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Making Connections in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract : **This paper explores the challenges faced by culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) educators in early childhood education (ECE) when integrating into communities of learning (CoL). It highlights the tension between educators' cultural identities and the predominant culture's expectations, leading to barriers in collaboration, participation, and effective teaching. Language differences, limited cultural competence, and lack of acceptance from families and peers further hinder integration. However, through professional dialogue, reflection, and culturally responsive practices, educators can build relationships, bridge cultural divides, and create meaningful, inclusive learning environments. By embracing diversity, educators enhance both their professional identity and the children's learning experiences.** ***The context of this paper has been set in the ECE practice of New Zealand.***

Key words: **Early Childhood Education (ECE), Cultural Competence, Linguistic Diversity, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD), Funds of Knowledge (FoK), Community of Learning (CoL), Situated Learning, Identity Development, Socio-Cultural Barriers, Professional Dialogue, Inclusive Practices, Multiculturalism, Reflective Practice, Cultural Sensitivity, Intercultural Understanding, Collaboration, Language Barriers, Authentic Relationships, Predominant Culture, Educator Identity, Socio-Linguistic Challenges, Family Engagement, Contextual Learning, Professional Development, Trust Building, Storytelling, Peer Culture, Enculturation, Cross-Cultural Communicatio, Culturally Responsive PedagogY, Professional Educator**

In Early Childhood Education (ECE), it is important for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) teachers to feel and exhibit respect for different cultures and value systems of the families. Without this, there is a threat to the developmentally appropriate practice of practitioners, obstructing the building of relationships in the CoL (Ritchie, 2010; Rogoff, 1994; Barron, 2009). A challenge that can arise is that even if professional educators have the willingness to accept, understand and imbibe a different culture, they are faced with the issue of negotiating their own belief system, combining their existing knowledge and identity to form an alternative identity which aligns with the predominant culture's values. The emergence of this new identity may be in conflict with their own, existing cultural funds of knowledge causing internal resistance (Gee, 2008) as a result of which full participation in the CoL will not occur. Wegner (2010) states that even with the evolution of an alternate, contextually relevant socio-cultural identity, an individual's prior cultural identity may continue to present a perpetual barrier, obstructing the possibility to fully participate with the culturally diverse community.

Furthermore, Iyer and Reese (2013) state that even within a situated learning context in the CoL, the culturally diverse predominant members may not be open or accepting, allowing only restricted participation. Barron (2009) suggests that by increasing their own cultural competence, incorporating aspects of multiculturalism, diversity and inclusion, teachers can move towards greater participation in a diverse culture. Moreover, practitioners can utilise opportunities to be transparent and share personal stories about their own cultural identity and background, thereby creating respectful, tolerant environments (Ritchie, 2010), and establishing mutually trusting, authentic relationships in the CoL.

As language is a pertinent boundary object and brokering instrument for people to meaningfully understand each other and negotiate boundaries (Wenger, 2010), diversity in socio-cultural backgrounds presents another challenge when relationships between professional educators and children of the predominant culture are hindered due to the barrier of language. Teachers describe the feeling of inadequacy in terms of being equipped to achieve certain goals such as communication without a common language, encouraging sufficient development of children languages, designing cross-cultural relationship with the children's families, and providing instructions at all levels for all children (Baghban, 2007). Without the ability to communicate effectively, the language barrier can result not only in non-participation in the community (Gee, 2008), but may also lead to the socio-linguistically diverse professional educators being marginalized and excluded from engagement in the CoL (Hodges, 1998).

Collaboration and quality interaction with experienced members of the predominant culture creates opportunities for professional educators to enhance participation, build relationships and deepen understanding (Hodges, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991). With the help of professional dialogue, practitioners can understand and accept differences, gaining multicultural knowledge of each other's socio-cultural contexts and creating a sense of belonging. Teacher educators report that challenges are related to the fact that they might have not accumulated enough knowledge of various traditions, languages, and cultural assumptions to effectively serve the need of the children and the family (Facella, Rampino & Shea, 2005). A supportive CoP can provide the

opportunity of enabling understanding, acceptance, self-reflection, communication, professional development and broadmindedness (Ritchie, 2010). Grey (2011) states that professional dialogue can create opportunities for "alleviating the tension that may form within a teaching team if conflicting personal theories are not well understood" (p.23).

Wenger (2010) states that in a CoP, members jointly develop knowledge that allows for collaboration, relationship, networks, and finally identities to form. A significant aspect in the CoP is participation as it assists educators to become competent members of the community and develops a sense of identity. Participation is central to for educators to reaffirm their identities. Iyer and Reese's (2013) study indicates that due to lack of collaboration CALD students can be isolated. An opportunity and notion of responsibility arises for all the community members to be involved in learning as a shared repertoire and as a joint enterprise (Iyer & Reese, 2013). By collaboration and learning, professional peers can facilitate cultural understanding and consequently the knowledge of each other in a particular learning environment thereby creating a successful learning community. According to Brennan (2007), while adults may accept differences more easily, often young children are unable to form relationships with those who they view as different. Villegas and Lucas (2007) propound that physical traits, language, practices and belief systems may all create barriers in the minds of children, making it essential for practitioners to be acutely mindful of any internal bias and have a positive, inclusive attitude towards diversity. Exercising patience and diligence, practitioners must attempt to meaningfully understand family and socio-cultural experiences the children may have been exposed to, all the while adapting their own thought processes through "trustworthy and respectful" efforts so that relationships can be built with the children, enhancing participation of all members in the CoL (Cooper & Hedges, 2014, p.171).

Whānau may also disregard CALD educators, impacting their confidence and participation. Furthermore, Cooper and Hedges (2014) state that whānau may have "time consuming commitments" resulting in inability to collaborate with and edify educators who are culturally diverse (p.167). An opportunity lies herein, as culturally responsive teachers, engaging with children's FoK can unreservedly make attempts to unhesitantly ask questions, showing a real interest, and becoming learnings in the community, with a role reversal from the traditional context, wherein the children and their families become knowledge bases for CALD practitioners (Iyer & Reese, 2013). This can enable CALD practitioners not to feel powerless or hindered in participation in the CoL (Iyer & Reese, 2013). In a study quoted by Keat, Strickland and Marinak (2009), "the children revealed complex thoughts about … societal issues" (p.14). The opportunity for learning communities to become interactive can be realised with practioners using their cultural funds of identity and socio-cultural backgrounds to develop intercultural understanding, co-constructing knowledge through their contributions or "rouraou" (basket) (Tamati, 2005, p. 1), alongside children and supporting relationships (Esteban-Guitart & Moll 2013; Fleer, 2012; lyer & Reese, 2013). Gee (2008) supports this stance, stating that the opportunity of co-construction of knowledge can be communally strengthened when practitioners are open to learning about predominant culture from each other, including children.

Lave and Wenger (1991) discuss the concept of situated learning, whereby meaning is created from experiences of daily living, through participation with others, or, "in situ" (p.31). This indicates that in a CoL, knowledge is acquired through inter-relationships and by connecting previous knowledge with authentic, sometimes unplanned and inadvertent circumstantial learning (Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Due to this, the opportunity afforded to practitioners in a diverse cultural context is to develop their own personal identity within the CoL, alongside nurturing the funds of identity of children in the predominant culture. This enculturation requires professional dialogue, reflection and an open-minded attitude towards learning and diversity, so that all members in the CoL can contribute, and participate (Ritchie, 2010). Professional development in cultural-sensitivity and international-mindedness can provide opportunities to eliminate socio-cultural biases (Iyer & Reese, 2013).

Carr and Lee (2012) state that children use dialogue to make connections between their experiences and home and learning environments. Therefore, in analysing challenges, the barrier of language presents itself as an issue without which a professional educator will be unable to comprehensively serve the needs of the learners in a CoL. Culturally responsive teachers can use opportunities to build their vocabulary in the predominant socio-cultural context to bridge divides and forge trusting relationships within the CoL (Villegas & Lucas, 2007).

An inability to understand and relate to the predominant culture may lead to educators creating learning environments which are contextually not relevant and unfamiliar to the everyday children's lives (Fleer, 2012) as the children's FoK and identity may not have meaningful pedagogical significance for the practitioners from a diverse socio-cultural background. Cooper and Hedges (2014) reiterate the importance of practitioners having appreciation of the cultural backgrounds of children and their play interests which are related to their experiences, circumstances and funds of knowledge. In a CoL, children collaborate with all participating members, learning from each other and co-constructing knowledge. Hence there is a need for children not to be separated from authentic community involvement and real life practices (Brennan, 2007; Rogoff, 1994). Such engagement in experiences can provide opportunities for creating relevant learning environments which reflect the predominant culture's values, beliefs and practices. Barron (2009) states that home visits and interviews can create opportunities to bridge socio-cultural barriers, allowing practitioners to gain a reminiscent understanding of the children's lives, experiences, backgrounds and interests. This will enable meaningful participation for all members in the CoL.

Keat, Strickland and Marinak (2009) posit that opportunities can be provided for practitioners to use the child's voice as a representation of the children's reality by utilising art and role-play as well as literature, wherein books, characters and other contextual aspects transform underlying cultural meanings into learning concepts that can become conversational points between children and practitioners. Through this, educators in cultures different to their own will have the opportunity to consider traditions of predominant culture families and make meaningful "instructional and assessment decisions" (p.14). Utilising this opportunity can enable professional educator working in a CoL in which the predominant cultural context is significantly different from theirs thereby integrating and facilitating a meaningful learning environment for the children.

Professional educators must use every opportunity to reflect on their practice, try to gain an understanding of the predominant culture and not make assumptions about the cultural aspects of children's learning thereby transcending boundaries between experiences at home and at school (Villegas & Lucas, 2007; Ritchie, 2010; Alcock, 2010). Furthermore, practioners must integrate concepts of diversity in their teaching, in order to enable the CoL to grow together, learning from all members' experiences and beliefs (Lenski, Crumpler, Stallworth, & Crawford, 2005). Reflective practice on the part of professional educators can provide the opportunity to reinforce their own professional identity and enhance their teaching strategies (Banks & Mhunpiew, 2012).

Another opportunity that presents itself is through story-telling. Wright, Diener and Kemp (2013) suggest that story-telling and drama provide children with the physiological, emotional and social environment conducive to their learning, fostering a sense of belonging, understanding and identity. According to Azuma (1994), learning entails picking up skills, values, and mannerism in an incidental fashion via connected involvement with cultural concepts of learning and socialization agent. Therefore, practitioners who may be from culturally different backgrounds can integrate such activities to give children a real, personal way of relating what they may be experiencing in terms of feelings and thoughts, many of which may be arising due to the values and beliefs their families have (Barron, 2009; Nimmo, 1994). Using stories, children in the CoL can build peer culture (Lash, 2008), sowing seeds of understanding, acceptance and FoK sharing, thereby creating the beginnings of meaningful bonds with teachers and relationships away from family. These are the scaffolding bricks for turning personal experiences into collective experiences in the CoL.

In case their current pedagogical knowledge is not reflective of the predominant culture, it is important for educators to cast aside their existing notions of how children learn and play, for creating relevant learning opportunities (Cooper & Hedges, 2014). The beliefs of whānau can actively provide insights for the children's interests. This makes it imperative for practitioners to be aware of socio-cultural factors and take a keen, active interest in order to build relationships in the CoL as well as create apposite environments (Rogoff, 1994; Montalvo, Combes & Kea, 2014). For full participation in the CoL, the professional educator must take the opportunity to ensure that learning experiences for the children have suitable cultural representations and resources which are familiar and relevant to them (Brennan, 2007), enabling a culturally curriculum responsive to the needs of all the children (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2013).

In conclusion, the journey of a professional educator situated in a cultural context different from his/her own must be accepting of the challenges and utilise every opportunity to understand and acknowledge the background, practices, beliefs and values of the predominant culture. If the FoK of the educator and the predominant culture are too diverse, it may be challenging to inculcate aspects of the disparity. This issue can get more complex in the situation of linguistic differences and due to the further challenge of not being open heartedly accepted by the culturally diverse children. Participation can be facilitated by engaging in professional dialogue with other practitioners and making efforts to build relationships. Moreover, appreciating the traditions of the whānau and children by actively asking questions, visiting homes and learning from community members can help such educators integrate and move towards full participation, as well as then creating meaningful learning environments for the children. A reflective approach and effort must be made by professional educators who wish to assimilate the diversity of the predominant culture, transcend boundaries and begin to fully participate in the community-of-learning.nstead,

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