was chosen because the teachers had experience of teaching multicultural groups from low socioeconomic backgrounds in a school where 90 per cent of the children come from cultural minorities and 40 per cent were born outside Australia. At the time...
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of the research, the school was in transition from the West Australian Curriculum Framework to the EYLF. Two out of the four teachers in the study were born in Australia. Of these, one had an Indian background and one had a British background. The other two were born in China and Bangladesh but had resided in Australia for a considerable amount of time. Teaching experience ranged from three to eight years with the mode being three to four years. Table 1 gives more detail.

Data collection
Teachers in the study were interviewed individually on one occasion for a period of 30–45 minutes, face to face, using semi-structured, open-ended interview questions. Guiding interview questions have been listed in Appendix 1. It is acknowledged that questions 5 and 9 may be seen as perpetuating notions of the ‘Other’ but a decision was made to make questions accessible to the participants (and get rich data) by wording them simplistically. Similarly, questions 6 and 7 might appear to be leading questions but they were sufficiently open and loosely structured to encourage differences of opinion. The semi-structured nature of questions also allowed the interviewer to modify questions as she went along. Field notes were written up over the duration of the study; these described and reflected upon lessons observed.

Data analysis
Data was analysed using a Miles and Huberman (1994) thematic approach. Findings were documented as thick descriptions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Analysis was authenticated by extensive participant quotation, the goal being to build an in-depth picture of participants’ understandings of, and responses to, cultural diversity. All data were received through the cultural lens of the researcher’s beliefs and experiences as a Muslim, Indonesian–Australian woman in her early 20s who has undertaken all of her schooling and tertiary education in Australia (Freinkel & Wallen, 2003) and read literature in the field.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Type</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Ethnic Background</th>
<th>Time in Australia</th>
<th>Qualification/years of teaching experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>T1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Indian–Australian</td>
<td>Born in Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Anglo-Saxon Australian</td>
<td>Born in Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>T3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Chinese–Australian</td>
<td>24 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>T4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bengali–Australian</td>
<td>31 years</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Findings and discussion
Teachers’ conceptions of cultural diversity
Each of the four teachers had a different understanding of cultural diversity. T2 and T3 saw cultural diversity as centred on issues of racial identity and religious beliefs. Their responses mirrored the Australian Government’s narrow definition of multiculturalism as ‘the cultural and ethnic diversity of contemporary Australia’ (DIAC, 2006). T2 defined cultural diversity as ‘people having different ethnic backgrounds … different religions and … different ways of life’. T3 saw cultural diversity as ‘differences in culture and in religion’. Both of these perspectives emphasised ‘tolerance and acceptance’ (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006, p. 72). T1 and T4, however, expanded their definition of cultural diversity to include differences in social structures, gender roles, economic status and political beliefs, resonating with views of cultural diversity as ‘linked to broader societal processes, policies and practices’ but still falling short of recognising the impact of racism, discrimination and inequality (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006, p. 72). T1 further recognised the significance of culture and religion in determining ‘… values, family size and structure, child-rearing practices, gender roles, role of educators, recreational activities, food and festivals’. T4 saw cultural diversity as a phenomenon that ‘allows for people to interact with each other but at the same time not losing their mother tongue’.

The participants were positive about multiculturalism. They believed, however, that, as in McInerney’s study (1987), effective multiculturalism was reliant upon appropriate regulation and assimilation into the dominant culture. This drive for conformity and maintenance of the status quo are embedded in cultural practices and beliefs put into place by bureaucracies and socialising agents like school (Keelie & Carrington, 2006). When asked about her views on assimilation T4 replied:

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Anyone who comes into Australia should share the same values as shared by all Australians and to abide by and fulfil their obligations within a democracy.

T2 reiterated this view by stating:

Multiculturalism is the greatest thing in this country but anyone who comes into this country needs to at least understand and in some aspects live the Australian way of life but then again, not lose their own culture in the process.

T3 shared the same perspective as the other participants:

You should be willing to learn about the Australian culture, its values, beliefs and traditions and by this I don’t mean you have to go to the beach and you have to have a barbeque every weekend. You need to be part of the wider community and not isolate yourself among your own kind of people.

Teachers’ beliefs about the shaping of cultural conceptions

Teachers’ unquestioned responses to cultural diversity had generally been shaped by family, friends, the media and interaction with people from other cultures. Perceptions about cultural or ethno-linguistic groups were generalised. For example T2 described how her conceptions of cultural diversity were formed:

I have learnt about my personal identity through my family but the messages from the larger society soon filtered through and became another critical influence. These messages were explicit and I guess in other ways I was brainwashed ... they mainly came from other family members, friends, movies and television and from books and advertising. I was so dependent on others telling me who I was but as I grew I started to search and find out who I was, and then I could start to learn about others.

T2 believed that the flip-side of social identity could be stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination. She felt that social reality was a media creation which could undermine access that immigrants have to opportunities and resources in society. She reflected, ‘Try being Muslim in today’s society, it’s not easy’. As a born and bred Australian she would have few real insights into what it would be like to be Muslim in today’s Australia but close contact with her Muslim students had probably led her to feel that life was not always easy for them.

T1 and T3 shared similar experiences. They admitted being unaware of their own prejudices and cultural biases, despite being members of minority groups themselves. As T3 explained:

I came to this country when I was around two years old and I had a very cultural upbringing ... the white kids at school would call me all sorts of names, my parents called them racists. We would always talk bad about the white people at home and how bad they treated us at school and at work and it all seemed ok to talk about them in that way, after all they didn’t treat us very nice. I guess hearing all this stuff at home about white people helped build this picture that all white people are racist ... I was so caught up in the hype I didn’t even realise what I was doing ... I was being racist myself.

T3’s reference to her ‘cultural upbringing’ is somewhat ambiguous. It could be interpreted as either an upbringing steeped in what might be seen as ‘high’ culture (i.e. literature, art, classical music) or an upbringing which was very intercultural in nature.

T1 said:

It’s weird, like when I go to the GP I will always go for a white Anglo-Saxon doctor because I’ve heard that the Asian doctors are dodgy, watching A Current Affair you know ... I’ve always heard how Arab and Muslim men keep their women at home and make them look after the babies and slave away over the stove and it always made me angry but when I walk out I actually noticed a lot of Arab women walking around and shopping with or without their husbands ... my Arab friend explained that it’s not like that at all you know? Sometimes once you hear something you just accept it without question and take it as gospel truth.

T2 also suggested that positive and negative attitudes towards differences are formed early in life, a view in line with that of Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2010). She understood it was essential to examine ‘Self’ in order to be able to teach and nurture all children fully and equally. T1 implicated the media in her images of non-Anglos. These images changed once she had had close personal contact with people from non-Anglo backgrounds, she said.

Teachers’ attitudes towards cultural diversity in the classroom

Participants held positive attitudes towards cultural diversity in the classroom. They acknowledged and valued identity recognition, suggesting that their attitudes had been shaped by family, friends, the media and interaction with people from other cultures. They identified what was important to them in terms of values and beliefs and recognised the need for reflection on ‘Self’ and ‘Other’.

T3 expanded on T2’s point in the previous section about the need for a critical cultural self-assessment:

If we want the children to be accepting of differences, then we need to look at our own beliefs and practices because surely they influence our behaviour and the way in which we interact with the children and their families ...

T4 added, ‘We need to provide positive experiences related to diversity and we can only share our own feelings at (2010), participants one’s own history, be they realised that cu upon acknowledging that exists within t: 2006) as seen in T3:

It’s the most amazing ... they views on life and have our proble doesn’t?

T2 added to this img:

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- selfing of differences, beliefs and practices sur behaviour and the the children and their

ve experiences related to diversity and we can't do this if we have not addressed our own feelings about differences'. Like Montgomery (2010), participants recognised the need to understand one's own history, beliefs, values and culture. Furthermore, they realised that culturally responsive education is reliant upon acknowledgement of and respect for the diversity that exists within the classroom (Keeffe & Carrington, 2006) as seen in T3's account below:

'It's the most amazing thing to have to come to every morning ... they all have different personalities, different views on life and different aspirations ... no doubt we have our problems sometimes but what classroom doesn't.'

T2 added to this impression:

On Harmony Day when the kids come in to school with their cultural dress you feel like you are no longer in Australia, somehow you are transported to a different country every time you see a different child and the cultural baggage they bring with them is suddenly meaningful and you truly begin to appreciate each atom of diversity that exists within our class.

T2's reference to Harmony Day highlights the point made by Schoorman (2011) and others (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010), that cultural diversity is often packaged up neatly into artefacts, food, costumes and 'special days' in schools while cultural examination remains at a superficial level. The expression 'cultural baggage' brings with it deficit connotations but once dressed up in colourful costumes the children and their 'backpack' become more palatable.

Teachers' ways of dealing with cultural diversity in the multicultural classroom

Participants framed their responses to culturally responsive education in two ways: lack of attention to English language development and immersion of young children into the dominant culture. The perspective on linguistic problems is a major focus of its own and is dealt with in another paper. Immersion of the children into the dominant culture, however, is a theme central to this paper.

Teachers expressed progressive, culturally sensitive and reflective views during interview but often adopted a teaching style designed to meet the expectations of significant others. Despite recognising the need to acknowledge and honour cultural differences in the classroom, participants adopted a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. There was also a sense that teachers felt students and their families were ignorant of how to integrate into Australian society. As in other studies (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, Keeffe & Carrington, 2006), teachers believed it their duty to help the children in their charge develop the skills, values and attitudes necessary for survival in the dominant culture. During interview, T4 talked about helping the children with 'openness in communication, a tolerance for other

cultures, independence, individual rights' and democracy. T1 explained: 'I'm not trying to assimilate the children into the Australian culture but as teachers we have a responsibility to teach the children the values, beliefs and attitudes we share as a nation'. T2 added:

'I'm really for gender equality ... sometimes with the families that come here you'll come face to face with attitudes that are just so backwards and I feel if you want to come here [Australia] then you will definitely need to change your views on gender roles stereotypically because I believe women and men are equal.

T3 shared the views of the other participants and stated:

I want my kids to leave my classroom with a sense of independence, respect and justice. I don't mind what the children and their families do at home but sometimes you need to leave some things at home and be a part of the dominant culture to fit in and succeed.

Such views fall short of acknowledgement of the social and cultural contexts of individual children and their families (Banks, 2007; Keeffe & Carrington, 2006). In another lesson a student approached T4 to ask a question while looking at his book and fiddling with his pencil. T4 urged the student to repeat his question and make direct eye contact. He repeated his question but continued to look down at his book and was once again urged to look at the teacher. His eyes moved around the classroom while he was speaking. T4 gently took his face and directed it towards hers. The student tried to move his head out of T4's grip. T4 explained to him that she refused to answer his question because it was bad manners not to look at a person to whom you were speaking. T4's actions seemed to be uniformed by cross-cultural pragmatics and the rules governing direct eye contact in different cultures, a phenomenon also observed by Keeffe & Carrington in their studies (2006).

A further example of cross-cultural insensitivity arose during lunch break when T2 was monitoring a Singaporean student:

T2: Natassa your noodles look so yummy...

T2: ... it smells really good but maybe next time you can bring something like a sandwich for lunch.

T2: (Walks around the classroom.) See Jay has some egg and lettuce in his sandwich (continues walking around.) Maryam has ... (looks at Maryam's sandwich) some tuna, mayonnaise and some lettuce in hers. (Addresses whole class) Who else has a sandwich?

(Students call out and raise their hands to show they have a sandwich.)

T2: (Addresses Natassa) You can eat your yummy noodles at home because I know how yummy they are. I love my noodles but when you come
to school maybe bring a healthy sandwich.

Educators sometimes use their own realities of the dominant culture to determine what belongs and what does not belong. They may unintentionally forget to acknowledge, value and respect the cultures and traditions of different children and different families (Banks, 2007; Dermer-Sparks & Edwards, 2010).

T4 justified her efforts to encourage students to adopt certain values and attitudes as follows:

Many lack awareness of how to function in the Australian culture or environment especially at this school; many families are completely stuck in their own cultures and traditions ... sometimes these kids lack self-confidence and often you have to pose a problem to them to know they are socially and morally capable.

Teacher behaviour seemed to be governed by a sense of anxiety about parents’ or principals’ expectations and a fear of students failing below the standards. This is illustrated in the following exchanges between teachers and individual students as well as the class as a whole:

T4: Don’t worry we’ll keep practising but you need to try and say it right because the principal will be watching you and everyone else.

T3: Hmm someone hasn’t been practising at home have they? I may need to talk to your mother this afternoon.

T4: (Addresses student) so now do you see we use division and not multiplication. You are in Year 2 now, you should know this; (addresses whole class) in fact all of you should know this.

Teachers’ understandings of the goals of multicultural education

Participants agreed on two things. First, it was important to teach children about different cultures and, second, the most effective way to do this was to emphasise points of comparison between cultures. In doing so, the participants sometimes unwittingly accentuated stereotypes and highlighted their limited metacultural awareness. In her response to the idea of preserving cultural, linguistic and religious differences T1 said:

I think the easiest way to help children learn more about their culture is to talk about what makes that culture special ... I usually borrow books that contain facts about a particular culture and we sort of learn from the facts because I have my own culture and I don’t understand much about other people’s culture so the internet and books are a big help.

T3 told her story:

We were learning about Aboriginal culture ... we did dot paintings and we looked at pictures of Aboriginal people living in the bush ... It was funny because one of the kids seemed confused; he told me that he had a neighbour who was Aboriginal ... and did not look like the Aboriginals shown in the picture and he asked me ‘does my neighbour really eat bugs and insects?’ I was just lost for words ... I didn’t know what to say ... I didn’t realise I was stereotyping a particular group of people ... that wasn’t the message I was trying to portray.

Such an approach risks focusing on the exotic and failing to provide children with up-to-date information or insights about how people in different cultures live their daily lives. Commercial material can be useful but, as suggested by Pelo (2006) and Robinson and Jones Diaz (2006), and made evident in the questions asked by the student above, there is no substitute for active investigation, reflection and dialogue between students or students and teachers.

Teachers’ beliefs about the role of the family in culturally responsive curriculum

Freire and Macedo (1999) suggested that interactions with families should embrace respect, reciprocity and responsiveness. The teachers in this study all recognized the need for close partnerships with families. They identified families as valuable and indispensable members of the early childhood setting who need to be involved and engaged in the planning process for their children. Despite this belief, the participants shared the view that it was ‘too hard’ to work with the immigrant families in this particular setting because parents did not show enough interest and language barriers were insurmountable. T2 explained:

Sometimes you try to talk to them and ask them how their day has been and they just smile at you because they have no idea what you’re on about ... some of the families don’t even turn up for parent-teacher interviews and it makes me annoyed because we spend so much time preparing all this stuff on their child and they just don’t bother ... it must be because they can’t speak English ...

Kiriakou (2001) has warned that with changing demographics, teachers in Australia can no longer afford to place issues of cross-cultural communication in the ‘too-hard basket’.

Propositions

Three propositions emerged from the findings of the study. They pertain to teachers’ views about ‘cultural baggage’, teachers’ preoccupation with conformity and teachers’ fears of failure.

Conformity overriden

Participants often t underlaying sentiment need to be ‘like us’ a tool by which to culture. This sends a culture which is not. Such practice does to empower children and allow for freed (UNICEF, 2013).

Fear of failure

The commitment to the family’s autonomy attributed, in part, only the students’ parents. T1 anxiety about meeting might reflect badly children of migrant the idea of Develo (NAEYC, 2009) and become better info

Recommendations

In light of the findings the following recommendations are made: In-service and professional development would benefit from historical, religious and cultural regions from which Curriculum in Australia competence in greater attention be given to make sure that awareness do not exist. They need to empt...
Culture and language seen as cultural baggage

Despite positive teacher attitudes towards multiculturalism, there was a feeling that learners were trapped or ‘stuck in their cultures’. This created a tension between the celebration of ‘cultural baggage’ (T3) as ‘amazing’ and the perception of cultural baggage as a burden. Teachers saw cultural baggage as ‘an encumbrance’ or a restriction rather than a ‘safety net’ which can prevent students from falling into insecurity (Louie, 2005, p. 23). There seemed to be recurrent Othing and an emphasis on ‘us’ and ‘them’ which resulted in a tokenistic, superficial, ‘tourist’ approach to teaching and learning (Schooman, 2011). The children’s experiences and cultural knowledge were not always recognised as a resource (Keengwe, 2010).

Conformity overrides diversity

Participants often took on parent roles and there was an underlying sentiment that in order to survive the children need to be ‘like us’. The dominant culture was used as a tool by which to measure the value of other people’s culture. This sends a ‘West and the Rest’ message that any culture which is not Western is repressive and ‘backward’. Such practice does not resound with pedagogies designed to empower children (Fleet, 2006; New & Cochran, 2007) and allow for freedom of expression and comfortableness (UNICEF, 2013).

Fear of the failure

The commitment to preparation and education of children within the spectrum of the dominant culture could be attributed, in part, to the participants’ fear of failing not only the students but also their line managers and the students’ parents. The teachers seemed to share an overall anxiety about meeting ‘standards’. Any faltering in this aim might reflect badly on them as teachers and migrants or children of migrants. Such a stance is in conflict with the idea of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) (NAEYC, 2009) and, therefore, needs to be challenged or become better informed.

Recommendations

In light of the findings from this small ethnographic study, the following recommendations are made:

In-service and pre-service practitioner education courses would benefit from core course content on social, political, historical, religious and cultural issues pertaining to the regions from which students originate. The new National Curriculum in Australia recognises the need for intercultural competence in graduates and dictates that explicit attention be given to this end. The challenge now is to make sure that units dedicated to raising cross-cultural awareness do not resort to a ‘tourist’ or Othing approach. They need to emphasise the dynamic nature of culture.

Practitioner advice on how to deal and engage with cross-cultural diversity needs to be embedded in all pre-service and in-service teacher education units and courses.

Pre-service educators need opportunities to engage firsthand with culturally diverse groups of children during teacher education practicums.

Skills for critical reflection need to be refined in pre-service and in-service practitioner education with examination of Self and Other, personal identity, values and the social, theoretical and educational discourses that have helped shape Australian practitioners.

Government and private education providers need support to deal with refugee and immigrant children. Teachers in this present study were making the best of limited resources but on many occasions this proved to be inadequate and stressful for both teachers and children. Multilingual translator services, specialisation in the English as an Additional Language/Dialect teachers, professional support and community support networks that can help immigrant families settle into their communities would benefit these teachers. Such resources are expensive, and this would not be the first piece of research to advocate greater spending, but it is necessary to reiterate this stand.

Opportunities for better informed practitioners to engage in dialogue with students and their families about teacher and learner expectations need to be formally established. One way to achieve this might be through learning journals where students, teachers and parents record their questions, impressions and anxieties with the aid of a translator. Alternatively, regular face-to-face meetings between the three parties may be effective.

Conclusion

The study reported in this article highlights instances in which children from culturally diverse backgrounds were Othing. Attempts were made by well-intentioned teachers, who were migrants themselves in some cases, to integrate the children into the dominant culture in order that they might succeed. Despite the best intentions of teachers, cultural diversity was celebrated in a perfunctory manner. Comments from teachers revealed their lack of confidence and knowledge in this area.

Building an inclusive culture in a school is paramount. This can only occur if teachers are informed, willing and confident to question and critique their own personal and collective beliefs and the values and practices underpinning their teaching. Increased metacultural sensitivity and awareness on the part of early childhood teachers could facilitate confidence and a more symmetrical dialogue between families and educators. Australia’s culturally diverse population and intercultural competence is not a luxury but a necessity. The need to look outwards rather
than inwards and have a more general understanding of the region underlies the recommendations put forward by the latest White Paper—Australia in the Asian Century (Australian Government, 2012). More dialogue, and an increased government or school response to the resourcing of schools, could lead to a greater connection between teachers and the children of culturally diverse families. In this way, wider perspectives and context-appropriate practices could be fostered. As Kofi Annan said, ‘Diversity is not only the basis for the dialogue among civilizations, but also the reality that makes dialogue necessary’ (Annan, 2000).

References


Appendix 1—Int

1. What does cultural diversity mean to you?
2. How have you been influenced by cultural diversity in your life?
3. How do you feel about the current situation?
4. How does your response to your experience of cultural diversity differ from your parents or grandparents?
5. What do you believe is the purpose of education in a multicultural society?
6. What do you think we should do to improve cultural diversity in our society?
7. What do you think are the benefits of having a diverse and inclusive school environment?
8. What do you think are the challenges of having a diverse and inclusive school environment?
9. What do you believe is the most effective way to promote cultural diversity and understanding in schools?
Appendix 1—Interview questions

1. What does cultural diversity mean to you?
2. How have you built up your knowledge/ perceptions of cultural diversity in society? What are the sources of these perceptions?
3. How do you feel about the culturally diverse children in your classroom?
4. How have your feelings influenced the way you respond to your students?
5. What do culturally diverse students bring with them into your classroom?
6. What do you believe culturally diverse children need to have/be equipped with before they enter formal schooling?
7. What do you believe are some of the ‘issues’ you encounter teaching in a multicultural classroom?
8. How do you respond to these ‘issues’?
9. How do you believe culturally diverse students learn best?