

# "The teachers said my child is different"

by Angel Chan



*New Zealand early childhood centres are increasingly multicultural. New migrant families bring diverse language and cultural practice to our centres.*

*Families and teachers may not share the same child rearing and educational beliefs. This article focuses on Chinese families in particular, and discusses ways in which early childhood professionals can acknowledge and understand cultural differences.*

*Some behaviours of Chinese migrant children and parents, that are commonly misinterpreted by teachers, can be explored through a variety of theoretical and philosophical perspectives. Early childhood professionals are encouraged to initiate partnerships with Chinese parents to support Chinese children's learning and development.*

Mobility between countries is increasing. Many families move to other countries, especially where English is spoken, to seek a better education and future for their children. As a result, New Zealand's classrooms and early childhood centres are becoming increasingly multi-ethnic, filled with migrant children and families. Chinese families make up a large percentage of this country's immigrants and they rank first out of the eight largest Asian ethnic groups in New Zealand, according to the statistics from the Census of Population and Dwellings held on 6 March, 2001 (Statistics New Zealand, 2002).

Each ethnic group has its own unique beliefs and values that guide its people's relationships and interactions. This article discusses some of the beliefs and behaviours of Chinese migrant children and families within the early childhood context. It summarises some of the findings from a case study that involved a mainstream early childhood centre, a New Zealand early childhood teacher, and two Chinese toddlers and their parents. It outlines the importance for early childhood teachers to recognise the existence of cultural differences, and the need to reach out to Chinese migrant families in order to understand and support the different learning and developmental needs of these children. A genuine parent-teacher partnership is required to help Chinese migrant children to develop to their fullest potential.

At this point, it may be pertinent to mention that I was a Chinese migrant some years ago. Some of the ideas expressed in this article result from the case study findings, my New Zealand teaching experience in a multi-ethnic mainstream early childhood centre and in a tertiary early childhood education training institution, as well as my desire to contribute to the learning and development of Chinese migrant children. Although this article focuses on Chinese children, its underpinning beliefs of accepting differences and working in close partnership with parents and families can be applied to all ethnic minority groups.

## **Recognising differences**

Some early childhood teachers believe

that they do not differentiate in their treatment of children because all children are the same. No matter what cultural/ethnic group the children belong to, these teachers assume that all children go through universal stages, have similar needs, and will all reach their fullest potential if these standardised needs are met. According to Darder (1991), many monocultural teachers view things only with the dominant cultural perspectives, and they fail to understand or validate the struggles of the minorities. Denying racial differences or supporting egalitarianism actually upholds the values of the dominant social groups, ignores the need to deal with differences, and continues to marginalise the subordinated (Simon, 1990; Dei & Calliste, 2000).

Language and culture are inseparable. They play a vital role in human development and shape the way we see our world (Vygotsky, 1978). Different cultural groups who use different languages and hold different cultural values think and behave differently. Cultural differences cannot be denied. It is the way we interpret differences that matters. Recognising differences does not mean categorising or stereotyping people because generalisation may run the risk of leading to bias and even discrimination (Plous, 2003). Early childhood teachers need to communicate with minority groups in order to explore differences and to develop teaching strategies collaboratively with parents, to promote the learning and development of minority children.

### **Differences in socio-cultural beliefs**

People's perspectives of the world are influenced by their culture, values and beliefs about themselves and others. These perspectives influence an adult's child rearing practices and determine what kinds of children's behaviour are seen as desirable or undesirable (Gonzalez-Mena, 2002). The underlying beliefs and values about how children should learn and develop, thus inevitably become the foundation of a teacher's teaching philosophy, and they shape teaching practice (Jorde Bloom, 1992; Bruner, 1996; McLachlan-Smith & St. George, 2000; Dalli, 2002; McLeod, 2003; Lee & Walsh, 2004).

parents and families make decisions for them.

### **Differences in role expectation**

Within early childhood centres in New Zealand, teachers expect children to actively explore the environment to learn. *Te Whāriki*, the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, states "children learn through play - by doing, by asking questions, by interacting with others ... by the purposeful use of resources" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 82). Children are expected to make their own decisions while they play and contribute to their own learning. These learning outcomes become part of the teaching ideology of most New

Zealand teachers, who value and promote self-help and independent exploration skills in children. Lee and Walsh (2004) believe that teachers, who are trained and educated in Western individualist ideology and culture, stress the importance of being independent and self-reliant, and not becoming a burden to family members and society.

since it was her first early childhood education experience. Throughout the months of observation, the child invariably either stayed close to her mother or attached herself to a teacher. She would not leave the adults to play or to explore, but only observed the other children's play from a distance. She would, however, do as she was told by an adult. When the mother was at the centre, she would tell the girl what to do and where and how to play. Interestingly, the mother constantly told the girl to do something for the others, especially the family members, for example, to paint a picture for the father, or to make a play dough cake for the sister. The girl was not expected to make any decision for herself, and this is in line

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While individualism is generally a dominant ideology of the West, collectivism strongly shapes the child rearing practice of most Asian parents. Individualists promote independence and autonomy, whereas collectivists believe the group or the family comes first and they stress conformity (Gonzalez-Mena, 2002). East and Southeast Asian countries, such as China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, are also labelled as "Confucian-heritage" cultures (Ho, 1991 cited in Biggs, 1996, p. 46), and the Asian ways of parenting and educating their children are influenced by the strong Confucian tradition. Confucian beliefs stress the importance of hierarchically structured relationships (Pearson & Rao, 2003), and Chinese children are expected to be obedient and to show respect for adults (Johnston & Wong, 2002). Under the co-influences of Confucianism and collectivism, Chinese children are taught not to be assertive, that their personal interests are unimportant, and to let their

with the collectivist notions as well as the Confucian beliefs that family is the priority and it is above individual's preference and interest - therefore children do as they are told.

Collectivists "teach children that they need adults and even older children" and "it is good to let the others help" (Gonzalez-Mena, 2003, p.21). According to Confucianism, skill development should come before the ability to explore, and teaching is by "holding the hand" (Biggs, 1996, p.55) of the students to accomplish a task as perfectly as possible. The child who was observed in the case study to be hesitant and reluctant to engage in active independent exploration might simply have been too afraid to make mistakes in any new experience. Instead, it appeared that she waited for the adults to give her permission to participate in activities and instructions to complete the tasks properly because this is the way she was taught by the family at home.

The teacher participant of the case study expressed the same beliefs of individualist ideology in the interview. She claimed that unlike other children in mainstream settings, most Chinese toddlers are unable to initiate play and to make independent decisions. They are unwilling to explore and have limited self-help skills because the parents, and sometimes also the grandparents, are over-protective. In fact, some of these traits were observed in one of the toddler participants. The mother was trying to settle her daughter into the centre

Chinese migrant children who attend mainstream early childhood settings may find it difficult to meet the role expectation of the teachers. Children define their roles and meet these role expectations through the role acquisition process (Ollhoff & Ollhoff, 1996) which enables them to learn the predetermined expectations of a setting to govern their behaviour. Children, like the toddler participant, who experience two sets of expectations, one from the early childhood centre and one from the home setting, may not have the capability to meet the different role requirements of adults when they transit between settings.

### **Differences in the perception of learning and playing**

*Te Whāriki* states children have to experience "an environment where their play is valued as meaningful learning and the importance of spontaneous play is recognised" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 84). This is in contrast to the Chinese beliefs that learning is not synonymous with playing and learning does not need to be active, fun and interesting. The concept of 'play' appears in the philosophy statement and policies of the case study centre frequently and its values were further acknowledged by the teacher participant in the interview, yet neither of the Chinese parent participants mentioned the importance of play.

Within the learning context, Chinese learners are expected to follow the instructions of the teachers and the group, never to create trouble for the teachers or to seek teachers' attention, to persist even when bored, and to learn submissively in order to fit into the education system (Biggs, 1996). As a result, Asian education systems are generally highly structured, dogmatic, teacher-centred, and parents socialise their children at a very young age in this direction. According to many New Zealand

student teachers, "What did my child learn today?" is a common question asked by Chinese parents. In the case study, both parent participants commented their children played most of the time, and were not learning much at the centre. They said they would like to see longer mat time and more structured group activities.

As a generalised view, Western culture tends to attribute success and failure to an individual's ability, whereas Confucian culture believes in continuous effort (Jorde Bloom, 1992; Biggs, 1996). Lee (1996) states that Confucian beliefs view everyone as educable, perceive "education as important to personal improvement and societal development" (p.26). They believe that incentive, self-determination, and efforts to learn are more important than innate ability and intelligence. When Chinese parents see that their children are spending the whole or most of the session in play, and not making an effort to learn in the conventional Chinese way, they ensure that learning takes place at home. Therefore, both parent participants admitted they taught their children at home by using puzzles, books, pictures and flash cards.

### **Differences in languages**

Most Chinese children appear very quiet when they are attending early childhood centres, and Brierley (2003) observes that Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) children, who are beginning to learn English, are frequently at risk of being verbally overlooked and socially isolated in the kindergarten. *Te Whāriki* encourages teachers to help children to develop the "confidence that their first language is valued" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 76), and Vygotsky (1978) believes that language helps children to understand the world. However, when Chinese children are allowed to use their first language at the centre, will there be teachers who understand their first language to help

them develop working theories? Will their learning of English be affected if they continue to communicate only with the other Chinese children in their native language at the centre? Without the English language, how can they interact with the other children and teachers, and participate effectively in the early childhood setting?

Tabors (1997) claims that children of NESB enter into a silent or mute period in an environment where they believe their native language is not understood. In some cases, they even develop a rejection period when they choose to be socially isolated (Itoh & Hatch, 1978, cited in Tabors, 1997). During the case study observations, the two Chinese toddler participants, who could speak Chinese fluently, hardly said anything in the centre, neither English nor Chinese. They did not even communicate with each other in their first language. When they were being asked a question persistently in either language, they would nod or shake their heads, replied with body-language, and acknowledged their understanding. Why were they not talking? Perhaps this is because shyness and quietness are the preferred virtues of Chinese culture; they are seen as the keys to future academic success (Carlson, Feng & Harwood, 2004), and children are socialized in this direction from a young age.

It was also observed in the case study that English speaking toddlers displayed a considerable amount of egocentric speech, but the two Chinese toddlers showed no sign of the speech at all. While Piaget believed egocentric speech is a form of immature think-out-loud speech which simply reflects children's egocentrism, Vygotsky viewed private speech as verbal self-communication (cited in Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 1998). Recent research further examines the value of egocentric/private speech in supporting young children's learning

and development (Diaz, Padilla & Weathersby, 1991; Krafft & Berk, 1998; Bailey & Brookes, 2003). Although children's private speech is important in guiding their behaviour and in problem solving, the amount of the speech reduces significantly when children are in a foreign language environment (Vygotsky, 1978). The two toddler participants might have given up on using egocentric speech out loud because they believed that their native language could not be understood.

Clark (2004) questions whether "the degree of wellbeing and belonging which the children experienced within the early childhood environment may (or may not) influence the amount of private

dimensions. Without the language and a secure emotional well-being, all other aspects of Chinese children's development may be impacted negatively.

### **Recognise, understand and work with differences**

Grieshaber and Cannella (2001) claim "the world presently can be characterised by complexity, uncertainty, and questions of culture, difference, ethnicity, class, privilege, and politics" (p.4). Many studies have looked at the relationships between teachers' perceptions of differences and the learning and development of ethnic minority children (Huss-Keeler, 1997; Sims, 1999; Yang, 2004). Teachers who are brought up and

raise their children's learning concerns with teachers. Perhaps this is due to modesty, a preferred virtue in collectivism (Gonzalez-Mena, 2003). This may be why the Chinese parent participants were confident that the teachers were doing a good job, and preferred not to tell the teachers that they wanted to see more structured teaching, but simply followed the culture and practice of the centre.

Furthermore, although the parent participants were aware of the different expectations their children might experience, they felt that their personal expectations and aspirations were unimportant, and it was unnecessary to share them with the teachers. Bandura's self-efficacy theory can be used to explain the non-

*"It is very rare that Chinese parents challenge the teacher's strategies or raise their children's learning concerns with teachers."*

speech that they use" (p.190). Were the two toddler participants who displayed no private speech feeling insecure in the centre? Clark (2004) also suggests that early childhood teachers should be sensitive to children's private speech in order to understand their thoughts and scaffold them at an appropriate level. However, if Chinese children do not display private speech, how do teachers know the best strategy for scaffolding? And, if these children use native language private speech, will their teachers understand?

*Te Whāriki* stresses the importance of holistic development in which areas of children's development are interrelated and it emphasises the development of a whole person in all his/her individual and socio-cultural aspects (Ministry of Education, 1996). The progression or regression of any developmental area influences the development of the other

educated in New Zealand will not think and act in similar ways to Chinese migrant children and families. Difference is undeniable, but we should recognise and discuss the differences with an open mind.

A relationship is usually understood to be reciprocal and to benefit both partners, as illustrated in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). However, while educators rely on the willingness of the parents to become involved in their children's learning, to share aspirations and expectations of their children, and to work in partnership with the centre, the initiation has to come from the teachers. This is because Chinese parents have high educational expectations of their children (Guo, 2004; Li, 2004), and teachers are accorded high social status and enjoy huge respect from the parents. It is very rare that Chinese parents challenge the teacher's strategies or

involvement of Chinese parents (Bandura, 1997). Chinese parents who are new to the country and lack the language to communicate with teachers, may feel they know too little about the education system and practice in New Zealand. They may then tend to take on a more passive role in their children's learning context. They do not feel capable of communicating with the teachers or making any contribution to the centres and to their children's learning.

The challenge is for early childhood professionals to understand a wider range of discourses around child development and early childhood education in order to broaden their world views and perspectives. Acknowledging and making an effort to understand each other's differences, helps to break down barriers between teachers and parents. Teachers and parents can discuss how to develop appropriate teaching strategies

collaboratively to support the learning and development of Chinese migrant children. A successful parent-teacher partnership, however, relies strongly on a genuine attitude of acceptance, respect, and willingness to listen and to change, from both parties.

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