
Early childhood social sciences: Social justice education or social engineering?**Debora Lee**

How is the area of social sciences perceived in early childhood education? What relevance does it have in the lives of infants, toddlers and young children? As an area of learning it is arguably the most difficult to define in an early childhood context. This may be because of the holistic nature of Te Whāriki, (Ministry of Education, 1996a) the early childhood curriculum document, although references to social sciences ideals in learning outcomes outnumber those in other, more widely recognised curriculum areas. It is the most crucial area of the early childhood curriculum. This is not because we are educating adult citizens of the future, as suggested by Barr (1994) when he refers to the primary aim of social studies, but because we are educating citizens of today (Nutbrown, 2002). This article will explore some of the challenges that face teachers in addressing their responsibilities to early childhood social sciences. These include identifying, defining and justifying the body of knowledge that makes up this essential learning area for very young children.

Social science is acknowledged as “the study of society and of the relationship of individual members within society” (Ministry of Education, 1997, p.58). This is a broad definition and encompasses an enormous range of possibilities in an early childhood environment. For infants, toddlers and young children the beginning understandings about being a member of a group or family/whanau; the different roles and responsibilities people have; human rights and fairness; diversity in language, culture, ability, family type and values are part of the learning that comes within a social sciences perspective.

Social science understandings are woven through each of the strands and principles of Te Whāriki. In the primary school sector this area of learning is known as social studies, an integrated field of knowledge, drawn from the social sciences with a focus on critical thinking and citizenship (Barr, 1998). The aim of social studies from the Social Studies in the New Zealand Curriculum Statement (SSiNZC, Ministry of Education, 1997), sits comfortably (although perhaps not as holistically) beside the aspiration for children from the early childhood curriculum document Te Whāriki.

For example:

- Social studies education aims to enable students to participate in a changing society as informed, confident and responsible citizens (Ministry of Education, 1997, p.8).
- 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, 1996a, p.9).

What is the role of education in the development of a nation's citizens? Strong challenges have been made about the role of the teacher when it comes to values in education and promoting ethnocentrism through the dissemination of historical information through the lens of the dominant culture (Harrison, 1998). Smythe's (1998) suggested aim for social studies in Aotearoa/New Zealand specifically outlines understandings that could relate to both social studies and early childhood social sciences. What subject content knowledge is required for teachers to facilitate these understandings?

To develop in children a sympathetic and valid understanding of their own and other people's way of life, both in New Zealand and elsewhere, in the present and in the past – the main purpose being to help children to be at ease with, and to appreciate, individual and cultural difference (p.127).

It has been acknowledged that teachers in early childhood education in Aotearoa/New Zealand lack the critical curriculum content knowledge to effectively promote learning beyond a "basic" level (Cullen, 1999). Social sciences may be viewed similarly to social studies, as a complex area addressing the integrated nature of a range of disciplines and promoting the development of effective citizens (Barr, 1998). The essential learning areas links in Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996a) would suggest that teachers should have a comprehensive range of understandings to support children's developing confidence in groups, their awareness of the social and physical

worlds, their knowledge of people's roles and responsibilities, and comprehensive knowledge about families and culture (Ministry of Education, 1996a). Are early childhood student teachers in Aotearoa/New Zealand being adequately prepared to meet the demands of this diverse and complex area of the curriculum?

Mana Atua/Well-being:

Te Whāriki provides links to the essential learning areas in the New Zealand Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, 1996a) in Section D, thereby attempting a seamless relationship with Social Studies in the New Zealand Curriculum Statement and the primary school sector. Under the Te Whāriki strand Mana Atua/Well-being and social sciences it states; "working together helps children develop confidence in their ability to develop relationships with others" (Ministry of Education, 1996a, p.94). How might "working together" or "working with others" be defined? It is likely that different teachers and families interpret this phrase in a variety of ways. How do infants and toddlers learn about working together? For the most part this learning would occur from the supported experiences of playing alongside other children. This can be problematic as in some situations there is little choice available to them in relation to where they play and with whom they play (Boyce, 2001).

Ensuring meaningful opportunities for infants, toddlers and young children to develop relationships with each other, and with teachers, necessitates careful and reflective engagement as "All learning occurs first within the caring relationship offered to an infant" (Mahon & Rockel, 2001, p.30). How do teachers facilitate the developing awareness of truly belonging to a group? Moss's proposition is for a "children's space", "a cultural space, where values, rights and cultures are created; and a discursive space for differing perspectives and forms of expression, where there is room for dialogue, confrontation...deliberation and critical thinking, where children and others can speak and be heard" (Moss, 2003, p.8). This could be seen as a progressive and achievable goal for early childhood education in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Teachers need a strong commitment to equity to be able to take steps towards an inclusive teaching and learning environment. MacArthur, Purdue and Ballard (2003) suggest that this social learning is not readily available for many infants, toddlers and young children with disabilities as some teachers leave the responsibility for the “inclusion” of children with disabilities to Education Support Workers (ESW), often para professionals with no formal qualification. This can mean the exclusion of children with disabilities from social participation, as fewer chances might be available for friendships to develop. Unqualified support staff demonstrate fewer skills than teachers in facilitating social interactions between children (MacArthur, Purdue and Ballard, 2003). Teacher interventions to promote children’s inclusive social behaviours would make a positive impact on social engagement in an early childhood setting. Early childhood social sciences could be viewed as a platform for actively facilitating these opportunities for all children.

Who else might be marginalised within early childhood settings? Children who are speakers of languages other than English? Tabors, (1997) recognises that the social difficulties experienced by children from non-English speaking backgrounds can have a long reaching impact on their interactions in an education environment. For example children will sometimes stop talking because communication attempts have not been successful (Tabors, 1997). Are these children experiencing equitable opportunities to “work together” or to “develop confidence in their ability to develop relationships with others”? To implement the Desirable Objectives and Practices (Ministry of Education, 1996b) equity must be a viable goal for early childhood social sciences.

Educators should plan, implement and evaluate curriculum for children in which there are equitable opportunities for learning for each child, irrespective of gender, ability, age, ethnicity or background; children are affirmed as individuals; and children are encouraged to work alongside others (Ministry of Education, 1996b).

Teachers can consciously foster equitable opportunities in an early childhood setting. What are children learning about relative power imbalances when they observe the

relationships between girls and boys; teachers and families; children with disabilities and their typically developing peers; children who are segregated by age away from their siblings; speakers of languages other than English and speakers of the dominant language? Acknowledging the potential power issues allows for a deeper level of reflection about interactions in an early childhood environment. It is timely for teachers to examine their views on power relationships and the impact these have on practice, and on the children in early childhood care and education centres. Ideas and assumptions can have a profound impact on children. Campbell, 1999, provides a strong challenge:

I believe that an early childhood pedagogy of equity requires an engagement with how socially constructed relationships of power operate in the interests of some groups to limit and constrain what a child understands as possible, powerful and desirable for her/himself and others (p.21).

Mana Whenua/Belonging:

Under the Mana Whenua/Belonging strand the social sciences essential learning area link is described as: “Children’s understanding of themselves in their family and community is affirmed when children know that their families and cultures have a place and are respected” (Ministry of Education, 1996b, p.95). What constitutes “having a place”, “being respected”? What does this mean in practice? It is estimated that by 2050 approximately fifty percent of the population of Aotearoa/New Zealand will be non-European (Durie, 2003). How are early childhood environments adapting to the changing expectations and desires of a multi-ethnic population? The teacher’s own view of the social world, strongly influenced by their culture, values and beliefs about themselves, will largely determine which behaviours they reinforce and encourage in children (Gonzalez-Mena, 2002). Defining what is acceptable social behaviour is ideally negotiated between the teachers and families. This will ensure that a collectivist perspective (Gonzalez-Mena, 2002), where celebration of the concept of whanau is constantly present, in keeping with kaupapa Maori (Ritchie, 2001) is taken into account. Teachers who are acutely aware of their own cultural and family norms, and the expectations that may cloud their view of diverse child rearing practices, are likely to be comfortable and competent with difference. Hughes and MacNaughton, (1999) consider that teachers should “See their values concerning

children, teaching, and learning not as neutral and independent but as historically and culturally specific and thus open to interpretation, criticism, and encourage parents to see their values in the same way” (p.173). Professional support is imperative for teachers to critically reflect on their own values and how these may impact on their teaching.

It is difficult to promote equity in education because the Crown is yet to adequately address its relationship of partnership with the tangata whenua of this land (Ritchie, 2001). Is early childhood education neglecting the key responsibilities as Treaty partners? Ritchie (2001) considers that it is the commitment to embracing the observed interests of children that has teachers’ tacit permission to largely ignore the te reo and tikanga Maori kaupapa that was beginning to grow and blossom in some centres in the late 1980s. It is vital that teachers, as well as children, have an active say in establishing curriculum content in order to ensure that these requirements, mandated in the revised Desirable Objectives and Practices, (Ministry of Education, 1996b), are met.

Mana Reo/Communication:

The Mana Reo/Communication strand link with the essential learning areas states that: “children experience the stories and symbols of their own and other cultures, developing awareness of the richness of communication” (Ministry of Education, 1996a, p.97). In meeting these expectations teachers are left to interpret a range of suggestions. What is required in order for children to meet the learning outcome that they have an “appreciation of te reo as a living and relevant language”? (Ministry of Education, 1996a, p.76). Concern has been expressed at the manner in which te reo Maori is used in mainstream early childhood education centres, that much of te reo Maori used is only in the form of commands. This means that children learn, not that te reo Maori is a vital and rich language, but that it is a language in which you are told what to do. Ritchie, (2001) considers that a great deal more needs to be done to adequately prepare teachers to effectively meet the requirements for the bicultural approach outlined in Te Whāriki. This is would be in keeping the Early Childhood

Strategic Plan with its desired outcome of increased participation for Maori tamariki/children (Ministry of Education, 2002).

How do children “develop confidence that their first language is valued” (Ministry of Education, 1997, p.76)? What does this entail for teachers? Is knowing greetings an adequate method of facilitating the learning implied in this learning outcome? The term “valued” suggests “holding something in high regard” (Collins Paperback Dictionary, 1999, p. 934). Recognising the heartfelt importance of a first language means actively treasuring it. Aotearoa/New Zealand does not have a good record for acceptance of diverse spoken languages. It is vital that teachers at all levels are actively involved in promoting positive understandings, and respectfulness, towards language diversity.

Mana Tangata/Contribution:

The Mana Tangata/Contribution strand link with the essential learning area of social sciences states that “through working with others, children develop respect for differences and an understanding of their roles, rights, and responsibilities in relation to other people” (Ministry of Education, 1996a.p.96). This is the strand that contains the greatest number of learning outcomes that relate to social sciences. Contribution Goal One clearly expresses a commitment to equity **in regard** to (my choice to replace “irrespective of”) “gender, ability, age, ethnicity and background” (Ministry of Education, 1996a, p.16), however there is little support for teachers to ensure this occurs. “Background” suggests an acceptance of non-traditional family types, but, for example, the “normalising” of same gender families in early childhood settings is not common. The diverse range of family types is not yet receiving respectful acceptance in centres. The learning outcome “children develop confidence that their family background is viewed positively within the early childhood setting” (Ministry of Education, 1996a, p.66) requires more than just that teachers do not portray bias in any of their interactions, language use or resources. For children to have a strong sense of their family being viewed positively necessitates a high degree of acceptance and open-mindedness. What kinds of attitudes and beliefs might stand in the way of this occurring, and what measures are in place to challenge these? Gunn, (2003), suggests that the anti-bias movement has not been viewed as an important part of the early childhood curriculum in Aotearoa/New Zealand, whereas it is recognised as

such in the United States of America and Australia. A greater commitment to an anti-bias philosophy in early childhood education would further promote the Te Whāriki aspiration for children and challenge teachers to reflect on their own biases.

Teachers of infants, toddlers and young children walk a fine line between the expectations on them as educators: promoting individual accomplishment from a eurocentric centric, success orientated perspective on one hand, and demonstrating respect for a more collectivist, group focused approach on the other. The philosophy “Io chi siamo” (“I am who we are”) of the Reggio Emilia approach (Rankin, 1998, p.219) and the notion that “the group holds the individual in its arms” (Seidel, 2001, p.312) are certainly consistent with Te Whāriki’s aspiration for children. Yet the same document contains learning outcomes that could be seen to support a more individualistic approach:

- Children develop awareness of their own special strengths, and confidence that these are recognized and valued (Ministry of Education, 1996a, p.68).

- Children develop an expectation that they take responsibility for their own learning (Ministry of Education, 1996a, p.84).

The awareness of these tensions between teachers and families, and within teaching teams, can provide opportunities for meaningful discussion and debate.

Cannella, (1997) challenges early years teachers to examine their understandings of social justice, and other related concepts, in order to transform education from a perpetrator of unequal power relationships to a movement capable of working for a fairer world. The presence of social oppression in society will continue unless groups of people work together to educate and oppose its continuation (Hardiman and Jackson, 1997). Taking action against injustice is recognised as important in the early childhood curriculum document, Te Whāriki: “Children moving from early childhood settings to the early years of school are likely to have some understanding of equity

and some ability to identify and challenge bias, prejudice, and negative stereotyping” (Ministry of Education, 1996a, p.65). Social cohesion depends on citizens with a strong commitment to independent and thoughtful participation in a democracy (Barr, 1996). It is never too early to promote understandings that foster acceptance of difference and lead to a greater level of social cohesion.

Mana Aoturoa/Exploration:

“Children develop confidence in working with others to explore the environment and make sense of the social and physical world” (MOE, 1996a, p.98) is the Mana Aoturoa/Exploration strand link with the essential learning area social sciences. Again a connection can be made here to citizenship and the skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary for active participation.

The creation of a society which combines a commitment to respect (for) the rights of individuals with an equal commitment to the exercise of social responsibility, must promote the capacity of individuals, from the earliest possible age, to participate in decisions that affect their lives (Lansdown, 1996, p.71).

What is the desirable knowledge that a citizen of Aotearoa/New Zealand might have about the environment, the physical and social worlds? As many of the current issues relate strongly to the past this would include a sound and comprehensive understanding of the history of this nation. How deeply informed do teachers need to be to effectively facilitate “knowledge about the features of the area of physical and/or spiritual significance to the local community; such as the local river or mountain” (Ministry of Education, 1996a, p.90)? Clearly there is an expectation that teachers will engage in specifically targeted professional development relating to their particular education communities. This level of knowledge and understanding does not appear to be valued in our education system.

The ‘social world’ referred to in the Mana Aoturoa link is surely the rich, complex and unique family and social system within which each individual child dwells. The

rights, roles and responsibilities explored earlier in this article that lead to beginning concepts about participation in a society, would also be part of this learning. Other aspects of this knowledge would include insight into our past. Michael King believed that it is impossible for people to gain an understanding of their own country and their own culture without a sound knowledge of its history (Watkin, 2004). Relatively few students study history at secondary school with even fewer seventh form students in Aotearoa/New Zealand schools studying the New Zealand history option. This is likely to translate into an uninformed, or worse still, misinformed, teaching sector. If our teaching profession does not value and promote the stories of this country's rich and event filled past, attitudes and beliefs based on myth and ignorance are likely to be perpetuated. Such attitudes unconsciously colour a teacher's interactions and may have a negative influence on young children's developing sense of belonging to a nation.

Conclusion:

As teachers of the youngest children, those in early childhood education have a responsibility to consider their ideas about citizenship and how their values might impinge on their practice. There is not a strong research base to call on when examining the attitudes of early childhood teachers to these issues. The questions that arise from exploring the curriculum document from the point of view of early childhood social sciences can act as a catalyst for discussion, debate and research. The philosophy of early childhood education is strongly perceived to be inclusive; yet how visible are teacher's attitudes and values in their responses to diverse beliefs and practices? Are early childhood teachers, as claimed, facilitating learning environments where "there are equitable opportunities for learning, irrespective of gender, ability, age, ethnicity, or background" (Ministry of Education, 1996a, p.16), environments where social justice education is recognised as a vital aim, or merely transmitting beliefs from the narrow lens of their own perspective? An enhanced awareness of the power inherent in the practice of teaching is essential in order to address issues of equity and social justice. The reference to social engineering in the title of this article could be seen as a challenge, wherever teachers place themselves on the continuum. The questions surrounding the discourse of social sciences in early childhood

education are unanswered and perhaps, as yet, unanswerable. Where does a commitment to social justice education end and the spectre of social engineering begin?

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