

Culture, language and identity: children's stories woven with teachers' stories in a bi/multicultural curriculum



Mihaela Enache
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*Titiro whakamuri kia anga whakamua.
Look to the past in order to move forward.
(Maori whakatauki).*

*To be yourself in a world that is constantly
trying to make you something else is the
greatest accomplishment (Ralph Waldo
Emerson).*

*Our identity is like a stake in the sand
(Melinda Webber, 2014, private
conversation).*

I wrote this article as a result of my presentation at the Learning Story conference in 2018, inspired by my PhD proposal on (immigrant) teacher identity. Culture, language and identity are key concepts in the newly revised Te Whāriki - the sociocultural early childhood curriculum. In an increasingly globalised world, it becomes imperative for teachers to honour

children's individualities, their identities and cultures. One approach to this complex task is through the power of storying, of listening to, telling and writing stories. Children's, whanau and teachers' stories could be "a step towards the change we seek in the world" (Holman Jones, 2016, p. 228), towards democracy, inclusion and acceptance, and a culturally responsive pedagogy (Enache, 2017).

As a critical autoethnographer and an early childhood (EC) teacher who writes (learning) stories, I start with my own (short) story. Who am I? My teaching career spans over nearly three decades in both Romania and New Zealand, in early childhood, primary and tertiary sectors. I arrived in Auckland in 2001 and since then I have worked in the early childhood field. For

more information, please visit my academic profile here: <https://unidirectory.auckland.ac.nz/profile/m-enache>

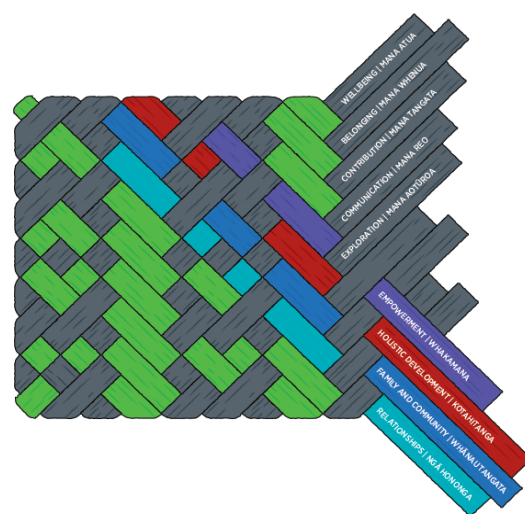


In New Zealand, immigration has a big impact on the multicultural and multiethnic society, with an increased number of immigrants choosing to settle in this country. Auckland is one of the world's most culturally diverse cities in the world, with thirty-nine per cent of the population born overseas (Tan, 2016). According to Statistics New Zealand (2014), Auckland, with a population of about 1.4 million residents, has more than 220 recorded ethnic groups living here, speaking around 200 different languages (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017). Among these groups, 59.3% are European, followed by Asian 23.1%, Pacific peoples 14.6% and Maori 10.7 % (Statistics New Zealand, 2014). Consequently, teaching, teachers and

communities of learning are affected by continuous changes in demographics and the need to permanently adapt education to social and cultural changes.

Te Whāriki states that teachers respond to the changing demographics “by valuing and supporting the different cultures represented in their settings” (MoE, 2017, p.3).

The *kōwhiri whakapae* whāriki depicted below symbolises the start of a journey that will take the traveller beyond the horizon. The grey represents Te Kore and te pō, the realm of potential and the start of enlightenment. The green represents new life and growth. The purple, red, blue and teal have many differing cultural connotations and are used here to highlight the importance of the principles as the foundations of the curriculum (MoE, 2017, p.10).



Below there are some of the statements in Te Whariki in relation to culture, language and identity:

- Learner identity is enhanced when children's home languages and cultures are valued in educational settings and when kaiako are responsive to their cultural ways of being (MoE, 2017, p.12)
- The real strength of *Te Whāriki* is its capacity to establish strong and durable foundations for every culture in Aotearoa New Zealand, and in the world... *Te Whāriki* rests on the theory that all children will succeed in education when the foundations to their learning are based on an understanding and a respect for their cultural roots (Reedy & Reedy, 2013, cited in Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 15, emphasis in text).
- Confidence that their [children] family background is viewed positively in the ECE setting (MoE, 2017, 2017, p. 37).
- Each child's culture finds a place in the programme through song, language, pictures, playthings and dance (MoE, 2017, p.38).
- One of the major cultural tasks for children in the early years is to develop competence in and understanding of languages (p. 41).
- The use of traditional storytelling, arts and legends and of humour, proverbs and metaphoric language can support children from some communities to navigate between familiar and less familiar contexts (p.41).
- Te Reo Maori is included as a natural part of the programme (p.44).
- Other languages of the community of children, whanau and kaiako are integrated into the programme (p.44).

The theoretical layout of the curriculum sounds enticing, but how do teachers honour it in practice? How do teachers respect children's individualities, their identities and cultures? A comprehensive curriculum, *Te Whāriki* provides a theoretical woven mat of biculturalism and multiculturalism, community and collaboration. What about the practical day to day curriculum? In the study "The dilemma of cultural responsiveness and professionalization: Listening closer to immigrant teachers who teach children of recent immigrants" (Adair, Tobyn & Arzubiaga, 2012) there are some practical responses regarding

practicing biculturalism and multiculturalism. For teacher empowerment to happen, all teachers, especially those from non-immigrant backgrounds, must be “willing to consider other cultural versions of early childhood pedagogy as having merit and to enter into dialogue with immigrant teachers and immigrant communities” (Adair, Tobyn & Arzubiaga, 2012, p. 28).

Sandy Farquhar (2015) notes that at present, cultural collaboration is built upon divergent stories: on one hand sharing and participation, and on the other hand, “division and alienation as individuals and minority groups are further marginalised by monocultural power relations” (p.62). A practical curriculum is implemented daily, by teachers who need to find their own ways of applying Te Whāriki principles in practice, and this process is not straightforward. Farquhar (2015) suggests that “it is in the everyday micro-practices that impacts are felt, and freedoms played out. It is in these micro-spaces that there is still room for curiosity, for linguistic hospitality, and for plurality of subjectivities. It is here that the real contest begins” (p.68). What micro-practices that promote children’s and families’ cultures,

languages and identities do you implement in your centres? Here are some examples below:

- Children could be helped to notice similarities and differences in appearance, by being introduced to the concept of “same but different”;
- All the children should be empowered to feel good about their unique physical appearances. Discussions and learning could refer to concrete aspects of appearance, like skin, eyes, abilities or disabilities (Wardle, 2011), but it can also evolve around feelings and human qualities which are the same in all races and ethnicities, for example, kindness, support, inclusion, but also hurtful expressions, sadness, exclusion;
- painting, where a variety of colours are provided, including brown and black;
- music and dance from different countries;
- dress-ups which include traditional dress from around the world;
- dramatic play and re-enacting of Maori legends, fairy tales and folktales from different countries, not just the predominant western stories with princesses, like Cinderella and Frozen;

- face and body painting exploring Maori, Pacific Islands and aboriginal designs;
- In order to genuinely know the families and children in their care, teachers could develop questionnaires, questions on application forms, have open discussions at meetings with parents, invite parents to take part in the curriculum decisions and to be active in the programme, engage them in casual informal discussions, organise visits to the communities where children live (Wardle, 2011).



As educators, we need to take time to know children and families in-depth, to build relationships that go beyond appearances, beyond superficial observation, and learn about people's values, beliefs, ways of knowing and being in the world. Furthermore, I propose that the first step we, teachers, can take towards valuing and

supporting different cultures is by understanding and being secure in our own (cultural) identity. Sonja Arndt (2017) emphasizes the crucial positioning of early childhood teachers in society, through their vital influence on young lives, and the urgent need of early childhood teachers' reconceptualisations of their own cultural selves. Moreover, as Clark and Flores (2014) suggest, "when the teacher has a strong sense of self, it will have a positive impact on student achievement" (p.3). Through my work as an EC practitioner, I have encountered a considerable number of teachers who are not aware of the fact that their own identity story is a very important factor in developing their teaching careers, and more importantly as a step towards creating more inclusive communities. In most of the early childhood centres I have worked as a teacher, or I have visited as a lecturer and professional learning facilitator, teachers' stories are neither as *visible* nor as represented as they should be. In my PhD study I investigate how EC teachers can represent their storied identity/ies through boundary objects, as described by professor Margaret Carr (2012) and her colleagues, objects that physically cross boundaries, as material

representations of teacher identity. I will continue this article as my study progresses.

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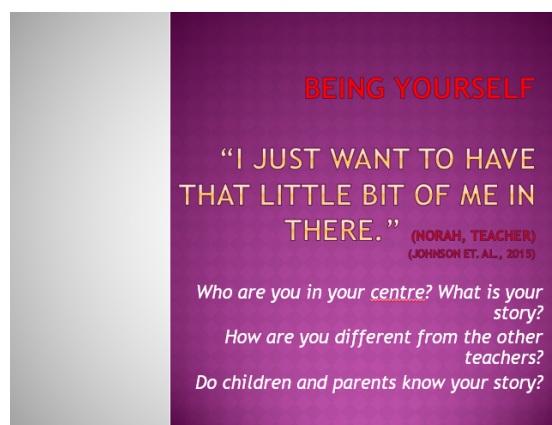
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Mihaela Enache is a PhD candidate at the University of Auckland. If you want to use this article, please reference it as follows:

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