Voices of playgroup

Connecting pedagogy and understandings of early childhood education

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The engagement of migrant families in early childhood education is a strategy pursued by the Ministry of Education in Aotearoa New Zealand. A growing body of research has explored the realities being experienced by these migrant families. These realities include how families are able to maintain their cultural identities, practices and languages while making a new life in Aotearoa New Zealand.

A supported playgroup model is one type of provision that can serve as a valuable introduction to early childhood education for parents and carers and their children of any pre-school age. Through informal conversations, and the modelling of learning through play, qualified and experienced facilitators can introduce and demonstrate important theoretical and pedagogical notions of learning, including the principles and practices of *Te Whāriki*, the early childhood curriculum. In addition, playgroups can be a place for listening to, and sharing in, the aspirations and priorities that families have for their children.

This article draws on a research project that explores how pedagogy and practices of early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand were introduced by teachers in a supported playgroup attended by migrant families who had English as an additional language. It reflects on how pedagogy and practices interacted with the families' educational expectations and cultural understandings and practices.

Introduction

The Ministry of Education's Engaging Priority Families initiative encourages migrant families to participate in early childhood education (ECE) in Aotearoa New Zealand (Mitchell, Meagher-Lundberg, Caulcutt, Taylor, Archard, Kara, & Paki, 2014). ECE has been identified as important for being able to provide proactive support and community connections for families, as well as positive learning experiences for young children (Ministry of Education, 2002). It can be a place for trust to be engendered and education to be conducted for such priority families and their children (Mitchell et al., 2014).

Research involving some migrant communities has also identified that these groups recognise the importance of their children's early childhood education and its foundation for their children's futures (Mitchell & Ouko, 2010; Mitchell et al., 2015). This recognition is shaped by their position as migrants and the value they place on opportunities for their children to learn English and become familiar with Aotearoa New Zealand societal and educational expectations and practices (Mitchell & Ouko, 2010). These opportunities are often balanced with the need to mix and gain support from their own cultural communities (Mitchell & Ouko, 2010).

At times the balance between maintaining the migrant families' own cultural identities and establishing an Aotearoa New Zealand identity might pose challenges. Guo (2012) expands on this point in her research with a Chinese immigrant community, where she identifies that many Chinese families deferred their own funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2009) on entering

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the early childhood education system. She found that for the participants in her research the priority was to integrate into Aotearoa New Zealand's culture. As she states, "there was the tendency of the parents to believe that the children needed to fully embrace the mainstream culture of the centre environment and parents should keep Chinese culture as a tool to use only at home" (Guo, 2012, p. 8). In this case, the families' perspectives further affirm the importance of reciprocal partnerships between centre and home to enable the inclusion of migrant families' cultural identities and funds of knowledge in the early childhood setting (Guo, 2012). One option for exploring or resolving such tensions is the playgroup model, which might encourage families and children to strengthen their cultural identities and experience the place of these identities within early childhood learning and settings (Ministry of Education, 2010).

The playgroup model

The playgroup model is one form of early childhood provision in Aotearoa New Zealand. Playgroups are often organised informally by a group of parents or caregivers with preschool age children (0–6 years in Aotearoa New Zealand), enabling opportunities for them all to engage in social and play-based activities (Ministry of Education, 2010; Warr, Mann, & Forbes, 2013). Playgroups will often meet on a regular basis, and the majority of children attending will have a parent or carer stay for the session (Ministry of Education, 2010). A key factor that can make a playgroup effective is that it is often based within its local community. Such a non-threatening "soft entry model" (Jackson, 2013, p. 78) can create a place for families to feel safe when entering the education sector. This informality can particularly suit vulnerable or marginalised families (Jackson, 2013) and afford opportunities for information sharing about services and local connections in the community (Warr et al., 2013).

Playgroups are seen as places for children to have opportunities for sharing and engaging with others outside of their family circles (Needham & Jackson, 2012). Research has further identified that families find it beneficial to be able to learn alongside their children, which often aligns with their strong beliefs about the value of early childhood education in relation to their children's learning (Mitchell et al., 2014). The key aspirations of playgroups for creating a responsive learning environment to engage young children and an informal support network for parents and carers can be further enhanced if a trained teacher or co-ordinator is able to facilitate and shape these features (Jackson, 2013). This type of playgroup is often referred to as a supported playgroup model.

The supported playgroup model can provide a number of positive educational and social outcomes for young children and their families (Jackson, 2013; Warr et al., 2013). It can introduce many family members to the roles they can play in their children's education, early childhood education practices and *Te Whāriki*, the early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996, 2010). This is achieved by fostering the static and dynamic aspects of the learning environment (Cornhill & Grey, 2010). This includes facilitating conversations with families about learning and education, the modelling of teaching and learning strategies with young children, and the arranging of the learning environment (Jackson, 2013).

Design and methodology

The supported playgroup in this research project was a Ministry of Education-funded initiative targeting families with English as an additional language. The supported playgroup was facilitated by a qualified early childhood teacher, and English was used in the majority of interactions. The playgroup was located in a Hamilton school classroom in Aotearoa New Zealand. During the first year of the supported playgroup, 15 families attended. The families' home countries were China, South Korea, and Japan. While the majority of families were monocultural, two were bicultural with one pakeha parent. The children attending the supported playgroup ranged from zero to four years of age. Every parent/carer who attended the supported playgroup stayed with his or her child during each session. Additionally, each family was invited to contribute to a portfolio containing their learning stories (Carr, 2001).

The findings and discussion presented in this article are drawn from the teaching experiences of one of the authors at the supported playgroup, and a research project entitled Voices of Playgroup.

The Voices of Playgroup research project sought to capture the educational values, aspirations and experiences of the participants and what they felt had shaped or influenced their understandings of education in Aotearoa New Zealand. The aim was to gain a better understanding of how such culturally determined expectations may affect engagement by children and their families with the education sectors in Aotearoa New Zealand, particularly when transitioning into and between services. The participants in the research project were five families who were current or past members of the supported playgroup.

The research project employed qualitative research methods. These consisted of one initial focus-group interview, follow-up individual family interviews every six months, and the learning stories in the children's portfolios. All five families were involved in this part of the research process. The individual family interviews are ongoing and had not been undertaken at the time of writing. In addition, participants were invited to construct a digital story, and four families chose to contribute. A digital story is a personal story created in a digital format using a range of information sources, and often includes a mix of personal narrative, text, images, and sound (Farmer, 2004). Families were asked to consider and reflect on how they saw themselves and their children in terms of learning and cultural identity, and to present their stories. Approximately 10 hours of discussion, technical guidance, and story creation took place over several meetings with the four families who volunteered. This included researchers offering content support and the technical guidance from the University of Waikato Centre for eLearning.

In addition to the data gathered from the families, the teacher (author) kept a reflective journal. Data from this journal included pedagogical conversations with families; reflections about teaching strategies employed, such as modelling; details relating to mat time activities; and sharing of assessment through learning stories.

Thematic analysis of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify key themes.

Findings

Two key themes emerged from the focus-group interview, the digital stories created by the families, and the teacher's reflective journal. These themes were the value of social interaction and the concept of play in Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood education, and the families' cultural identities and cultural aspirations for Aotearoa New Zealand.

Theme 1: The value of social interaction and the concept of play in Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood education

During the focus-group discussions, the families shared their own experiences of early childhood education in their home countries. They noted the formal style, and at times pressure, of the early years education they had experienced as they were growing up. This is demonstrated by the comments of participants when thinking about their own memories of education. For example, one parent described his experience as "one teacher and many desks with pressures of formal activities". Another elaborated about the pressures of the amount of work required in his home country's education system in comparison with Aotearoa New Zealand, saying that "I prefer the less pressured education in New Zealand compared to China, many activities to have to do and lots to learn and remember [*sic*]".

During the focus-group interview, several families expressed that although they valued their own educational experiences, they recognised and appreciated that the Aotearoa New Zealand educational context was different and had a strong focus on the concept of play. Indeed, there seemed to be a general consensus among the families that the notion of play was an attractive and valued element of the early childhood education and care system. This was evident in the comment by one parent who noted, "We think early childhood education should let children feel the joy of achievement from lots of playing". However, from the teacher's perspective, as documented in the reflective journal, how and what children might learn through play was less understood by families. For example, one interaction between Paul (pseudonym) and the teacher during block play was closely observed (and recorded) by Paul's mother, and documented by the teacher in a learning story. As Paul and the teacher took turns to build a vertical structure, his mother marvelled at the height and balance being achieved and how careful Paul was in placing the blocks. She reported her pleasure about how well he built up the structure and the skill he showed. It was through the conversation with the teacher and subsequent learning story that further learning was described and explored. This included the cooperation between Paul and the teacher engaging in a shared purpose and the thoughtfulness about size and the placing of the materials. Indeed, it did include the skills of balancing but of similar importance was Paul's confidence to take part in a shared activity with an adult and enjoy the success of its construction and tolerate the disappointment of its final destruction.

Families viewed that social interaction was a necessity to facilitate play, and they agreed that it was a desirable key competency for their children that could be developed in early childhood services. This was evident in the comments made by the families in the focus-group interview. For example, one parent said, "Playing with others is very social and important here in New Zealand and he [the child] needs to play with others so he can become good at play". This was endorsed by another parent who commented, "It is important for my child to be with other children and practice being social". One parent reflected on the formality and activity focus of his own education noting that for his child "it is much more important for him to learn to be social and accept others". The families' perceptions of the importance of social interactions aligned with the pedagogy of the teacher and curriculum philosophy. This was evident in the way families valued their children socialising, gaining skills of taking turns, communicating, respecting others and playing/enjoying the company of others. Additionally, the teacher was able to make connections to *Te Whāriki* and share these understandings with the families in learning stories. Essentially, it became evident from the focus-group interview that families valued the assessment practices of learning stories and particularly valued playing a part in adding to the children's portfolios and seeing the learning taking place.

Theme 2: Cultural identity and aspirations for New Zealand

The impacts of being a migrant in Aotearoa New Zealand on their children's identities and cultural values and practices featured strongly in the focus-group interview and digital stories. The majority of the families attending the supported playgroup for families with English as an additional language also attended playgroups for their own cultural groups. It seemed from their conversations that their own cultural identities were strong in their home settings and also in their respective cultural playgroups. However, families saw supported playgroups for families with English as an additional language as an opportunity for their children to learn and embrace Aotearoa New Zealand culture. This is reflected by one family member during the focus-group interview when he said, "The playgroup may not be the place to learn his parents' culture but the place to learn New Zealand's culture".

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Families also indicated in the focus-group interview and digital storytelling the aspiration for their children to experience a wider range of cultures. The aspiration seemed to draw a comparison to what some parents regarded as their less culturally diverse home countries, and their wish for their children to be "global citizens". This is evident in one family's digital story: they included a photograph of being out in a crowd in their home which was monocultural, and a photograph taken in a multicultural crowd in Aotearoa New Zealand. Additionally, there were comments by members of other families during the focus-group interview that "the playgroup supports my child to touch other cultures and learn respect for other people and cultures", and "it [the playgroup] offers our child opportunities to spend time with other children/people from different backgrounds and cultures."

The aspirations of families for their children to have the opportunity to embrace Aotearoa New Zealand culture, and that of other cultures, meant that they did not seem to have as a priority the sharing of their home cultures in the supported playgroup. This was highlighted in one conversation with families documented in the teacher's reflective journal that focused on the families' wish to understand the expectations of early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand. Recognising this, the teacher actively encouraged families to share their cultural "funds of knowledge" (González et al., 2009; Mitchell et al., 2015). These included, for example, conversations discussing cultural customs and practices, and the inclusion of artefacts relevant to their home countries (books and art activities). This led to a rich exchange of information that significantly shaped the life of the playgroup, adding to a sense of belonging and stronger ownership of the supported playgroup by the families.

Aside from the aspiration of families for their children to be global citizens, during the focus-group interview the families identified that there was also an unexpected positive outcome for the children: they found that attending the supported multicultural playgroup helped several of the children transition into their more formal experiences of education and care services. Families recognised that accessing and interacting with others in a multicultural playgroup, where the majority of interactions among all attending cultures were in English, could help minimise what could be regarded as a culture shock when moving from a monocultural environment into a culturally diverse setting of more formal services.

Finally, it was interesting to note that although families did want their children to embrace Aotearoa New Zealand culture and life, they reflected on what this might mean for their children's sense of cultural identity in the longer term. Some families and children seemed at ease with their understandings of their identities while living in Aotearoa New Zealand. One parent said, "L is very clear about who he is, he sees himself as a kiwi and me as Chinese, that's ok [*sic*]". On the other hand, some families were concerned about how their children might navigate the different cultural worlds they could potentially exist in:

> I worry about which identity M becomes. If she got kiwi identity when we go back to Japan whether she can adapt a lot of kind of Japanese style or not? If she has got Japanese identity when we stay in NZ she can adapt kiwi style or not? In the end when M grows up and becomes an adult it is uneasy whether she can adapt to the culture of the country or not [*sic*].

Discussion and conclusion

The migrant families who attended the supported playgroup in this research project placed a strong value on their children experiencing social interactions and developing greater social competence, which aligns well with the aspirations of the supported playgroup model (Warr, Mann, & Forbes, 2013). The migrant families also recognised that social interaction was strongly associated with the concept of play and learning through play.

It was interesting that several of the migrant families' views on social interaction and play differed from some of their own experiences as children in their home countries' educational approach. In essence, the migrant families strongly valued the principles of the Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood education without any personal experience or understanding of the curriculum. With the input of the teacher in this supported playgroup, however, the opportunity to discuss and share some stronger pedagogical aspects of learning through play was possible. This took place through informal conversations about learning and how early childhood education supports young children in an Aotearoa New Zealand context. Furthermore, the pedagogical intention of the teacher to invite migrant families' involvement in their children's learning stories enabled conversations about learning that included parental participation. These pedagogical strategies seemed to contribute to the migrant families having a better understanding of how and why children can learn through play, and satisfy migrant families' belief of the value of social interaction and play (Mitchell & Ouko, 2010). This also contributed to recognising migrant families' values and interests in their children's early childhood education (Mitchell et al., 2015).

Playgroups can operate with a specific cultural membership in which cultural practices and specific language is supported and prioritised (Warr et al., 2013). This was true of the families in this research project as they all attended a culturally specific playgroup as well as the supported playgroup in this research project. However, it has been recognised that families from migrant backgrounds also seek to play an active and meaningful part in Aotearoa New Zealand culture and that opportunities to experience and orientate themselves to this, including educational expectations, is important (Mitchell & Ouko, 2010). This suggests that playgroups can be a place for cultural security and support and an opportunity to experience and negotiate the expectations of a new country, in particular its educational expectations. It would seem from the findings in this research project that having a multicultural supported playgroup where English is the main language and where *Te Whāriki* is enacted by a qualified teacher appeared to satisfy the migrant families' wish to understand education in their new country. The supported playgroup in this research project complemented the migrant families' memberships to other culturally specific playgroups as both met their different priorities. It was of interest that these priorities included the sensitisation of their children to many diverse cultures and the experience of using English as the main language. The migrant families acknowledged that this could potentially minimise any culture shock for their children when transitioning into other ECE services.

Although each playgroup the migrant families attended served particular purposes for each family, it was essential that when attending the supported playgroup in this research project the families were not expected to surrender their cultural 'funds of knowledge' (González et al., 2009). It was clear that through the practices of sharing stories and conversations the teachers and families learnt things about each other's cultures, and this was an important component to participation in the supported playgroup. This shift in practice, advocated by the teacher, strengthens families' understandings that their cultures and funds of knowledge are important for their children's learning, and that these have a place alongside their aspirations of also "wanting to be kiwi" in early childhood education (Mitchell et al., 2015).

In conclusion, we perhaps need to ensure that we recognise and embrace migrant families' enthusiasm for taking part in their new country and their willingness to learn about it. At the same time it also means we clearly need to show migrant families how we value their cultural identities and how important these are for their children's early childhood education experience, and be a true reflection of culturally responsive teaching pedagogy.

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