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AN 'OPEN LETTER TO TEACHERS'

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Professional Summary

Teaching is a highly complex and political endeavour, and as teachers, we need to be courageous as we support children to make sense of the increasingly complex and diverse societies that we live in. My doctoral research highlighted a number of issues related to teachers and curriculum. *Te Whāriki*, the Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood curriculum is the framework for critical socially relevant curriculum, and this letter speaks to teachers whose daily work involves recognising and responding to children's 'working theories' about the social world. I argue that as teachers we need to be reflective and reflexive, and think critically about curriculum planning to go beyond children's surface interests and focus on deeper issues like fairness, justice, anti-racism and our shared humanity – issues of concern to society as a whole. As teachers, we also need to involve families in the conversations that they are part of, and privy to, so together we can create a fairer, more just society for all who call Aotearoa New Zealand home.

Keywords: Diversity, fairness, social justice, curriculum, young children

Introduction

As part of my doctoral research about diversity and fairness, I spent ten days over a seven month period at Beech Kindergarten (pseudonym) where I interacted with forty five 3 and 4-year-old children, their families and six teachers. Four years later, after having spent a good deal of time immersed in the myriad of data that had been generated, I ended my thesis with an 'Open letter to teachers'. As I sought to answer the following research questions, a number of key issues surfaced which I documented in this letter.

1. When learning about diversity and fairness in the social world, what working theories do young children (aged 3-5 years) express? And how are these expressed?
2. How do families describe, encourage, and respond to children's explorations of fairness and difference?
3. How do teachers provoke and respond to children's working theories about the social world?
4. How might teachers promote an 'inclusive response' to diversity by supporting children to respect the equal worth of others regardless of their perceived differences?

The letter presented here highlights the importance of a socially relevant curriculum that balances the interests of the child with the interests of the community. Teaching approaches based on social justice and anti-bias necessitate making spaces for negotiation and meaning-making and valuing multiple perspectives and possibilities. Children's developing 'working theories' for making sense of the world are visible in these spaces as they refine their thinking and apply it across new situations (MoE, 1996, 2017). Social justice and anti-bias approaches are part of courageous, whole-setting responses required to make the world a fairer, more just place for everyone.

An 'Open letter to teachers'

Teaching is dynamic, political, and values-based. Teaching can also be complex, messy, and uncertain. Relationships and *ako*ⁱ are fundamental to teaching, for as we teach, we are taught; as we help others

ⁱ *Ako* (cross-gender) and *tuakana-teina* (gender specific) are Māori pedagogies that involve a learning relationship where there is an expectation that older siblings or peers will take responsibility for their younger

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develop, we grow and change as well. Beyond the home, ECE settings are often the first contact that families have with education settings, making them important social spaces for children learning about the world - especially the increasingly complex and diverse societies that we live in.

Diversity and fairness really matter to young children and teachers as this research has shown. Long ago, Silin (1995) argued that contemporary curriculum needs to speak to, “the things that really matter in children’s lives or in the lives of those who care for them” (p.40). *Te Whāriki* is the framework for socially relevant, critical curriculum. Children’s social learning about self and others happens in ECE settings, while each person’s mana is being enhanced. These goals, woven throughout the *Te Whāriki* principles and strands, frame what is to be taught and learned in ECE settings (MoE, 1996, 2017).

In the revised version of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017), teachers are urged to use “critical inquiry and problem solving to shape their practice” (p. 59). The curriculum document is now explicit that “critical theory perspectives challenge disparities, injustices, inequalities and perceived norms” (p. 62). These perspectives are “reflected in the principles of *Te Whāriki* and in guidance on how to promote equitable practices with children, parents and whānau” (p. 62).

Critical theory perspectives are also fundamental to critical multiculturalism and in keeping with renewed/revised anti-bias approaches to socially relevant curriculum. These teaching approaches were identified in Chapter eight as the next pedagogical turn for these teachers, and an urgent task in ECE (Schoorman, 2011; Vandenbroeck, 2007).

Consciously thinking about power imbalances, and question[ing] their practices by asking who is advantaged and who is disadvantaged are fundamental to realising the transformative potential of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017). ‘Troubling’ diversity and seeing it from a range of perspectives is vital in order to better understand how to teach children about inequalities in relationships while keeping focused on the goal of social inclusion. The challenge becomes deciding what knowledge is valued and spoken about, and what knowledge is ignored or silenced. Additional challenges relate to hearing everyone’s voices, especially marginalised and silent voices.

Discourses permeate teachers’ and children’s interactions, discourses that can be embraced, challenged, resisted or ignored. This research has shown that normalising discourses can cause power inequalities, and limit children’s potential. Statements such as, ‘she’s the naughty girl’, ‘girls can’t do Speedway’, ‘friends don’t do that’, ‘what’s he doing that for? he’s a boy’, ‘that’s a girls’ song’, ‘probably because she’s hot’, and ‘no-one with brown faces is coming to my party’ are related to normalising discourses about social relations. Teachers can promote fairer relations by rejecting/disrupting normalising and limiting discourses (Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2006), as part of renewed/revised anti-bias approaches to socially relevant curriculum.

Exclusion is evident whenever children’s participation, agency, and voice are limited, including when realities of the world which they are a part of, are hidden from them. Children’s understandings and their potential can be constrained by dominant discourses as shown in this research. Left unchallenged, discourses such as white and/or male dominance, feminine passivity, (hetero)normativity and childhood innocence perpetuate the status quo. These limiting discourses do not offer solutions to problematic social issues.

Children’s interests do not have to fall into narrow stereotypical categories. Nor should children’s interests be limited by their biological sex, or their gender performances despite external pressures from mass media. Movies, television and product advertising all carry messages about acceptability and desirability, deeply entangled with traditional stereotypes based on children’s biological sex. Parents and teachers will constantly face decisions about whether to challenge and resist these stereotypes.

siblings or peers, and that both have much to teach each other. Ako also describes where the educator is learning from the student (Williams & Broadley, 2012). Teina - younger sibling, cousin, same gender, novice. Tuakana - elder sibling, cousin, same gender, more competent other.

'Risky' topics like kissing, marriage and babies, skin colour, or 'smacking' were of interest/ relevant to some children as this research has shown. Children are not innocent, and sensitive issues are not irrelevant to them as is sometimes assumed. Neither should teachers presume that children are oblivious to differences including size, social class, gender and ethnicity for example. Working theories related to stereotypes and (pre)prejudice need to be disrupted or 'interrupt[ed] with social justice intent' (Genishi & Goodwin, 2008), as they are inconsistent with the learning outcomes in *Te Whāriki*. Conversations, statements and incidents have 'generative possibilities' (Blaise & Taylor, 2012) as the 'no-one with brown faces' lunchtime conversation showed. The generative possibilities of incidents can also involve parents and whānau, as the example provided at the end of this letter illustrates.

Claxton's metaphors of volcanoes (highly visible interests) or sea beds (harder to see interests)ⁱⁱ are pertinent for teachers as children's ongoing working theories about diversity and fairness may well be operating below the surface of what is readily seen and heard. Therefore, working theories, that is "the evolving ideas and understandings that children develop as they use their existing knowledge to try to make sense of new experiences" (MoE, 2017, p. 23) are a useful construct to support children's social learning about diversity.

As young children spend longer periods of their day and their early childhood years in ECE settings, the importance of group times including mealtimes should not be underestimated as a potential site for learning about difference - in terms of gender, ethnicity, cultural and other differences. Food is a significant aspect of any culture, and sharing food or eating together while talking about socially relevant issues can build community, and/or mirror traditional practices in some family homes.

Education should offer solutions and alternative possibilities. "Early years settings can become welcoming sites of creative dialogue, collaborative thinking and imaginations where children, parents and teachers can become agents for social change as opposed to accepting the status quo of dominant discourses" (Pacini- Ketchabaw & Berikoff, 2008, p. 263). 'Opening up' spaces for negotiation and meaning-making, and valuing multiple perspectives and possibilities are part of renewed anti-bias approaches that are needed if a fairer, more just world is to be realised.

Since there is no pedagogy without choice, relevant questions for teachers to consider include: What counts as, or constitutes, 'curriculum'? What is 'socially relevant curriculum'? And are we conscious of the 'hidden curriculum'? A related and worthwhile investigation is, what counts as 'children's interests'? In the interests of things that matter to children and to the adults who care for them (Silin, 1995), what about providing a broader curriculum where 'constructs of race, ethnicity, social class, gender, and sexual orientation are addressed openly and actively in the classroom' (De Lair & Erwin, 2000, p. 154).

In addition to planning for children's learning, teachers are expected to formatively assess and document children's developing skills, attitudes, knowledge, dispositions and working theories. Often linked to 'giving children a voice', documentation has several key purposes. First, documentation enables children to revisit their learning, second, parents and whānau can share in children's developing understandings and add their perspectives, and third, everyone can see what learning is valued in this setting. Reification makes learning concrete and public, supporting everyone to negotiate its meaning (Claxton & Carr, 2004). Rich insights gained in dialogue between parents, teachers and children can enable teachers to play a mediation role in children's learning as expected in *Te Whāriki*.

ⁱⁱ Dr Guy Claxton is a British academic whose early work informed the construct of working theories in *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996, 2017) as discussed (Chapter 4 - Literature Review). Claxton was also an advisor on the TLRI project 'Moments of Wonder' (Peters & Davis, 2012) where he introduced the metaphors of volcanoes and seabeds to describe children's interests; the former being easily visible while the latter means you have to really stop and look (Personal communication AP Sally Peters, 29 July 2017).

[Early childhood is] a period of momentous significance for all people growing up in [our] culture...By the time this period is over, children will have formed conceptions of themselves as social beings, as thinkers, as language users, and they will have reached certain important decisions about their own abilities and their own worth (Donaldson et al., 1983, p.1, as cited in MoE, 1996).

I would add the words ‘*and the abilities and the worth of others*’ given the sociocultural underpinnings of the curriculum. The interests of the child and the interests of the community, like self-worth and the worth of others, are mutually constituted as can be seen in socially relevant curriculum.

As children mature and leave ECE for the wider world of school, younger children with less experience of socialisation with diverse others beyond their home and family contexts, come in their place. These children are accompanied by families who often look to teachers as models of what to do and say about sensitive issues or behaviour they find challenging. Derman-Sparks (2008) suggests that teachers need to provide leadership in these areas, and ‘keep on, keeping on’ doing and redoing social justice issues so that they become part of the daily curriculum, rather than when they arise as an issue, or an ‘interest’. “Central to effecting change is that negative attitudes towards difference and diversity are countered with new understandings and knowledge” (Gordon-Burns et al., 2012, p. 7). We need to “blend rather than bulldoze new ways of thinking” (Waite et al., 2013, p.273) on hearing children’s concerns, and questions, and their developing working theories about sensitive issues.

As authentic partners in children’s learning, parents and teachers together can navigate the complex terrain of children’s theorising about diversity and difference in an increasingly diverse, multi-faceted and post-modern world.

I leave you several challenges today:

- Be critically reflexive. Who you are, where you come from, and how you relate to others, your habitus, identities and subjectivities, are constituted in discourses that affect how and what you teach (Education Council, 2017).
- Interrogate your way(s) of understanding the social world, how it is, and how it might be. Tell each other your stories, and talk about the world you want to live in, and want your great-grandchildren to live in.
- Engage in dialogue and critical reflective practice and investigation through ‘Self Review’ and ‘Internal Evaluation’ (ERO, 2009, 2015), and action research to foster culturally-responsive practices in your setting.
- Develop your awareness of power imbalances that advantage some and disadvantage others, actively responding to normative and limiting discourses that work against inclusion. Remember diversity has a dark or shadow side.
- Model the ‘learning disposition of responsibility’. This involves taking responsibility, recognising justice, and resisting injustice (Carr, 2001; MoE, 2017). Model these behaviours to children and families because they are watching you.
- Recognise the child-in-the-society. Support them to negotiate fairness related to aspects of diversity so they realise their full potential. Intentionally seek to notice, make meaning, and respond to the expressions of children’s working theories (Davis & McKenzie, 2018).
- Be clear about the curriculum choices you make. All aspects of diversity need to be covered in relation to fairness and the Contribution strand of *Te Whāriki*. Look beyond the volcanoes to the sea-bed, and enact socially relevant curriculum that moves between the interests of the child and the interests of the community. Remember, your interests matter too.
- Be courageous. Teaching can be a rocky, risky terrain (Palmer, 2007). Take an activist stance, remembering that while there are risks in doing and saying things, there are even greater risks if we do or say nothing. Silence is no resistance to oppression and injustice.

- Seek multiple perspectives from children themselves, parents, and other teachers to uncover broader understandings about children's meaning-making. Open up spaces for negotiation so children's meaning-making can be supported. Embrace messiness and uncertainty, resisting the urge to simplify or settle things.
- Document children's learning, not just the good sanitised stuff, but the real, hard 'difficult' risky learning too. This will support children revisiting their learning over time, and enable parents to share in children's developing understandings.
- Genuinely involve parents and whānau in children's learning (see example below), and provide leadership to parents who are unsure of what to say or do in terms of their children's developing understandings of diversity in the world around them.

And finally,

Build communities to support yourselves and your renewed social justice, anti-bias teaching by sharing the difficult, risky, messy and uncertain aspects of your daily work with supportive others.

Blaise and Taylor (2012) provide an example of how teachers might involve parents.

[My additions appear in *italics*]

Teachers can bring families into these types of discussions. Descriptions of gender and sexuality [*and race, ethnicity, social class, religion*] conversations, including children's questions and points of view, could be included in the daily class journal or weekly newsletter. The teacher might also highlight how such discussions made *them* uncomfortable and why. Since parents are likely to feel more uncomfortable about these issues than their children, they might appreciate a teacher's honest reflections on what can sometimes be difficult but important discussions about gender, power, inclusion, and exclusion. Perhaps parents will appreciate them more if teachers attempt to include families in the process and are not just always told about it after the fact. For example, a teacher might write about *their* reaction to often hearing children say, 'You're such a girl!' in a derogatory way [*Or what's he doing that for? He's a boy!*]. *They* could ask parents if they have heard similar kinds of remarks at home, whether they consider this kind of behaviour problematic and why/why not, and how they might address it (p.96).

As an early childhood teacher, and someone who believes passionately in social justice, I am more conscious than ever of how things might be different. I want to continue imagining and working to create a fairer world. This task needs all of us to focus on relationships, improve our practices, and work to change the world, starting with ourselves. Time spent building community is never wasted if we are 'hard on the issues, and soft on the people' (Kelly-Ware, 2018, pp. 259-266).

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For further reading related to the thesis from which this article was constructed, see *What's he doing that for? He's a boy!* (Kelly-Ware, 2016) and *Navigating the risky terrain of children's working theories* (Areljung & Kelly-Ware, 2016). The full thesis is available at <https://hdl.handle.net/10289/12132>