

Culturally Reflective Practice: An Alternative Framework to Culturally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Education in New Zealand

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the adoption and implications of culturally appropriate and reflective practices in New Zealand early childhood education (ECE). Using the national ECE framework, Te Whāriki, as a case study, this analysis highlights the limitations of culturally appropriate practices in addressing systemic decontextualization issues. It proposes culturally reflective practices as a more comprehensive alternative. By integrating universal minimum standards of human and children's rights with local cultural contexts, culturally reflective practices challenge dominant discourses and promote a democratic ECE system. This paper further explores the necessity of incorporating culturally sensitive and sustaining pedagogies in teacher education to foster a reflective practice that transcends mere cultural appropriateness.

Keywords: culturally appropriate practice, culturally reflective practice, early childhood education (ECE), Te Whāriki (New Zealand's national ECE curriculum), decontextualization, democratic ECE system, neoliberalism, empowerment

1. Introduction

This paper aims to explore the challenges associated with the localization of Early Childhood Education (ECE) practices through culturally appropriate methods and to propose culturally reflective practice as an alternative theoretical framework. Xu et al. (2023, p. 14) introduce the concept of culturally reflective practice, which combines universal minimum standards of human and children's rights with local cultural contexts. This approach also involves questioning social norms and dominant discourses within a democratic ECE system (Xu et al., 2023, p. 14). In recent years, culturally responsive teaching has gained traction, encompassing various approaches like culturally appropriate practice, culturally sensitive teaching, and culturally sustaining teaching, all of which value and uphold students' cultural experiences (Debnam et al., 2023). Specifically, culturally appropriate practice integrates diverse cultural knowledge, experiences, and insights into both assessment and instruction (Gay, 2018). The researcher uses Te Whāriki in New Zealand as a case study of culturally appropriate practices within the national ECE framework, symbolizing a 'woven mat for all to stand on', which reflects the collaborative involvement of children, parents, whānau, and communities (MoE, 2017, p. 10).

Despite their widespread recognition, culturally appropriate practices present significant challenges in New Zealand, prompting the consideration of culturally reflective practice as an alternative framework. These practices are often viewed as best practices for teachers (Gunn et al., 2021), rooted in a neoliberal perspective that equates high-quality education with high returns on investment, consistent with human capital theory (Moss, 2018). To achieve this neoliberal goal, developmental psychology is often emphasized as a quality feature in New Zealand's ECE, continuing to influence perceptions within the field (Xu et al., 2023; Dahlberg et al., 2013). Moreover, the implementation of culturally appropriate practices heavily depends on teachers' interpretations,

which may fail to address systemic barriers to inclusion and can reinforce disadvantageous notions for certain groups (Bautista et al., 2019; Schenker et al., 2019). While culturally appropriate practice does acknowledge cultural context within localized curricula (Gay, 2018), its limitations necessitate the adoption of culturally reflective practices in teacher training (Xu et al., 2023). Additionally, to prevent homogenization in teacher education and avoid a binary view between culturally reflective and culturally responsive practices, it is essential to incorporate a variety of culturally responsive approaches, including culturally sustaining and culturally sensitive practices, into ECE teacher professional development (Debnam et al., 2023; Gao et al., 2022).

In brief, this paper argues that while culturally appropriate practices in ECE in New Zealand present certain challenges, educators should embrace culturally reflective practices alongside other vital aspects of culturally responsive teaching. The paper's structure is outlined as follows: The first section discusses Te Whāriki as an example of culturally appropriate practice in the localization of New Zealand's ECE framework, highlighting its problems. The second section introduces culturally reflective practice as a viable alternative framework, followed by a discussion divided into two parts. Lastly, the paper emphasizes the importance of a diverse range of culturally responsive approaches in ECE teacher education to avoid homogenization.

2. Localizing Early Childhood Education (ECE) in New Zealand: Culturally Appropriate Approaches

Implementing culturally appropriate practices in ECE without thorough reflection poses challenges (Bautista et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2023). While sociocultural theories used in national ECE practices may better align with local culture compared to developmentalism, they often overlook the problem of decontextualization (Xu et al., 2023). This section will first discuss sociocultural theory as a major aspect of ECE discourse. Then, Te Whāriki will be examined as an example of an ECE curriculum in New Zealand, influenced not just by global trends like developmentalism but also shaped by sociocultural theories (Soler & Miller, 2003; Tesar, 2015; Ministry of Education, 2017). Despite Ritchie et al.'s (2013, p. 101) emphasis on inclusive and equitable practices within Te Whāriki, the interpretation and implementation of these practices ultimately depend on educators (Blaiklock, 2010). Xu et al. (2023) also note that while culturally appropriate ECE practices can enhance localization efforts, they can also present challenges without critical reflection.

Understanding cultural contexts is crucial for effective ECE within local settings before discussing culturally appropriate practices. Cultural context plays a key role in combating decontextualization to some extent (Campbell-Barr & Bogatić, 2017). Neoliberalism, a dominant global policy discourse that involves economic efficiency, has significantly influenced global ECE curricula (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). This influence often prioritizes developmental psychology's biological aspects as indicators of educational quality (Dahlberg et al., 2013). However, this approach risks overlooking cultural diversity in children's development, leading to decontextualized educational experiences (Delaune, 2019). Understanding quality in ECE thus requires acknowledging the complex and dynamic nature of cultural contexts (Lather, 2015).

Regarding the localization of ECE frameworks within cultural contexts, Te Whāriki exemplifies a culturally appropriate practice in New Zealand, promoting a learner-centered approach (MoE, 2017). While influenced by developmentalism and sociocultural theories, Te Whāriki focuses on children's development through active engagement in daily activities (Rogoff et al., 2018). This approach aligns closely with developmental learning theories, highlighting that children learn through meaningful interactions within their cultural context (Hedges, 2000). Despite these influences, national culturally appropriate practices have faced challenges in local implementation (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Gupta, 2018; Xu et al., 2023). Next, strategies for introducing culturally appropriate practices will be discussed.

To effectively integrate cultural perspectives in ECE and challenge dominant discourses, culturally appropriate practices involve incorporating diverse cultural knowledge, experiences, contributions, and insights into assessment and teaching (Gay, 2018). This includes creating age-appropriate materials and consulting with educators and students to identify relevant themes and topics (Sachs et al., 2018). Most national ECE curricula have adopted culturally appropriate policies or practices, as evidenced in New Zealand's framework (Xu et al., 2023). Te Whāriki, designed to resist neoliberalism and neo-colonialism, embodies a bicultural approach that actively challenges these ideologies by recognizing Māori as tangata whenua (Rinaldi, 2021; Soler & Miller, 2003). This culturally appropriate practice supports flexible and responsive curricula that resonate meaningfully with local families and communities (Nuttall, 2003). However, it's important to acknowledge the challenges in implementing culturally appropriate practices within local socio-cultural contexts. Despite their potential to better reflect local cultures compared to developmental approaches, these practices may not fully address the issue of decontextualization (Xu et al., 2023). Educational researchers should explore sustained implementation and refinement of culturally appropriate teaching methods, ensuring these methods reflect and respect diverse cultural identities and languages, address biases, and confront inequitable educational policies reflectively (Davis et al., 2020).

2.1 An Inclusive Curriculum

In ECE, fostering a democratic culture involves embracing inclusive practices that acknowledge the complexities of culture (Sousa & Moss, 2023). Te Whāriki exemplifies inclusivity by integrating Māori values throughout its curriculum, ensuring all children, regardless of gender, ethnicity, abilities, learning needs, family backgrounds, socio-economic status, or religion, are catered to (MoE, 2017, p. 13; Griffiths, 2014). According to Xu et al. (2023), achieving inclusion requires advocating for both equality and diversity. However, while Te Whāriki aims to empower marginalized groups, particularly the Māori, in response to neocolonialism in New Zealand (Schenker et al., 2019), systemic barriers such as discrimination and socioeconomic disparities can still limit access to educational opportunities (Bloch, 2019; Schenker et al., 2019). Therefore, it is crucial to consider broader societal frameworks, including regulatory and normative aspects, to effectively promote social justice initiatives. Te Whāriki recognises and values diversity among children, acknowledging differences in abilities and family backgrounds, but may encounter practical challenges in implementation for certain cultural groups.

2.2 The Principle of Empowerment

Another challenge in culturally appropriate practices is the principle of empowerment. Te Whāriki advocates for empowerment within a democratic educational approach, asserting children's agency and cultural context (MoE, 2017). While empowering children to navigate their circumstances independently fosters their role as agents of change (Brown et al., 2019), focusing solely on individual agency may limit its ability to challenge broader power structures. Additionally, viewing empowerment as a fixed goal rather than an ongoing process further restricts its transformative potential. Despite Te Whāriki's emphasis on empowerment through professionalization and holistic education (Chan, 2019; MoE, 2017), its individualistic approach may not effectively address systemic issues. Further exploration is needed to understand how empowerment is conceptualized and practiced within educational settings. This requires critical reflection on how empowerment can effectively challenge existing power dynamics, fostering an inclusive, equitable, and participatory educational environment for all children. Implementing empowerment frameworks must also consider cultural nuances and avoid imposing Western-centric ideals (Mohanty, 2003). Overall, a more nuanced and culturally reflective approach to empowerment in ECE is essential.

3. Culturally Reflective Practice: An Alternative and Reasonable Framework

Effective implementation of culturally appropriate practices in early childhood education relies heavily on how leaders and staff interpret and apply them (Bautista et al., 2019; Blaiklock, 2010). Continuous professional development in culturally reflective practices is essential to this process. Xu et al. (2023) advocate for a framework that integrates universal children's rights with local cultures, challenging societal norms within a democratic ECE system (Moss, 2015, as cited in Xu et al., 2023). This approach empowers local stakeholders by granting them autonomy in decision-making and supporting them with resources to effect positive changes for children, families, and communities (Xu et al., 2023). Thus, stakeholders play a pivotal role in shaping children's learning experiences across different contexts. The following discussion will explore culturally reflective practice in detail.

3.1 Universal 'Minimum Standards' of Human and Children's Rights

A culturally reflective approach incorporates universal minimum standards of human and children's rights (Xu et al., 2023). However, culturally appropriate practices can sometimes reinforce outdated traditional notions, potentially undermining these rights in modern society. This suggests that such ideologies may perpetuate inequality and hinder progress towards a more equitable educational environment at various local levels. "Local" here refers to different levels of locality or regionality, ranging from global to national contexts, as well as national curriculums versus specific local settings or unique cultures of individual ECE centres (Campbell-Barr & Bogatić, 2017). Therefore, universal minimum standards are crucial across different layers of contextualization in ECE. These standards promote learning while upholding human rights in diverse national or individual learning environments through multiple layers of contextualization (Schweisfurth, 2014). Similarly, Bines and Lei (2011) discuss the importance of promoting educational methods based on children and human rights principles. It is essential to consider the interconnected nature of these minimum standards within the local ECE context, ensuring mutual respect between teachers and children in various cultural contexts to achieve comprehensive minimum standards. For example, in assessment practices, it is acknowledged that these processes can impact performance differently across cultures, rather than enforcing a standardized approach (Schweisfurth, 2013). These principles show that universal minimum standards allow flexibility for contextual interpretation and implementation. Moreover, these standards act as safeguards against traditional beliefs and practices that may undermine human and children's rights in culturally appropriate practice. In summary, culturally reflective practice adopts universal minimum standards of human rights, which are essential in culturally reflective practice (Xu et al., 2023).

Introducing the concept of universal minimum standards is crucial for Te Whāriki in New Zealand to achieve its full potential as a more inclusive local ECE curriculum. The first example is integrating local culture from a

macro perspective. Despite its aim to embody a bicultural partnership between Māori and Pākehā, the curriculum has inadequately incorporated Māori cultural constructs. To address this, a shift towards a culturally reflective approach is necessary, requiring Te Whāriki to meaningfully integrate Māori worldviews and knowledge across various local cultural contexts (MoE, 2017). This approach involves critically challenging the dominant Western discourses that have historically shaped ECE in New Zealand, demonstrating multi-layer localization to respect cultural diversity. Reflecting universal standards, and cultural differences can help educators avoid cognitive shortcuts, such as viewing a child merely as part of a demographic group, which oppresses children's rights (Davis et al., 2020). Beyond the Māori and Pākehā partnership, universal minimum standards can improve learning experiences for children on a micro level. In flexible classroom practices, teachers often prioritize well-being over learning, which can result in insufficient learning experiences for children (Blaiklock, 2010). Embracing universal minimum standards within a culturally reflective framework ensures a balanced curriculum implementation across all strands (Schweisfurth, 2013). Thus, with a culturally reflective stance, Te Whāriki can move beyond superficial inclusion, strengthening Māori children's identities and cultures through universal minimum standards in ECE settings (MoE, 2017). With these agreed-upon universal minimum standards and recognition of rights, stakeholders can facilitate democratic transformations in implementation, which will be further explored below.

3.2 Challenge Social Norms and Dominant Discourses Through a Democratic ECE System

Empowering key stakeholders to challenge social norms and dominant discourses through a democratic early childhood education (ECE) system is a significant aspect of culturally reflective practice (Xu et al., 2023). This can be further supported by implementing universal minimum standards (Schweisfurth, 2013). Various scholars have explored this critical issue. Moss (2007) argues that prescriptive curricula driven by normative targets limit democratic space within ECE. He suggests that the increasing influence of a neo-liberal accountability system, characterized by governance and external control, hinders the democratic engagement of children, parents, and professionals in ECE (Moss, 2010, 2013). This restricts opportunities for children to be seen as capable citizens and limits professionals' autonomy (Soler & Miller, 2003). Additionally, Miller and Hevey (2012) note that parental involvement often remains superficial, confined to a consumer role rather than genuine democratic participation. To address these issues, Farrell et al. (2022) advocate for engaging stakeholders as active citizens, which requires political renewal and shifting power relations. Promoting democratic experimentalism (Hevey & Miller, 2012), collaborative dialogue (Petrie et al., 2009), and participatory approaches to policy and practice (Luff & Webster, 2014) can enable children, parents, and professionals to challenge simplistic curricula (Lenz-Taguchi, 2010) and develop counter-discourses. Furthermore, reclaiming democratic professionalism through mutual relationships and resisting external control necessitates developing resilience to the pressures of a neo-liberal accountability culture (Brogaard Clausen, 2015, p. 367). Thus, adopting participatory approaches to empower stakeholders in ECE policies is a democratic right and counters a linear policy implementation model (Barnes et al., 2007; Lloyd, 2014). In summary, empowering stakeholders in ECE to challenge dominant norms and discourses through democratic engagement is essential for fostering collaborative participation.

Effective stakeholder engagement, based on principles of inclusion, respect, accessibility, and collaboration, is crucial, as highlighted by Hadley et al. (2024). For example, Denmark's social pedagogical tradition offers an alternative discourse of democracy, emancipation, and local decision-making (Brogaard Clausen, 2015). Similarly, New Zealand's Te Whāriki involves children, families, and communities in developing a localised curriculum within a specific cultural context (MoE, 2017). The International Association for Public Participation (2015) provides guidelines for stakeholder participation and collaboration in Australia and New Zealand, shifting policy development decisions to include stakeholders. Te Whāriki exemplifies this spirit of collaboration and negotiation by encouraging stakeholders to integrate themselves. Extensive consultations with committees, communities, and established ECE providers revealed some opposition to pressures for individualistic achievements from the outset. Although current research focuses on stakeholder engagement in ECE, continued critical reflection on the politics of curriculum in Te Whāriki is necessary.

Continual critical reflection on empowering stakeholders in culturally reflective practices within the Te Whāriki curriculum is vital. While Te Whāriki was developed through a collaborative process involving widespread stakeholders (MoE, 2017), the level of ongoing stakeholder participation in curriculum implementation varies. For instance, Smith (2020) found that teachers were hesitant to show the intentional aspects of their roles, often defaulting to child-led approaches, suggesting limitations in teachers' professional agency to challenge dominant practices. Although Te Whāriki originated from a bicultural spirit, it still promotes a liberal romantic ideal of childhood that masks differences, as children need to be homogenized to fit the curriculum (Farquhar, 2015). Consequently, dominant cultural norms may still influence curriculum enactment. Effective empowerment requires deep engagement with stakeholder voices to challenge social norms and dominant discourses (Luff & Webster, 2014). Moreover, empowerment is mainly discussed as a principle for individual children rather than addressing higher power relations (MoE, 2017). Thus, it is essential to navigate shifting power relations

continuously and center children's rights and whānau in political decisions (Farquhar, 2015). Through strong advocacy and active participation in citizenship at local, national, and international levels, early childhood communities can promote democracy as a fundamental value (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Moss, 2007). Culturally reflective practice involves critically evaluating global and local dominant discourses in ECE, empowering local stakeholders to challenge dominant discourses. However, this democratic and transformative approach is often missing in culturally appropriate practices (Xu et al., 2023).

Table 1. Culturally Appropriate Practices vs. Culturally Reflective Practices

Dimension	Culturally Appropriate Practices	Culturally Reflective Practices
Theoretical Basis	Constructivism, Multiculturalism	Postmodernism
Objective	Adapt to local cultural contexts	Integrate universal values with local cultures
Limitations	May reinforce disadvantaged situations for certain groups	Requires higher professional development for teachers
Representative Curriculum	Te Whāriki curriculum in New Zealand	No specific practical examples yet

Overall, the culturally reflective framework integrates universal minimum human and children's rights and promotes democratic participation, distinguishing it from merely culturally appropriate methods (Xu et al., 2023). This approach prevents reinforcing oppressive traditional beliefs by advocating for a critical examination of local norms and practices within the ECE context, thus empowering educators, families, and communities to make informed decisions (Schweisfurth, 2014; Moss, 2015). For example, culturally reflective practices are essential for Te Whāriki to ensure it authentically incorporates Māori perspectives and overcomes historical Western biases, fostering a genuinely inclusive and democratically engaged ECE environment (Xu et al., 2023). Continuous professional development and training in culturally reflective practices are crucial for teachers' interpretation of curriculum implementation (Bautista et al., 2019; Blaiklock, 2010). However, it is important to note that culturally reflective practices are just one aspect of teacher training. Teachers also need to enhance their professional development in other areas, such as culturally sensitive and sustaining teaching within culturally responsive practice (Gao et al., 2022).

4. Future Perspectives in Advancing Implementation: Preventing Homogenization and Binary Thinking

As discussed earlier, localizing ECE practices introduces inherent challenges to culturally appropriate practices, necessitating educators to embrace culturally reflective approaches (Xu et al., 2023). This paper will now delve into the integration of culturally sensitive teaching and culturally sustaining teaching within teacher education. This exploration is warranted for two primary reasons: firstly, comprehensive teacher education should encompass more than just culturally reflective practices, moving beyond homogenizing perspectives; secondly, it is crucial to avoid dichotomizing culturally reflective practice and culturally responsive practice. Although culturally appropriate practice is a component of culturally responsive practice, its problematic aspects do not invalidate other elements of culturally responsive practice, as previously outlined (Gao et al., 2022; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012).

Incorporating culturally sensitive and sustaining teaching into teacher education is essential for fostering reflective practice. Culturally sensitive teaching requires educators to develop skills in experimenting with cultural integration, engaging in reflexivity to sustain such practices, and collectively overcoming perceived barriers (Gao et al., 2022). Culturally sustaining pedagogy aims to perpetuate linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism in contrast to monocultural and monolingual approaches (Paris, 2012, p. 93). However, implementing these approaches presents challenges. Nash et al. (2019) describe culturally sustaining practice as multidimensional and dynamic, while Puzio et al. (2017) caution against misconceptions that equate cultural sensitivity with superficial activities like incorporating diverse stories or celebrating holidays. Even when teachers embrace culturally sustaining principles, they often struggle to fully implement them due to insufficient support and training (Puzio et al., 2017; Rychly & Graves, 2012).

To address these challenges, Gay (2018) asserts the integration of culturally sensitive teaching and sustaining pedagogies into teacher education. Effective teacher preparation should empower educators to translate knowledge into reflective practices through comprehensive learning experiences that enhance their ability to incorporate culture meaningfully (Gunn et al., 2021; Puzio et al., 2017). This transformative process requires more than exposure to strategies like diverse read-alouds; it demands deep social and political engagement (Gunn et al., 2021). Furthermore, Gao et al. (2022) advocate for a holistic learning approach in teacher education

to cultivate educators' agency in culturally sensitive practices, thereby enhancing their reflective capacities in cultural integration. In brief, teacher professional education should not only focus on culturally reflective practices but also foster educators' engagement with other forms of culturally responsive practices, such as culturally sensitive teaching and sustaining pedagogies (Debnam et al., 2023; Gay, 2018). This comprehensive approach is essential for preparing educators to navigate the complexities of culturally diverse classrooms and promote inclusive learning environments effectively.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has critically discussed the challenges associated with culturally appropriate practices in localizing ECE, advocating for the adoption of culturally reflective practices as a more viable framework, using Te Whāriki in New Zealand as an illustrative case study. While culturally appropriate practices acknowledge cultural contexts within localized ECE curricula (Gay, 2018), they often fall short in addressing issues of decontextualization (Xu et al., 2023). Educators are encouraged to embrace culturally reflective practices and consider broader aspects of teacher education in ECE (Gao et al., 2022; Gray, 2018; Xu et al., 2023). The effective implementation of culturally appropriate practices hinges on teachers' interpretations and may struggle to fully address systemic barriers to inclusion, thereby perpetuating disadvantageous perspectives for certain groups (Bautista et al., 2019; Blaiklock, 2010; Schenker et al., 2019). In contrast, culturally reflective practice offers an alternative framework that integrates universal minimum standards of human and children's rights with local cultural contexts, challenging prevailing social norms and discourses within a democratic ECE framework (Xu et al., 2023, p. 14).

Furthermore, this paper underscores the importance of incorporating culturally sensitive teaching and culturally sustaining pedagogy into teacher professional education to foster reflective practices (Debnam et al., 2023; Gao et al., 2022). It advocates moving beyond a singular focus on culturally reflective practice in teacher education and avoiding dichotomies between culturally reflective and culturally responsive practices. While the discussion has centered on Te Whāriki in New Zealand, it acknowledges that culturally appropriate practices in ECE may vary globally (Campbell-Barr & Bogatić, 2017). Future research should explore the implementation and effectiveness of culturally reflective practice across diverse cultural contexts. As ECE practitioners, it is essential to engage in ongoing critical reflection on culturally appropriate practices within specific settings, while also remaining open to exploring alternative theoretical frameworks and practical applications.

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