Providing culturally competent care in early childhood services in New Zealand

Part 3: Parents' experiences of different early childhood pedagogies
Parents’ experiences of different pedagogies

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In Providing culturally competent care in early childhood services in New Zealand - Part 2: Developing dialogues, strategies were presented for practitioners to engage in meaningful dialogue with parents and families. It was argued that on-going dialogue is the most successful way for teachers to begin to ‘unpack’ the early childhood programme for parents, as well as helping early childhood practitioners discover the beliefs and experiences that parents from different cultural backgrounds bring to their new encounter with early childhood programmes in New Zealand.

Families who migrate to New Zealand have often had experiences of early childhood education programmes in their countries of origin. Their previous experiences of early childhood pedagogy are sometimes quite different from that practiced in New Zealand. Discovering these differences by talking with parents can be illuminating and can highlight areas of potential discomfort for both parents and practitioners.

For the purposes of this paper I interviewed three parents from different cultural backgrounds who have had experience of early childhood services in their countries of origin and whose children have also attended early childhood services in New Zealand. At the end of each interview there is an analysis of points of difference that practitioners may want to consider as topics for discussion with parents.

An early childhood experience in Jordan

Mohammed Shubair, his wife and three children came to New Zealand in 1996 from Jordan. Mohammed, a trained medical doctor who had practiced medicine in Jordan for many years, came to New Zealand because of job opportunities and the volatile political situation in the Middle East.

Was the kindergarten your children went to in Jordan significantly different from the educational environment you found when you came to New Zealand?

“Yes it was! Of course the first big thing was the language difference. The kindergarten in Jordan did not have the freedom as the kindergartens do here. In the kindergarten in Jordan the kids cannot draw and spoil their clothes, get wet and dirty with the sand and everything. In Jordan they are not allowed to do this. The other thing is going on trips and to museums. In Jordan we don’t have those facilities available… At the kindergarten they used to teach the children English words…In our country we teach Arabic and English.”

You described how the kindergarten in Jordan did not have messy activities. How was it for you coming into a kindergarten in New Zealand that allowed these activities?
“We were so surprised actually because in Jordan when I finished my work and I would go and pick them [the children] up from the kindergarten and I would wait five or ten minutes outside because maybe Lana’s hair is not brushed well or she has some food or stains on her so the teachers would not allow me to take Lana home in this way!

When we arrived in New Zealand and our children started kindergarten my wife was so surprised and said, “Look they are wet all over, and all stained!” We asked our friends “why are they allowing this?”, especially as you know how my kids they love the water, especially Hala! Everyday when she came home from the kindy she was all wet and we had to change all her clothes. Well, in our country they are not allowed to do those things!”

Did this upset you?

“Yes, because we have to change their clothes and at home we try to keep them tidy and clean. But when we find that all the other people do the same thing then it was a problem just for us…but not any more!

I think it the programme should be explored with the family and it’s a good idea to interview the family… not just to enrol like I did. It is very important to sit with the family and say well we do this and this…so the family knows what to expect from the programme and for you to know what we expect…how our child should be taught.”

The interview with Mohammed highlights some of the areas that and he and his wife found challenging when his children started attending kindergarten in New Zealand.

Mohammed and his family’s experience of early childhood education in Jordan was of a formal and structured system. Their expectations were framed by this experience and they found some things challenging when they first started their children at a New Zealand kindergarten. State-funded New Zealand kindergartens tend to be informal and operate with a child-centred pedagogy that encourages and allows active, hands-on learning experiences in a relatively unstructured environment.

Mohammed raises the issue of the children ‘spoiling their clothes’ and identifies this as a problem for him and his wife. It is unlikely that a New Zealand kindergarten teacher would anticipate that children getting dirty during the course of their creative engagement in the programme would be a problem!

Mohammed and his family would have preferred a formal interview with teachers about the programme before the children started at the kindergarten. Introduction to the New Zealand kindergarten system is often a more informal process, generally taking place when a child starts and over a period of time as teachers get to know parents and children better.
An early childhood experience in India

Usha Khanna came to New Zealand from Bombay, one of the largest cities in India, with her husband and two children in 1993. Her youngest daughter, Risha, was then four years old and started kindergarten soon after they arrived in New Zealand.

You told me that Risha went to preschool in India for one year… what is pre-school like in India?

Well, it is completely different from here…quite the opposite! Risha started kindy there at the age of three. There they teach them to learn to read and write. There she learned 1-20 - to count, and she could write A – Z in capital letters and small letters and she knew many poems, in our language as well as in English.

So was it like a school with desks?

Yes, it had benches and desks and they had to go and sit in one place…they couldn’t move around here and there in the class. They have some swings outside and when there is a break they can play outside but not inside the class. They have charts all around the walls of the food and animals to teach them but nothing to play with in the class. It is all sitting down and the teacher is there at the blackboard, she’ll say ‘apple’ and children will repeat after her.

It sounds as if it was very different from New Zealand kindergartens?

Yes, but now Risha likes it here! There are lots to things to play with and I was amazed at how many things there are for children to do!

We started kindergarten [in New Zealand] after the holidays and I was with Risha all the time because Risha had language problems and we were new to the place and I was not happy to leave her alone. I wanted to stay with her so I was there all the time with her and slowly, slowly she was happy there…she was very attached to her teachers! And I also got friendly with them and I was happy to come there because the teachers were very good to me.

It is interesting because I think you said the kindergarten teachers were some of the first people that you met here. Is this correct?

Yes, and at the kindergarten I met other parents. The first friend you can say I made was at kindergarten - the teacher Jo. She was very good to me, and she used to talk to me about India, and how I feel here and if I had any problems. She would say ‘don’t worry we will help you!’ She was very good and she helped me a lot…so I was very happy to come to kindergarten.

You stayed at kindergarten with Risha for about six months didn’t you?

Yes, all the time I would stay there…then slowly, slowly she would want me to go back so I would stay for one hour and then I would go back [home] and then I would
come back early… I felt I should stay with her…she was very small and very attached to me so she wanted me all the time so I was there with her.

**How would you have felt if the teachers had told you to go?**

I would not have been happy because that’s the thing in India, they don’t allow you to stay in the class. Once the child is there in the classroom they tell you to go out…and there in India I would wait outside the class till Risha had calmed down! So here when they said I could stay here I was so surprised and so happy. The first time I asked if I could stay the teacher said ‘Yes! As long as you want!’

I loved to do cooking there…I was happy that you liked Indian food! All the children came to me and got to know me…everybody used to come to me and say ‘Usha can you help me!’ It was very good and I was very happy. It was very good for me.

**Did some activities at the kindergarten made you anxious?**

I was happy with all the things…I counted one day, there were more than 20 things -like play-dough, dressing and painting and colouring…and the paint and they can do what ever they like with the paint! In India, first of all there is no paint for kids and they are very careful about what children do with their clothes but here it’s free! What ever they want they can do! The only thing I was worried about was the carpentry section, they have got hammers and all, and I was worried someone would come and hit my Risha with a hammer…I was not happy with that section but the rest was fantastic!

Here I think children enjoy their childhood. They get their childhood! Like playing with the sand, and paints and colouring…it’s what the children need and what they want they can do…like get messy or whatever. First I was worried Risha was getting paint on her clothes but they love playing with water, and the sand and the mud and everything…and that’s very good…now I realise it was all very good for Risha!”

The interview with Usha Khanna illustrates some areas that she appreciated in the New Zealand system.

Usha had experienced a very structured and formal early childhood education system in India. Hand-on learning opportunities were minimal and the teacher dictated the range of activities children engaged in. Usha appreciated the range of different activities provided at the New Zealand kindergarten, however, some of the hands-on activities, e.g. the carpentry area, she felt were dangerous for children. She was initially worried about her daughter getting paint on her clothes, but came to appreciate that ‘messy’ experiences were good for her daughter’s learning.

Usha had experienced a system in India that excluded parental involvement and was relieved to discover that the New Zealand system accommodated her need to stay with her child. She was able to settle her child at the child’s own pace, and become familiar with the kindergarten environment. This was important for both child and parent.
Usha made friends by attending the kindergarten with her child. She made friends with the teachers who valued her input and who spent time with her discussing her feelings about being in the new country. She also met other parents through the kindergarten.

It is important to add that by regularly attending the kindergarten with her daughter, Usha participated in the kindergarten programme as a parent-helper and, eventually, as a paid reliever. This experience later gave Usha the confidence to get paid employment as a caregiver at a daycare centre and then later as a Barnardos family caregiver.

**Kindergarten teaching in China**

Mandy and her husband came to New Zealand in 1996 from Guangzhou City in south China. Mandy was a trained kindergarten teacher who taught for 6 years at a kindergarten in Guangzhou. Mandy now has a two and a half year old son, Raymond, and she teaches at Yau Yih Yun, a Cantonese speaking pre-school in Wellington.

Mandy describes kindergarten teaching in China as ‘very hard work’. Because parents have to go to work, children start attending early childhood facilities at a very young age, usually starting at an early childhood service at 6 months old. Some children stay at the early childhood service during the week and go home with their parents at weekends. Kindergarten programmes are only provided for 3, 4 and 5 year old children.

Kindergartens are typically provided and supported by a company or business for the children of its employees. Children usually arrive at the kindergarten around 7.30 am and domestic staff give children their breakfast. Teachers use this time to talk to parents about the children. The kindergarten programme begins at 9.00 am and is very structured, with sessions in the mornings dedicated to teaching curriculum subjects such as maths, science, language etc. Lunch break is from 12.00 – 2.30 pm and children usually have a sleep before recommencing the programme at 2.30 pm.

In the afternoon children play teacher-directed games ‘to calm the children down’ until parents come to collect their children at 4.30 pm. Mandy said the New Zealand idea of ‘child-directed, free play’ does not exist in the Chinese early childhood context. She said that if teachers in China introduced free-play into their programmes they would be seen as ‘not doing their jobs properly.’ An average kindergarten class has about 40 children and is taught by one teacher and a teacher aide – teacher aides are often first year teachers.

Teachers need to do a lot of preparation and lesson planning before each class. Kindergartens have a Director who oversees the teachers’ work and checks their lesson planning. Much of what is taught in the programme is determined by the Ministry of Education. Mandy found kindergarten teaching quite stressful due to the amount of work teachers were required to do and the pressure from their Directors.

Other differences Mandy described were:

- Kindergarten children wear uniforms.
- Kindergartens often enter competitions with each other, e.g. performance of nationalistic songs and dances.
• Some activities found in early childhood services in New Zealand, such as carpentry, would be considered too dangerous for children in China.
• Children never sit on the floor in Chinese kindergartens as the floors are concrete and it is considered that the floor is too dirty to sit on. Children always sit on chairs.
• Water play and sand play are very slowly being introduced into kindergarten programmes in China but children do not have the same freedom to play with these activities as children do in New Zealand.

The interview with Mandy illustrates a very formal, structured and teacher directed teaching system, where the content of kindergarten programmes is carefully controlled. Concepts about play and the types of play opportunities experienced at a Chinese kindergarten are teacher directed rather than child-centred and some activities that would be found in a New Zealand early childhood service are considered inappropriate, e.g. carpentry.

Mandy’s experiences of early childhood services in New Zealand, as a teacher, and a playgroup parent, have been very positive. She enjoys the more relaxed attitude to running an early childhood programme and likes getting feedback from parents. However, Mandy has decided that when her son Raymond is old enough she will send him to a Montessori preschool because she likes their more structured approach.

Conclusion

Canella (1997, p135) challenges proponents of child-centred early childhood pedagogy to be aware that “child-centred pedagogy and play, as central tenets within educational practice, have been created in a particular culture with particular values and biases. Applying the notion of play to all peoples in all situations denies the multiple value structures, knowledges, and views of the world which are created by people in diverse contexts.” It is important when discussing different early childhood pedagogies to remember that they are culturally determined and are likely to be valid and appropriate in their specific cultural context.

These three examples of parents’ experiences of early childhood pedagogies in their countries of origin illustrate some quite fundamental differences to early childhood services in New Zealand. It is important to consider that although some parents may not have had their children attend early childhood services in their country of origin, their own experiences of early childhood may also colour their expectations. It is also important not to assume that parents who have come to New Zealand from countries that have similar early childhood systems in place, e.g. Australia, Britain and the US, will be immediately au fait with the New Zealand curriculum. Allowing time for discussion with parents about their experiences will enable both parents and practitioners to develop dialogue and increase their understanding.

Bibliography:


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