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A Critical Pedagogy of Early Childhood Education: The Aotearoa/New Zealand Context

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ABSTRACT: *Recent international developments in education, including early childhood education, promote more inclusive and complex contexts than those traditionally provided. Some of the foundation principles of early childhood education are increasingly subjected to intense scrutiny in an attempt to analyse the impact of traditional practices on diverse groups and individuals. Critical pedagogy provides a framework for an analysis of the provision of early childhood education in diverse contexts. Te Whaariki, the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, prescribes a curriculum framework based on some of the same principles that underpin critical pedagogy. In this paper, the notion of critical pedagogy is briefly described and the potential of Te Whaariki as a tool to support diversity and equity is examined.*

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY – A BROAD OVERVIEW

Critical pedagogy has its roots in critical theory and the two share many common philosophies and approaches. Both critical theory and critical pedagogy are concerned with investigating institutional and societal practices with a view to resisting the imposition of dominant social norms and structures. Critical pedagogy is, however, distinct from critical theory in that it is primarily an educational response to oppressive power relations and inequalities existing in educational institutions. It calls into question issues related to opportunity, voice and dominant discourses of education and seeks more equitable and liberating educational experiences. In short, "in the language of critical pedagogy, the critical person is one who is empowered to seek justice, to seek emancipation" (Burbules & Berk, 1999, p. 50).

While this may seem to be an honorable and achievable goal, the realities of critical pedagogy are complex and fraught with challenges. The aims of critical pedagogy potentially contest a wide range of educational practices and philosophies. McLaren (1993) suggests that critical pedagogy involves a way of

thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the relationship among classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relations of the wider community, society, and nation-state. Herein lies an enormous task for the critical pedagogue, for this calls into question a wide range of societal and educational contextual issues. These may include: the role of teacher and her educational beliefs and values; the relationships between teachers in the setting; approaches to curriculum both within the setting and in the wider educational and social communities; societal expectations on the role of education and the teacher; the relationships between teachers and management; and the role of the state in the prescription of educational practices. Within any educational context, these issues will be vigorously contested in the process of establishing a critical pedagogy.

Any analysis of critical pedagogy must begin with an examination of the work of Paulo Freire who is generally considered to be "the inaugural philosopher of critical pedagogy" (McLaren, 2000, p. 1). Although Freire's initial focus targeted adult literacy projects in Brazil, his work has subsequently dealt with a wide range of social and educational issues and become popularly adopted and critiqued.

The heart of Freire's pedagogy revolved around an anti-authoritarian, dialogical and interactive approach, which aimed to put power into the hands of students and workers (McLaren, 2000). In addition, the fundamental goal was to place social and political critiques of everyday life at the centre of the curriculum. Freire's praxis - critical reflection and action - required implementation of a range of educational practices and processes with the goal of creating not only a better learning environment, but also a better world.

Freire refuted any idea that education could be only *about* politics, but rather that education *is* politics, though the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive. A social and political analysis of life should be at the centre of curriculum, no matter what the official content. Education should not be about the transference of knowledge but rather the collaborative and collective production of knowledge grounded in the reality of students' lives. The former, Freire (1984) termed 'banking education' and deemed this to be domesticating. He explained this as practices or systems that are imposed by those in dominant positions in society to maintain the status quo and keep other groups or individuals oppressed, often through lack of information. By contrast, Freire saw group endeavour and dialogic relations between teacher and learners as liberating or humanising. He maintained that human life holds meaning through communication and therefore dialogical relations should be at the heart of any educational experiences. And through authentic dialogue between students and teachers and an emphasis on problem-posing, the students would develop a

critical consciousness. Freire (1984) believed that education is pivotal in helping people to understand the conditions and restraints of their own lives and work and that education has a responsibility to help people to critique the influences on their lives and move towards a better world.

These concepts form the basis of Freire's philosophy of education and give rise to a wide range of other educational practices. However, Freire did not support the idea that his educational philosophy could be reduced to a handbook of classroom strategies. Rather, he claimed that each educational context should aim to enhance the broad goal of liberation for learners, and practices should be adapted for each individual situation. If this is so, then the term 'critical pedagogy' itself may be inadequate. Freire acknowledged that pedagogy is grounded in and influenced by ideology, the belief systems and practices of those conceiving of or using it. Through understanding that there are multiple social systems, defining a single pedagogy of liberation becomes somewhat complex. "Consequently, one cannot speak of pedagogy but must speak instead of pedagogies which respond to particular necessities, interests and conditions" (Gaudiano & de Alba, 1994, p. 128). This expansion of the term to include a range of situations, beliefs, contexts and social systems subsequently occurs in many more recent analyses of critical pedagogy.

As can be seen by this very brief overview critical pedagogy traverses an extremely broad territory that is far beyond the scope of this paper to examine. There are broad variations in both the definition and the practice of critical pedagogy(ies) and this has resulted in the continued development of an extremely complex literature that, at times, turns in on itself and contests many of its core principles. For the practitioner, aiming to develop as a critical pedagogue, this can be very challenging and, at times confusing. It is somewhat more efficacious to focus on particular aspects of practice and examine these for resonance with the goals of critical pedagogy than it is to take a broad-brush approach to the whole of one's teaching.

A CRITICAL PEDAGOGY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION?

In analysing the goals of critical pedagogy, the potential for its implementation in early childhood education seems clear, but not without challenges. Even the issue of whether critical pedagogy is appropriate as a goal in early childhood education itself is subject to examination. The founding philosophers (notably Freire) of critical pedagogy may argue that its implementation requires dialogic and equitable relationships between teacher and learner and assumes a knowledge of the world and oppression which is not appropriate or possible in early childhood education contexts. However, although the pedagogy may not

be entirely the same, the goals are similar and the practice of liberatory teaching is not only desirable, but possible in early childhood education settings.

The reality of the *existence* of critical pedagogy in early childhood education is less apparent. Attempts to examine this issue internationally may be helpful but fraught with difficulties as, while there are some universals in approach to early childhood education, there are major national (not to mention local) variations in the actual provision.

Perhaps the most obvious illustration of this is the issue of curriculum provision, where there are some central belief-systems that are interpreted in a wide variety of ways. At the core of these beliefs is a "consensus around an individualized play-based curriculum and that adults should be non-directive and only 'facilitate' learning" (Siraj-Blatchford, 1999, p. 21). Even this definition, which is seen to be fairly representative of approaches to early childhood education in the Western tradition, is subject to critique because the reality of how this translates into practice in a particular early childhood education setting is complex. In recent years, early childhood has seen the development of a broad range of curriculum models and, central to this, is the role of the teacher and the issue of whether those who work with children in early childhood settings should even use the term 'teacher'. Added to this is the debate around whether child-centred pedagogy, as described in the Western tradition, is appropriate for all or whether some children are disadvantaged in this process (Delpit, 1988). Although there may be agreement regarding the importance of play, this has not led to pedagogic uniformity because there is a lack of consensus regarding the degree of influence the adult should have over play. Thus there are constantly shifting opinions and positions on models of play-based curricula.

Notwithstanding this position, it is still important to examine some of the key themes that permeate early childhood education internationally and to critique them in relation to the themes of critical pedagogy and their relevance to the New Zealand context.

Cannella and Grieshaber (2001) describe some underpinning beliefs that justify a critical pedagogy of early childhood education. Those who subscribe to these goals they suggest:

> believe that younger human beings are not separate from the historical, political, and social context in which they live (or the issues of gender, race, socioeconomic level, or power that are part of time and context); they believe that younger human beings and their families (especially if they are not part of the dominant power elite) have not been listened to or even respected as having identities or voice; they believe that engaging in the human struggle to make

> unthought-of connections with each other may increase life possibilities for all of us. (p. 24)

In her somewhat controversial book *Deconstructing Early Childhood Education: Social Justice and Revolution,* Cannella (1997) identifies six key themes that have traditionally been located at the centre of early childhood education philosophy and which, she contends, must be deconstructed in terms of their impact on children and families from a range of cultural and social backgrounds. This deconstruction provokes debate around much of what has been long held dear in early childhood education and is still likely to cause much soul-searching, or indeed, rejection, amongst early childhood educators and theorists. Briefly these themes are:

- The creation of the concept of childhood, which places limitations on younger human beings, constructs privilege and power for those who are older, and lessens the connections that we make with children and each other.
- Child development is a discourse that has been constructed within a particular social, political, cultural, and historical context by one group of people with power over others.
- The belief in early experience as the determiner of later life oversimplifies the lives of younger human beings and privileges adults as more sophisticated and intelligent;
- In the institutionalization of programs for young children, early childhood education has played a role in the construction of a two-tiered system and in the continued segregation of diverse groups of people.
- Within the construction of child-centered pedagogy and play-based instruction, a particular group of adults reproduces the cultural capital of their own group, and exerts power over children.
- The professionalization of teaching has generated disciplinary and regulatory powers over women and children within a continuing patriarchal system. (Cannella, 1997, pp. 158-159).

An investigation of these themes presents strong challenges for the sector to confront and reflect upon. Many of these ideas are in line with those described earlier in this paper and so the possibilities for a critical pedagogy of early childhood education becomes evident in such a critique. While some of these challenges may seem harsh and controversial, a starting point to identify the potential for critical pedagogy may be a closer examination of the theme of 'the child in context', which is central to contemporary early childhood education

provision. While this is not to suggest that the context-based approach to ECE is inappropriate, it does suggest that more analysis and active responses may be required. The context, when closely examined and deconstructed, may reveal practices and philosophies that directly confront those held by the teacher and those valued by the sector. Additionally, the focus on the child in context may not "engage with how relationships of power circulate within and through the context to make some knowledge, opportunities, and experiences more accessible, possible, and desirable for each child – or the politics of being a child" (Campbell, 1999, p. 21). Therefore, that which is central to the pedagogy of early childhood education, including the traditionally accepted aspects of philosophy and practice described above by Cannella, must be problematised. Freire described this as 'troubling' accepted concepts and systems to reveal their potentially oppressive and domesticating implications. This may then require action on a number of fronts to ensure that opportunities for all children are indeed equitable and the existing practices of early childhood education do not favour the status quo to the detriment of any child or family.

Although this type of critique can shake the foundations of our practice, I contend that a critical pedagogy of early childhood education is not only possible but highly achievable, if the processes used to promote and support it are appropriate for use with children. There may not be scope for full-blown development of critical consciousness or liberation, but, equally, there are relatively limited instances of this being successful in institutionalised *adult* education. For children, "learning to take action against unfair behaviors that occur in their own lives is at the heart of anti-bias education" (Derman-Sparks, 1999, p. 248). Young children have a highly developed ability for learning how to be proactive if the adults who work with them structure the environment, interactions and activities in ways that are relevant and appropriate. Activism begins with children's daily interactions with each other and with their environment. And the role of the adult is pivotal, for it is through pro-active scaffolding of children's learning that their social awareness is developed.

Derman-Sparks (1999) describes how this can be carried out in reality and advocates activities like involving children in collective activism such as writing letters about concrete issues of concern and discussing the impact of these issues on children's lives. But she also suggests that some of the very basic groundwork is done through intervening in children's play in such areas as superhero play that promotes the supremacy of white male heroes. The key is to focus on real-life issues and interactions through which children "learn to interact with the world with initiative, responsibility and strength" (Derman-Sparks, 1999, p. 251).

Traditional notions of 'good teaching' in early childhood education are under siege. The changing social world and the developing understanding of multiple perspectives signal that early childhood teachers must reconstruct their beliefs about children and teaching and challenge some of the "uncontested pedagogical assumptions" (Tayler, 2000, p. 265) that underpin philosophy and practice. What is now required is a responsiveness to the changing context and the establishment of a dialogic curriculum which better caters for the particular community in which the service is located.

In New Zealand these themes are not only relevant but central to what may be achieved in early childhood education. We live in a particularly diverse country and many of our centres are extremely multicultural thus providing challenges to existing mono-cultural paradigms that have traditionally supported education provision in this country. Of even greater importance is the partnership obligation Pakeha and Maori have under the terms of the Treaty of Waitangi. Early childhood education has the potential to reconstruct itself in New Zealand to address these obligations, these challenges and these inequities in the provision of education for young children.

THE ROLE OF THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM DOCUMENT

Te Whaariki, the national early childhood curriculum is described as a "groundbreaking national curriculum document" (Hayden, 2000, p. 8). It is an internationally acclaimed example of a "commonly promoted ECE programme for early years education" (Siraj-Blatchford, 1999, p. 31). Siraj-Blatchford goes on to quote Carr and May (1993) that the intention of this framework which uses the metaphor of the woven mat (*Te Whaariki*) as its title, is that "each early years centre weaves its own curriculum and creates their own pattern from features and contexts unique to them, their children and their community" (p. 34). Clearly there is evidence that this document is at the cutting edge of early childhood education pedagogy. *Te Whaariki* is easily adapted, as suggested above, to the unique contexts in which it is implemented, which may vary from state kindergartens to parent co-operatives such as Playcentre, Te Kohanga Reo, language nests, home-based services and childcare centres. Of equal importance, is its focus on the child in the context of family and community. Acclaim for *Te Whaariki* is not limited to those from an early childhood education perspective. Penetito (2001) broadens the debate by suggesting that "*Te Whaariki* has pushed the boundaries out in what counts as education".

Te Whaariki grew out of initiatives grounded in the early childhood sector in New Zealand and therefore reflects many of the philosophies, values and ideals

held dear in the very diverse environment that constitutes early childhood education in this country. It is founded on the following aspirations for children:

> To grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society. (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9)

Such aspirations would appear to be entirely consistent with the goals of critical pedagogy and the document goes on to say that the curriculum "emphasises the critical role of socially and culturally mediated learning" (p. 9). However, there are challenges for early childhood teachers because the aspirations must be examined in the context of the specific educational experience being offered for children to ascertain the responses to such questions as:

- Whose definition of competent?
- What defines a confident learner or communicator?
- What determines a healthy spirit?
- A sense of belonging to what?
- Whose construction of society?
- What is valued?

In each educational setting these and other questions must be asked to ensure that the experiences for all children are indeed just, equitable and liberating. Thus, *Te Whaariki* itself is not a critically pedagogical document. Is there such a possibility given that critical pedagogy is always determined by context? *Te Whaariki* simply promotes an educational approach with the potential for the implementation of programmes that are inclusive and emanicipatory. The criticality is determined by what choices the teachers make in their construction of the programme. So, in response to the above aspirations, teachers can choose to deconstruct and reframe the educational programmes to ensure they cater for all children and their families, or they can simply provide a programme that is defined and delivered according to dominant educational discourses and societal expectations.

The second key feature of *Te Whaariki* is the set of principles on which the curriculum document is based. These are described as empowerment (whakamana), holistic development (kotahitanga), family and community (whanau tangata) and relationships (nga hononga) (Ministry of Education, 1996). The intention is that children are empowered to learn and grow within early childhood experiences that reflect the same holistic way in which *they* learn and grow. Equally, the wider world of family and community are seen as

an integral part of the early childhood curriculum and the provision of early childhood education should recognise that children learn through responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places and things. Again, the links with the goals of critical pedagogy are apparent. Through a set of principles such as these, there is ample scope for constructing an educational experience that is grounded in the realities of the child's own life, and which values the contributions each child and their family makes. Collectively, these principles frame a potentially critical pedagogy of early childhood education. It must be acknowledged again that this is not to suggest that *Te Whaariki* is a document intended to be viewed as emancipatory (though it does refer to fairness and justice). However, when implemented in ways that are consistent with its principles, the potential is there to achieve the goals of critical pedagogy.

Current Commentary on Te Whaariki

Recent commentary on the use of *Te Whaariki* indicates that there is support for the concept of it providing a framework for achieving the goals of critical pedagogy. Carpenter (2001) comments that *Te Whaariki* is a relatively permissive document for educators to work with but does raise questions about the ownership of knowledge and the range of ideologies that can be accommodated in its implementation. However, in using Freire's theoretical perspective, she notes that *Te Whaariki's* notion of empowerment contributes towards "providing families with independence and resources to control their own lives" (Carpenter, 2001, p. 117).

Ritchie (2001) also comments on *Te Whaariki* with specific reference to two issues - its bicultural nature and its focus on group endeavour. In relation to the former, she says that the "strong bicultural focus of the document provides challenges to Western-centric pedagogy" (p. 141), an issue addressed previously by Cannella. Consequently *Te Whaariki* recognises Maori ways of knowing and making sense of the world and challenges early childhood teachers to incorporate these into their programmes. And with reference to group endeavour, Ritchie (2001) suggests that *Te Whaariki* encourages teachers to "move beyond constructivist approaches in which the child is viewed as the Piagetian individual explorer/scientist acting on the world" (p. 141). This is replaced with a focus on adults supporting children's social skills and collectivism – the encouragement for children to work in groups and to care for each other's values and attitudes.

Carr (2001) has also examined the issue of democracy focusing on assessment for a democratic community. There are immediate parallels with critical pedagogy when democracy is at the heart of educational practice. Though she looks specifically at the issue of assessment, Carr examines the role of learning stories in the formation of democratic communities of learning. Learning stories

are based on the strands of *Te Whaariki* and the dispositions that have been associated with each of these strands. Carr maintains that assessment can and should be based on mutual dialogue and feedback and that this should reflect both the skills and funds of knowledge of the children and their identities as learners. When assessment operates in this way, it has the potential to accommodate and value the perspectives and values of all who contribute to the learning community.

Practitioners' Voices

If *Te Whaariki* has the potential for criticality – for liberation of the learning community - the question remains about how this is to be achieved and what the realities are for teachers. As suggested above it is not the document itself that is emancipatory or oppressive, but the implementation of it.

At a recent professional development support seminar (June 2001) I examined this issue with participants in my session. A group of about 40 people attended, comprising teachers from a range of early childhood contexts and teacher educators and early childhood professional development providers. The majority of participants were either Maori or Pakeha. After briefly investigating the theoretical foundations of critical pedagogy they were asked to identify in what ways they felt *Te Whaariki* supported the goals of critical pedagogy. The group entered into vigorous debate and collectively generated the following possibilities. These comments are a collation of the information fed back from small group discussions:

- *Te Whaariki* itself is a political statement. Its presentation and principles support a particular approach to early childhood education.
- It is inherently valuing of community in its language and expectations.
- It provides an invitation to contemplate, to consider, to engage because it is meaningful and related to our everyday lives and the realities of practice.
- It allows for multiple interpretations as it is non-prescriptive and inclusive of diverse contexts.
- It allows people to bring their own values and beliefs through the openness of its terminology.
- It is trusting – has faith in the implementers to weave the appropriate whaariki for each context.
- It builds on centre, teacher and community involvement – a feeling of permission to engage at the centre.
- It promotes collaborative learning between and among children and adults.

- It supports the integral nature of family and community in the educative process.
- It avoids promoting discrete knowledge and skills but focuses more on inclusion and holistic approaches.
- It has challenged teachers to move on from a deficit base that earlier permeated early childhood education.
- It has opened teachers to be inclusive of their communities.

The participants felt that these opportunities for critical pedagogy were achieved through *Te Whaariki* offering teachers choices in relation to the context, curriculum, routines, variety of settings and kaupapa of each centre. The group members were strongly in favour of the direction promoted in *Te Whaariki* and suggested that there was great potential for liberation through its implementation.

I then asked the group to consider ways in which *Te Whaariki* was potentially domesticating (Freire, 1984). This had previously been described as including practices that maintain the status quo defined by the dominant group and keep people located in positions of oppression. The general consensus was that this was not by design but by interpretation, but nevertheless the following were suggested:

- Interpretation can be owned and unchallenged – practitioners can justify inappropriate practice by misinterpreting the principles, strands, goals or learning outcomes.
- It can lead to a 'this week we're doing well-being' mentality and assumes that everyone has the same well-being.
- Teachers can take responsibility for their interpretation without engaging in consultation with parents.
- Without trained staff or without professional development, how do you encourage/promote a culture of critical inquiry? If this is not established there can be no questioning of the status quo.
- The *Te Whaariki* statements are broad with the expectation that teachers will engage in 'unpacking' words and this may not necessarily happen.
- Effective implementation requires team collaboration and this does not always occur.
- Some practitioners see *Te Whaariki* as a 'vehicle for redemption', leading them to rescue children from uncaring/inappropriate parents or contexts.

- The principles don't necessarily implicate or provoke *action* but can be seen as a nebulous umbrella statement.
- The terminology can be seen as the inaccessible discourse of an elite group which excludes some parents and practitioners.
- Some centres have used it as a deficit model, identifying what children cannot do rather than creating a platform for progress.
- It tempts a structured approach to literacy and numeracy to 'comply' with curriculum statements or external standards.
- Teachers can extract the goals without putting them into the context of the setting.

These educators highlight an important issue in relation to the implementation of *Te Whaariki*. The key factor to be considered is the ongoing professional development of early childhood educators so that they are familiar with the complexity and potential of *Te Whaariki* for making a difference in society. In the current environment there is a serious lack of rigour in the implementation of *Te Whaariki* in liberating ways.

Returning to the recent literature, Carpenter (2001) addresses a separate but important concern. While acknowledging that *Te Whaariki* is itself a 'permissive' document, she addresses related documents and directions and suggests that "subsequent statements, assessment tasks, and guidelines may impose increased structure. Each new publication or idea has the potential to move curriculum further towards rigidity and conformity" (p. 130). She makes particular reference to the exemplars currently being produced and wonders if these will become "straightjackets' for professionals" (p. 120).

CONCLUSION

Carpenter's (2001) concerns must be noted, but they need not come to fruition and she suggests that there is the potential for "allowing teachers and students a greater sense of agency as they produce or determine directions in tandem with their communities" (p. 130). This last word is consistent with the positive potential suggested by the early childhood educators. *Te Whaariki* can make a difference for children from diverse backgrounds in the multiple contexts that constitute early childhood education. To fully appreciate the possibilities *Te Whaariki* offers early childhood educators may find that an understanding of critical pedagogy may help focus on and develop a commitment to genuine equity and diversity.

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