

# Providing culturally competent care in early childhood services in New Zealand

## Part 1 : Considering Culture



*Early Childhood Development  
Nga Kaitiaki Kohungahunga*

**RIGHT FROM THE START**



# Considering culture

Lisa Terreni with Judi McCallum

New Zealand, an island nation once relatively isolated from the rest of the world, is experiencing, like many nations, increasing immigration and resettlement by peoples from around the globe.

Statistics from the Ministry of Education show that the percentages of children attending early childhood services from different ethnic backgrounds have increased over the past 10 years<sup>1</sup>. It is very likely that early childhood practitioners will, during the course of their teaching careers, work with children and families who come from different ethnic backgrounds and who bring with them the different experiences, customs and values embedded in their particular cultures.

Increasingly, early childhood practitioners are considering theories that address issues of bi-cultural and multi-cultural education. However, in my experience as a professional development facilitator, practitioners often skip the debate on what culture actually 'is', in their efforts to try and deal with the 'what should be done'.

This paper addresses some of the current theories that attempt to understand 'culture' and examines some of the concepts underlying theories of inter-cultural communication. It examines how understanding ideas about culture and inter-cultural communication has implications for early childhood education practitioners from the dominant culture.

## What is culture?

"Culture can be a set of fundamental ideas, practices and experiences of a group of people that are symbolically transmitted generation to generation through a learning process. Culture may as well refer to the beliefs, norms, and attitudes that are used to guide our behaviours and solve problems." (Chen and Starosta, 1998, p 25).

Culture is multi-layered. Overt signs of culture manifest themselves in symbols or phenomena that are *concrete and explicit* e.g. language, festivals, food, and dress. It is often these overt signs that are most easily identifiable and which can be more easily shared with others. However, the *implicit and subconscious* assumptions individuals hold about existence determine the beliefs, norms and attitudes of a culture. These lie beneath the concrete and explicit manifestations of the culture and are often more difficult to identify or be aware of.

Early childhood practitioners, in their efforts to be culturally inclusive, often explore with children the concrete and explicit aspects of different cultures. For example by including a wide variety of different cultural objects in the family area, providing a range of culturally diverse dress-ups, preparing, cooking and eating different types of food, presenting photographs and art

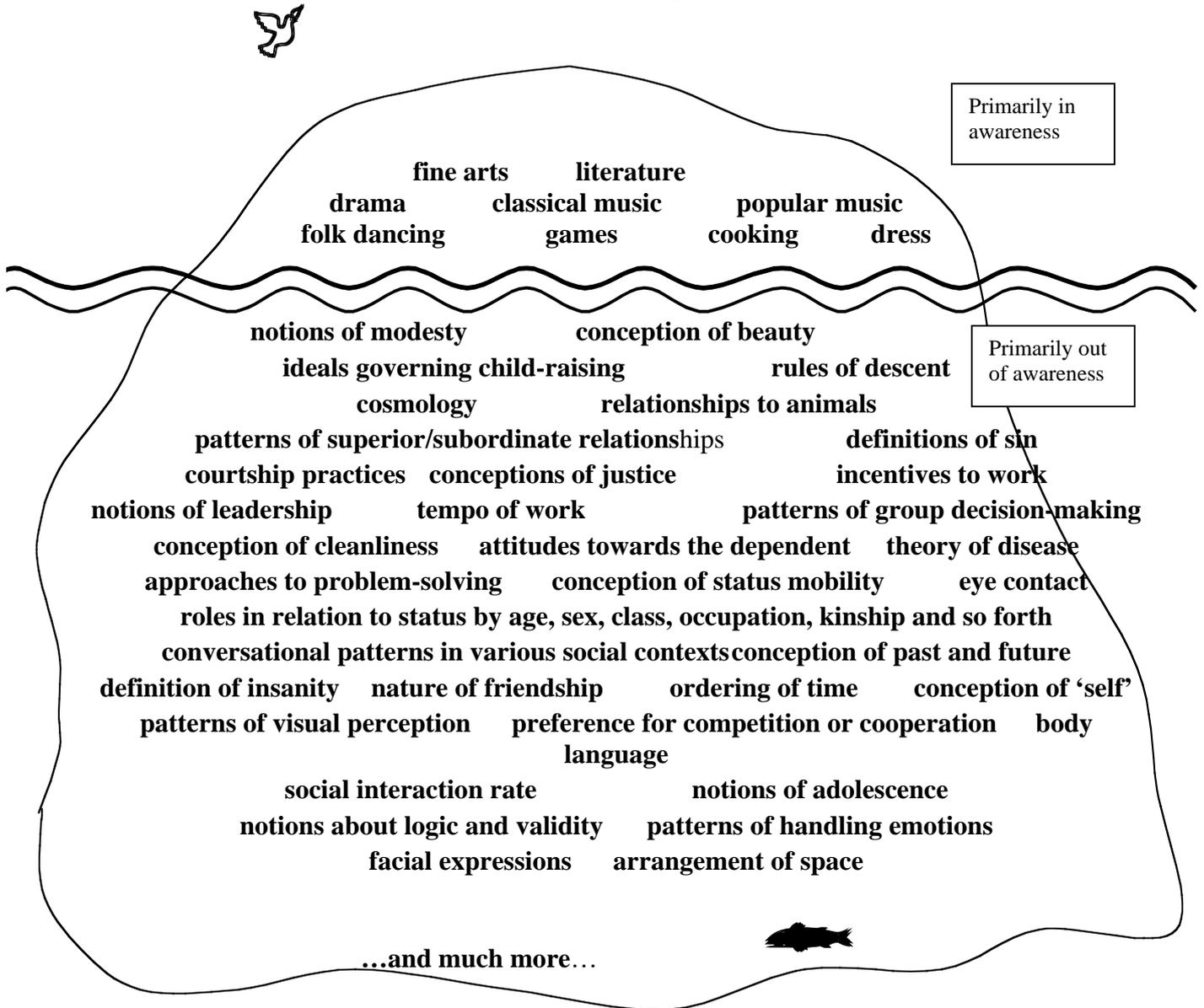
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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Education statistics ([www.minedu.govt.nz](http://www.minedu.govt.nz)) for 1995 show the percentage of children enrolled in early childhood services: 18.73% Maori, 6.12% Pacific Islands, 2.32% Asian, 2.8% other, 70.65% European/Pakeha. For 2001 statistics show: 18.51% Maori, 6.16% Pacific Islands, 4.56% Asian, 1.48% other, 69.37% Pakeha.

objects from different cultures in the environment. It is also in these areas that parents often make valid contributions to the programme, e.g. by teaching a song or telling a story from their culture, or preparing food.

However, increasing one’s knowledge of the implicit beliefs and orientations that inform the practices of a culture can lead to deeper understanding of cultural difference and increase the possibility of quality inter-cultural communication.

### The culture iceberg



Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) provide a framework for unpacking the implicit assumptions about culture that are more difficult to access. They do this by identifying three issues common to all cultures: relationships with people, relationships with time and relationships with nature. These three issues are universals, however the way cultures resolve

these issues is where cultural difference lies. It is useful to examine these three dimensions more closely.

### **Relationships with people**

The way in which human beings deal with each other depends very much on the way their culture determines their 'relational orientation' (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1998). These orientations can be described as:

- Individualism or communitarianism
- Neutral or emotional
- Achievement or ascription
- Specific or diffuse
- Universalism or particularism

The orientations need to be viewed as being on continuums rather than polarised. Very often a culture will fall somewhere in the middle of the continuum rather than at one end or the other.

#### ***Individualism or communitarianism (the individual or the group)***

A culture that has its prime orientation to the self (individualism) places the needs and wants of the individual first. Underlying this cultural orientation is the belief that once individual needs are met, the individual is then better able to contribute to the group.

A culture that has a prime orientation to common goals and objectives (communitarianism) will consider these first. This cultural orientation perceives that the community must be strong to adequately meet the needs of individuals.

The following procedures in a work place may be threatening to staff, parents or children coming from one or other of these orientations:

- Encouraging independence rather than dependence
- Singling out an individual for praise or special attention
- Seeking consensus rather than majority rule
- Prioritising individual goals rather than family goals

Janet Gonzalez-Mena (2002) describes a conflict between a parent and caregiver over the amount of assistance given to a child attempting to dress herself. The caregiver's perception of infancy is framed by her culture in which she views infants as needing to be taught independent self-help skills so they will develop as individuals. The parent, coming from a culture which values personal connectedness sees dependency in childhood as an important way of maintaining the ties that bind family.

As a kindergarten teacher once working in a predominantly Pakeha community in New Zealand, I was alerted to this cultural difference when I approached a Chinese mother who was staying at kindergarten with her child every day. I was curious to find out why the mother wanted to stay and felt it was important to let this mother know her child would develop some independence by being left at kindergarten on her own. Despite my good intentions the mother was rather taken

back by my approach and told me that her time with her child was very precious, and she wanted to be with her child as much as she could before the child went to school.

Caring for the young and the elderly in communitarian cultures is often something that is shared by the wider family. Early childhood practitioners should be aware that the parenting of children from a communitarian culture might not be the sole responsibility of the biological parents.

### ***Neutral or emotional (the range of feelings expressed)***

Reason and emotion both play a role in relationships between people. A culture in which members do not overtly communicate their feelings and keep them more controlled and subdued is described as being affectively (emotionally) neutral. There is an emphasis on 'rational' rather than 'emotional' processes.

A culture which is much more expressive emotionally uses a more expressive style of communicating. There is more overt 'laughing, smiling, grimacing, scowling, gesturing' (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1998) as people attempt to find outlets for their emotions. Neutral cultures tend to use humour, understatement and irony rather than emoting overtly. The tolerance of silence, tone, use of words, and the amount of non-verbal communication, such as eye contact, distance, touch and gesture, also depend on cultural orientation.

Recently, a Pakeha friend flew home after visiting her father who had just had a major stroke. She sat next to a Māori woman and in the course of the flight they began to converse. After my friend described the reason for her trip, her companion remarked that she thought Pakeha people really didn't express their emotions very much. Slightly taken aback by this analysis, my friend replied that actually her family had been in tears all weekend. However, it had been her controlled description of the reason for her visit that had prompted her companion's remark.

In early childhood contexts it is important to consider the cultural background of children and their parents in relation to how feelings and emotions are expressed. Knowing that different cultures emote differently can reduce negative judgments about people.

### ***Achievement or ascription (how status is accorded)***

How status is assigned to people differs significantly from culture to culture. In some cultures individuals are accorded higher status on the basis of their achievements (achieved status). This differs greatly from cultures that give individuals higher status due to their age, class, gender, profession or education (ascribed status). For example, in Pakeha society it is not unusual to find young educated women in positions of responsibility and leadership whose age, appearance and gender would not be accorded the same status in a culture that ascribes status.

It is important for early childhood educators to find out how status is determined in the particular ethnic communities using their service. This can help make the most effective and appropriate links with communities. For example, in Pacific Islands communities ministers of the church and their wives have high status and influence. Consequently, developing relationship with local ministers can be beneficial. There may some circumstances where it is more appropriate for initial meetings with parents to be conducted by the head teacher, supervisor, or a staff member who is older and more experienced.

### ***Specific or diffuse (the range of personal involvement)***

Cultures that perceive relationships as being specific tend to keep relationships in separate areas. This means that the status associated with a relationship will be likely to remain within the context of that relationship. For example, the status of a teacher tends to be confined to the specific context of the school and does not necessarily flow on into other relationships outside of this context.

Diffuse cultures tend to have relationships that are less segregated. This means the status accompanying a person's occupation, for example, is carried with them into other areas of their life rather than being confined to the work context.

It is useful for early childhood practitioners to be aware of the specific/diffuse orientation of different cultures they are working with. The status of teachers is often very high in some cultures, and the respect (mana) that accompanies this, extends beyond the classroom door into the wider community. It is important, I believe, for practitioners to acknowledge this deference to their position and to be aware that there may be an expectation of formality in this relationship.

Another aspect of specific or diffuse orientations involves personal space and public space. In a 'specific' culture the public space tends to be large and segregated into many sections, which means that a member of this culture may have a relationship with someone in a particular context but not in another. For example, a person may have a relationship with someone at work but this relationship may not carry over into a social context. People from specific cultures are often perceived as very friendly, relaxed and accessible because admitting someone into one area of their public lives is not necessarily a big commitment.

In contrast, in a diffuse culture a person's life space is harder to enter and permission is needed to 'come in'. The public space is relatively small and the private space large and diffuse, which means that once admitted as a friend, admission is granted into many aspects of the person's private life. International students often comment that although Pakeha New Zealanders are extremely friendly people you may never be invited into their houses.

I recently worked with a group of parents from Latin America who wanted to start a Spanish-speaking playgroup. Developing and building a personal relationship with the group was important in terms of establishing respect for and trust in my expertise, but most importantly for developing a level of friendship that extended beyond the usual professional relationship with playgroups.

### ***Universalism or particularism (rules or relationships)***

Cultures that share an obligation to adhere to standards universally agreed upon (the laws and rules of a culture) are described as universalist cultures. There is a belief that, by applying set rules to everybody, all people are treated as equals.

Cultures that have a primary focus on people and focus on the exceptional circumstances of a situation can be described as particularist cultures. Particularist cultures focus on 'the exceptional

nature of a present circumstance' (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner,1998: 31). Rules can, at times, be disregarded as the importance of a relationship takes precedence.

Although these two positions seem polarised, the reality of the situation is that often both kinds of judgements are used. For example, in early childhood contexts the particular circumstances of a family or child may involve a bending of the rules. As a kindergarten teacher I was occasionally requested by a parent, who had particular difficulties in arranging for a child to be collected on time, to care for the child a little longer. To me, these particular circumstances often warranted a change in the rules.

### **Relationships with time**

How cultures orient themselves to the past, present and future differs. Cultures that place a high value on tradition, relationships with ancestors and strong family ties generally have an orientation to the past, e.g. Māori and Japanese cultures. Successes, achievements, knowledge and wisdom gained from the past have a place in guiding behaviour in the present and future.

However, some cultures have an orientation to the present. As the past is seen as unimportant and the future vague and unpredictable, only the here and now is deemed important.

Cultures that have a future orientation tend to view change as highly important and the future as being potentially bolder, brighter and better than the past or present.

### ***Time management***

Whether time is managed sequentially or synchronically can also depend on cultural orientation. Time can be viewed as a social construct that enables members of a culture to coordinate their activities.

Time can be seen as **sequential**, i.e. a line of events that happen in sequence and pass at regular intervals. Those who think sequentially view everything as having a time and a place, and changes to this can create levels of uncertainty. For sequential people, schedules and time slots are of prime importance. Punctuality is important, and lateness can cause great anxiety. "Time is viewed as a commodity to be used up and lateness deprives the other of precious minutes in a world where 'time is money'" (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner,1 998: 128).

Conversely, **synchronic** methods of time management usually involve activities happening in parallel. Ways of reaching particular goals may involve a more circuitous route. Synchronic cultures are less concerned with people being servants of time; rather time is seen as the servant of people. Less concerned with punctuality and schedules, synchronic people consider their relationships with others as having higher priority and consequently needing more time.

For early childhood practitioners an understanding about orientation to time is important particularly when entering into cultural contexts that are different from their own. For example, when attending hui on a marae, it is useful to know that a great deal of time will be spent on protocol and establishing links with the past. The actual getting down to business may also take some time due to the need to establish relationships within the group e.g. through use of mihi - where everyone has a formal opportunity to introduce themselves to the group.

Awareness about different orientations to time can help foster understanding about time management behaviours that might appear rude or discourteous. It has been my experience that those involved in the parenting and education of young children often manage time sequentially and synchronically. For example, I recently met with the playgroup coordinator of a rural playgroup. I needed to sit with her to check administrative details and discuss the progress of the group. She was able to meet with me and discuss the business, breast feed her baby and support her other child's creative endeavour all at the same time!

## **Relationships with nature**

How cultures relate to nature and the different forces created by natural events also determine certain beliefs and behaviours. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) describe two main orientations to nature: societies that believe nature can be controlled by humans through the imposition of human 'will' or societies which believe that humans are part of nature and must abide by the directions and forces of nature .

In highly industrialised societies, like the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom, the mastery-over-nature view is quite dominant. Physical control of the environment by machines and technology are ways of controlling nature, but so too are advances in medicine which control illness and disease. This view sees nature as something that can be controlled and subjugated by the individual and extols the belief that humans control their own destinies.

A cultural orientation that sees society as a product of nature emphasises its relationship to the environment and the need to respond to external circumstances. It is not seen as weakness to accept the arbitrary nature of events that can occur beyond the control of human beings.

According to Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998: 153) western business managers are often surprised at their 'success' in imposing their procedures and methods on other cultures. This occurs because some of these cultures "are accustomed to being heavily influenced from external sources and taking their cue from the environment." But they caution that it is a mistake to assume that "**accepting** guidance from outside is the same as internalising it or using it successfully." They add that these cultures do not like to debate or confront, and directives that seem to be accepted may not actually be considered appropriate. Similar situations arise in an early childhood context. Many early childhood educators have expressed frustration with parents from different cultural groups who appear to have acknowledged and understood information or directives given to them by staff but later their actions reveal that this information has not been taken on board.

## **Conclusion**

Political policies such as integration and assimilation, that have been part of New Zealand's history, have resulted in the domination of white, European culture over indigenous Māori culture and other minority cultures living in New Zealand. As a consequence, mainstream early childhood pedagogy in New Zealand is essentially a product of the majority culture's underlying value base and beliefs about the education of young children (Canella, 1997). It is vital that practitioners do not assume that the values and philosophies embedded in mainstream early childhood services are shared by all the families who attend.

Although there is a degree of diversity in early childhood pedagogies being implemented in New Zealand such as Te Kohanga Reo and Aoga Amata, practitioners in mainstream early childhood services have a responsibility to ensure that families from different cultures understand the assumptions upon which their early childhood programmes are based. In other words, practitioners need to consciously ‘unpack’ underlying theories and philosophies for families so the cultural messages inherent in the programme are made as explicit as possible. The framework outlined in this paper may help in this process.

Developing good relationships with parents and families so that practitioners can begin to engage in meaningful dialogue with parents is the most successful way for teachers to begin the process. This dialogue enables practitioners to discover the beliefs and experiences parents and children from different cultural backgrounds bring to the early childhood centre. The next article in this series *Creating culturally competent care in early childhood services in New Zealand - Part 2: Developing dialogue* examines ways in which teachers can engage in and develop meaningful dialogue with parents from diverse cultures.

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### **The authors**

Lisa Terreni (Dip Kindergarten Teaching, B.Ed) works as a professional development facilitator for Early Childhood Development, Wellington, New Zealand.

Judi McCallum (Dip Teaching, B.A, M.A Applied Linguistics) lectures in languages, inter-cultural communication and teacher training at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand.