

## Applying an ethical lens to the concept of the child at the heart of the curriculum: Reflecting on the sociocultural constructs and social justice considerations

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*Children under five are the heart of Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum (Te Whāriki) (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017). When a child is at the heart of the curriculum, they are the life force of that curriculum as it puts the child as being the paramount focus behind forming relationships, planning and activities (MoE, 2017). The original principles of the importance of the child and the need to understand the sociocultural context of their lives is still very much a focus of the updated version of Te Whāriki (MoE, 2017).*

This article explores how social justice is achieved when an ethical lens is applied to the child at the heart of the curriculum. Each child is an individual and even when they experience the same activities and environment, each child will have different understanding of the situation due to the variances of experiences. Each child arrives with different 'funds of knowledge' built by their own sociocultural experiences (Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett, & Farmer, 2015). These authors find the sociocultural approach honours what the child has already learnt in the context of their own family and community. Sociocultural theories put emphasis on the connections and interactions between people, places and things that leads to new understanding (Rogoff, 1994). This author maintains that fundamental to sociocultural thinking is the belief that our worlds are built and based on social interactions, historic events and cultural understanding. Hargraves (2013) supports this stance finding interactions with others is part of the sociocultural perspective that supports children's education. Learning, thinking and knowledge accumulation occurs through activity in the world of the participants and includes negotiation and contribution by the members of the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). New knowledge is formed through making links with prior knowledge and experiences in activities where each person is "supported and guided by others" (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2013, p. 44). Thus, having the child at the focus of any planning is necessary to achieve optimal benefits from the curriculum. Whether teachers are considering the experiences of a child at an early childhood centre, it is important that the child be at the centre of the thinking and planning. McNaughton (2002) finds the curriculum can contain important theoretical influences but teachers need to understand the historical, cultural and social world of the child. The child is socially situated and their development can be enhanced by new and different experiences at educational institutions (Fleer, 2012). The child is in the care of the teachers at the centre, so the experience of the child is dictated by adults who have an ethical responsibility to care for, as well as teach the child.

Qualified and registered early childhood teachers have an ethical responsibility and obligation to uphold the ethical standards of their profession (Education Council New Zealand, 2017). They work directly with families and their children and "are making decisions every day, moment by moment, that have ethical considerations at their heart" (Mukherji & Albon, 2015, p. 41). Teachers also have a wide reaching and inclusive role to ensure participation of all children in learning activities, routines and events in a centre. Exclusion is a human rights issue and teachers have a moral accountability to provide fair and equitable education for each individual child. This is social justice and it is an important area that early childhood teachers have opportunities to ensure each child is the focus of their planning.

Stetsenko (2012) believes that being ethical is about being human and any action by one individual contributes to the understood social practices of their society. It is through these combined social practices that social justice can be promoted. Stetsenko's (2012) views are based on Vygotsky's beliefs, which have a "clear commitment to social justice"

(p. 147). This puts responsibility and accountability back on each individual to question their practice in relation to an ethical perspective that includes care. Snook (2003) also finds there is ethical accountability involved in the profession of teaching and acknowledges teachers cannot be accountable for outcomes but they are accountable for the processes they undertake. This means teachers have an “ethical responsibility for another person’s learning” (Snook, 2003, p. 25) and to advocate for children to bring about positive change in the situation where children are disadvantaged by a lack of these rights. Vasconcelos (2006) asserts that in places where children are cared for ethics must be practiced. This is echoed in Aotearoa/New Zealand by Lee (2010) who believes teachers in this country are concerned about ethical issues.

Ethics is understood as a set of socially accepted rules and standards based on the particular values of the society that the profession belongs to (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Professionals and communities perceive what they feel “right and moral ways to behave” as ethics, and it is from this perception of what is the right way to behave that a code of ethics for that group is developed (MacNaughton & Hughes, 2008, p. 78). It is about moral decisions and appropriate conduct based on those decisions. Because cultures and societies are different, it is not possible to formulate a code of ethics that is considered universal (MacNaughton & Hughes, 2008). This view sits well with sociocultural concepts of varying ideas belonging to different cultures and society over time. Hanssen (2000) admits defining ethics is problematic and there is no one perfect definition of ethics. Teachers have to make decisions that can be seen to be fair-minded and unbiased. The ethics of teaching require teachers to recognise they have power and the use of this power should not cause any harm to any child (Grey & Clark, 2013). This means every day choices are made based on ethical decisions and there is a need to be fair to the child and other children in the collective. The debate around ethical issues has moved from actions based on guidelines to a more postmodern understanding where the individual themselves must also take into account the care of others (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007).

The postmodern approach that involved ethics going beyond these guidelines and take into account the care of the ‘other’ is advocated for as a solution to ethical problems (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007). This is about care of what happens to the other person in addition to what can be done to help them not only in education but also in their life situation. It is about taking into account all the sociocultural contextual information that can influence decisions. Kennedy (2008) supports care and discusses this as an ethical concept mooted by Tronto. This concept of ‘care’ is seen by Tronto as a value central to ethics, which would, lead to a better society (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). This means ethical responsibility includes the respect for others and the care for the ‘Other’ (Kennedy, 2008 p. 46). In the case of the centre, the ‘other’ is each child that attends. The relationship between the teacher and child is a reciprocal one where actions by one party influence the other person in the relationship (Noddings, 2012). This relationship is a process in progress that evolves over time and includes care as a basis.

Noddings (2012) places care very much in the ethical arena with her “care ethics” (p. 54). She finds care an important part of the teacher and pupil relationship and care is inherently part of that connection. The adult is seen as the one in charge and making decisions. Snook (2003) brings in the concept of authority and finds each person has to have the ‘right’ as well as the ‘power’ to take the action. Authority should be used carefully and with an understanding of the consequences to the others. Care ethics is about the depth of this relationship and the need to have a mutual understanding that allows for reciprocal interactions. The role of the one who cares and the other who is cared for is fluid and will change with time but will be of benefit when it exists (Noddings, 2012).

The Education Council of New Zealand Code of Ethics (2017) provides guidelines and four fundamental principles including “Responsible Care - to do good and minimise harm to others”. Professional ethics is understood as guidelines that are pertinent to their vocation and uphold values and beliefs that are important to their society (Taggart, 2011). The professional body of peers provide these standards and examples to help guide teachers. There is a problem in New Zealand where not all early childhood teachers need to be qualified or registered. Those who are not registered

do not have to adhere to ethical guidelines developed for the profession. Snook (2003) relates how teachers actually did think there was one way of ethical teaching without realising it actually represented just one way or idea. This type of rationale goes against sociocultural thinking and social justice principles, which both take into account different ways of thinking and accepting others as they are (Smith, 2013; Arthur et al., 2015; Grey, 2013). It is now accepted children have rights as citizens and diversity should be celebrated (Ministry of Education, 2017; Smith, 2013). It is the right of children to be part of and take part in “all aspects of life including educational settings” (Grey, 2013, p. 96). These areas signify that children have a right to be provided with a certain standard of care and education no matter what the family circumstance or culture they come from (Te One, 2011). This means children of Aotearoa/New Zealand have a right to participate in early childhood education appropriate for them where they as an individual child drive their own learning.

Rights are not easy to define and there is varied understanding of this concept (Te One, 2011). However, “the most fundamental of rights is the right to possess rights” (Freeman as cited in Te One, 2011, p.41). In early childhood it includes the celebration of diversity and all children are given the fundamental right granting participation in an environment that gives them a sense of belonging (Gordon-Burns, Gunn, Purdue & Surtees, 2012). It is about children and families being respected and welcomed to a place that removes barriers to learning (Mackey & Lockie, 2012). The issue of children and their rights as citizens is about social justice. The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) (United Nations, 1989) have at their centre the child having the right to be treated as a legitimate person. That is as a child they have the rights of citizenship under the laws of this country (Human Rights Act 1993; New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990) and Te Titiri o Waitangi (Network Waitangi, 2012). Adults are accountable for respecting these rights as they have the authority over children. Teachers also have this responsibility as they have authority over children but also ethically, they have to be transparent in decisions affecting children.

Part of that responsibility teachers have is to consider the authority they use. Snook (2003) reflects on the authority the teacher has in the relationship with their students. Teachers need to be aware of his suggestion that authority causes others to do “what they want us to do” (Snook, 2003, p. 33). Whereas the national curriculum puts on the significance of allowing children to have agency over their actions as vital (MoE, 2017). Snook (2003) finds official obligatory considerations often mean assessment is for these requirements, rather than formative purposes that enhance learning. He queries whether being part of a large organisation with set rules around assessment, that does not take into account situational complexity, is ethical in the postmodern perception because it does not respect autonomy and care of the student.

Looking through a sociocultural lens give the view that each child has different needs and is at different stage with their learning. Snook (2003) points out that ethically teachers have to respect students and help guide them to use their “own reason, to become autonomous” (p.25). There is a huge diversity of abilities among children in any one centre. For teachers to have an understanding and take into consideration each student’s abilities is a complex task. To have this early childhood education experience children need to participate. Smith (2009) acknowledges progress has been made and participation in early childhood education has improved and the increase of qualified staff gives more depth to what children experience.

Teachers have a responsibility to support participation rights for children to be exposed to high quality education under their rights in UNCROC (Te One, 2011). This author finds it is important teachers need to check how quality indicators are supporting children’s rights and whether their voices are being heard. There is now more awareness that there needs to be better interagency collaboration between health education and government social services to ensure children do have their rights respected and in turn prevent crisis (White & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2014). Social justice is not all about addressing present problems but also about being proactive in preventing processes that have deficit influences on any child or group of children.

A diverse group of learners can be marginalised by not having the individualised focus that puts them at the heart of the curriculum. Macartney (2011) feels an ethical way to deal with inclusion problems are through the early childhood curriculum, which is an inclusive document. Macartney (2011) does find *Te Whāriki* does not address the wider societal issues of social justice in regards to “reproducing social inequalities and regarding disability” (p. 15). This is not only a rights issue but also an ethical dilemma for early childhood education. If the matter is directly addressed, does it give emphasis to the differences rather than help solve the exclusion. In many cases, the environment is a barrier and if the environment is made more user friendly, it solves the inclusion problem. Macartney and Morton (2009) suggest to be effective in change there is a need to take notice of the advice of “developing a listening, open and responsive orientation to ‘others’” (p. 15).

For some centres this is more difficult because of the diversity of their centres includes refugee families who have faced trauma in their own country. This is a growing global problem and does affect centres in this country. This means families have lost the “social link of their past” (O’Loughlin, 2009, p. 34). For many it also means a loss of personal links and support. It is noted in this discussion that children are vulnerable and absorb the pain of adults almost by osmosis. This can be passed on through the generations and affect complete cultural communities (O’Loughlin, 2009).

O’Loughlin (2009) proposes education can be the means to help heal the hurt the child instinctively holds. Teachers can help by being aware of the historical context and by being willing to learn more about the customs and culture of the child. This enables the teacher to use oral literacies to make sure the child’s “own inner knowledge is nameable and addressable” (O’Loughlin, 2009, p. 35). This adds another layer of responsibility to teachers striving to balance ethical considerations while teaching wide range of students form diverse sociocultural background.

If children and /or whānau members are marginalised because of culture, then this is a social justice concern and this justifies the need to understand the sociocultural situation. Professional educators can take the role of brokers to ease the situation (Wenger, 2010). Brokers are those trusted to go between the centre and the community attached to the centre. That is, they can be the means the children and whānau are brought from the periphery of the centre to become fully active members of that community. This requires the teacher to use different means to build trusting relationships with the whānau. Teachers need to make an effort to include members of a community in such a way that they feel comfortable about approaching them. It is when they are comfortable that they will be willing to contribute to the learning (Grey, 2011). The use of portfolios and learning stories, which are whānau friendly, is a means of making connections to the members of the community (Carr & Lee, 2012). Including cultural knowledge from the children themselves results in valuable learning as well as building trusting relationships. When a teacher can discern what funds of knowledge should be explored they will be able build on those (Hedges, Cullen & Jordan, 2011). This can lead to a shared sense of belonging which is an important component in nurturing a centre/school community (Lash, 2008).

An issue that children and families face from other cultures is that their cultural values are not promoted to the same extent as that of the dual cultures in Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Network Waitangi, 2012). Over time, with the modern ease of travel, New Zealand has become a mixture of diverse cultures. It is important to understand that every child is part of a family as well as a culture and view them in relation to this (Cullen, 2006). This is integral part of sociocultural philosophy and is fundamental social justice. Respect for children and cultural considerations are part of the Aotearoa/New Zealand curriculum (MoE, 1996, 2017).

Teachers can take on board the fact that new understanding is developed by interactions between people and sociocultural theories that emphasise the building of relationships (Rogoff, 1994). This author echoes sociocultural thinking that cultural understanding is built through these interactions and knowledge of historic events. Ritchie (2012) cautions educators to take care when forming relations with people who have different world views especially Māori.

This is because they have different traditional understanding and narratives show their special connections to the earth. Her discussion subsequently notes all cultures have narratives and teachers are in a position of power to be “shapers of narratives” which children will retell in the future (p. 29). This gives an extra ethical responsibility to teachers to ensure the discourses that govern choices are examined for bias that may be unconsciously transmitted to children. Grey and Clark (2013) remind us that teaching has many professional layers and is evolving dependent on circumstances. Dalli’s (2012) research finds the day of a teacher is complex and relationships make them part of the lives of others.

Understanding the sociocultural background of each child at a centre is daunting. Building relationships take time but are necessary to put the child at the heart of the curriculum. Part of that complexity is the responsibility not only to teach but also to advocate and act to protect children’s rights. Ethical obligations of a teacher have grown with the postmodern perspective. It is no longer about following professional guidelines but includes individual accountability as a person involved in the care of another. Keeping the child at the heart of the curriculum is an ethical consideration that is underpinned by social justice.

*He pai te tirohanga ki ngā mahara mō ngā rā pahemo, engari ka puta te māramatanga i runga i te titiro whakamua.*

*It’s fine to have recollections of the past, but wisdom comes from being able to prepare opportunities for the future.*

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