Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.
The politics of identity, belonging and exclusion

Chinese immigrant parents’ involvement

in

New Zealand

early childhood education

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Arts

Massey University, Albany

New Zealand

Angel Chan

2014
Abstract

Parental involvement and parent-teacher partnership are key notions promoted in the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, and their value for children’s learning and development is nationally and internationally recognised. This study employed a life story methodology and a range of relevant theoretical frames, including theoretical and conceptual approaches concerning identity, social spaces, transnationalism and critical multiculturalism to explore Chinese immigrant parents’ participatory experiences in their children’s early childhood education in New Zealand and the factors that influenced their involvement. A documentary analysis identified many of the dominant discourses and practices prevalent in New Zealand early childhood education. Ten Chinese immigrants from the People’s Republic of China, recruited from three public kindergartens in Auckland, participated in two phases of individual face-to-face interviews, which focused on their involvement in the kindergartens and their perspectives of parenting, teaching and learning.

The participants took pride in their Chinese identity and were determined to maintain their Chinese heritage. They had high expectations for their children’s education and were actively involved in their learning in private spaces. However, their participation in the kindergartens was passive and minimal. Utilising the technique of critical discourse analysis, an unequal positioning of discourses was revealed when narrative data was interpreted against textual findings. The participants’ stories indicated that they felt the teachers were not prepared to embrace diverse familial funds of knowledge. Their parental
aspirations and concerns were often dismissed and silenced while the dominant discourses were institutionally reinforced, thus perpetuating the participants’ essentialised beliefs regarding New Zealand and Chinese ways of teaching and learning, whilst placing cultural beliefs and practices in binary opposition. Without a sense of entitlement and belonging, the participants excluded themselves from the kindergartens. Although they reluctantly accepted the dominant discourses in public spaces, they actively employed strategies within private spaces to fulfil their parental aspirations. They fluidly utilised a range of transnational and transcultural spatial strategies to mix and match practices from both the home and host country in order to maximise the learning opportunities and achievements of their children. This thesis concludes with pedagogical recommendations informed by critical multiculturalism.
Acknowledgements

The completion of this thesis would not be possible without the support of many people. I would like to thank my supervisors, Distinguished Professor Paul Spoonley and Dr Jenny Ritchie, for their attentive and skilful supervision. Although Paul has many other commitments, he is always responsive to emails. His no-nonsense approach, constructive comments and suggestions were most valuable. I am grateful to the support of Jenny, my critical friend, whose comments were always thorough. She responded quickly and thoughtfully to my endless emails and phone calls. She was always available whenever I needed support.

The Department of Education at Unitec Institute of Technology has supported me generously throughout the study. Specific thanks go to Robyn Reid who gave me the space to complete my thesis and graciously tolerated my physical and mental absence. The presentation of this thesis has also benefited greatly from her meticulous proofreading. Thanks also to Associate Professor Andrew Gibbons from AUT University for being a critical reader of this thesis. His thought-provoking feedback and our conversations definitely enriched the depth of this thesis. I am indebted to the participants of this study who generously shared their stories and time with me. They are the protagonists of this thesis.

My parents in Hong Kong have supported every decision I made, even though I am hardly physically available for them. Finally, I would not have come to writing this acknowledgment without the love from my husband and son whose lives have been greatly impacted by my doctoral study. Eliot has grown from a
teenage boy to a fine young man while his mother immersed herself in the thinking and writing. He constantly ‘disturbed’ me with his bear-hugs which reminded me of the most important things in my life. My husband encouraged me to embark on this journey and gave me the strength to keep going till the end. He is extremely patient with me and his sense of humour refuels me. He has become the chief chef at home, and the lovely meals nourish my body and warm my heart.

Ethics Approval was granted by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (MUHEC).
# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................... i  
Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................ iii  
1. Introduction ................................................................................................................ 1  
   Story of the researcher ............................................................................................... 2  
   Contextualising the study: ECE .................................................................................. 3  
   Contextualising the study: PRC immigrants in Auckland ........................................... 6  
   A life story methodological approach and an eclectic theorising .............................. 8  
   Linguistic protocols .................................................................................................. 10  
   Words of caution ...................................................................................................... 12  
   Structure of the thesis .............................................................................................. 12  
2. Contexts Matter ....................................................................................................... 21  
   Introduction .............................................................................................................. 21  
   Contexts of New Zealand ECE ................................................................................. 23  
   Diverse ECE services ............................................................................................... 23  
   Regulations, ‘quality’ and challenges ...................................................................... 25  
   Te Whāriki .............................................................................................................. 29  
   Theoretical underpinnings of Te Whāriki ................................................................. 32  
      Erik Erikson ......................................................................................................... 33  
      Jean Piaget .......................................................................................................... 34  
      Lev Vygotsky ....................................................................................................... 36  
      Jerome Bruner ..................................................................................................... 38  
   The discourse of play in New Zealand ECE .............................................................. 39  
   The discourse of parental involvement & parent-teacher partnership ..................... 43  
      Communication, engagement and empowerment ................................................. 47  
   Immigrant parents: Values, beliefs and practices ..................................................... 50  
      Children’s education: Upward social mobility ..................................................... 50  
      Perceptions of children’s early learning and play ............................................... 52  
      Perspectives and experiences of participation in children’s ECE ....................... 55  
      Social cohesion: Immigrants’ participation in ECE settings ................................ 57  
      Fluid, selective and adaptive practices ............................................................... 59  
   The Chinese contexts: Parenting and ECE ............................................................... 60  
      Overview of ECE in China and Hong Kong ......................................................... 60
Meaning co-construction..........................................................................................134
Truth, contextual knowledge and subjectivity .......................................................... 135
Motives & intentions.................................................................................................... 137
Voices............................................................................................................................ 138
Participants ................................................................................................................... 139
Selection criteria ........................................................................................................... 139
Recruitment .................................................................................................................. 142
Research process .......................................................................................................... 144
Data collection: Ongoing documentary analysis.......................................................... 145
Data collection: Individual interviews............................................................................ 148
Data interpretation: Narrative and critical discourse analysis ....................................... 153
Reflexivity and the role of the researcher ...................................................................... 156
Ethical considerations .................................................................................................. 159
(De)limitations, ‘disclaimers’ and validity ...................................................................... 161
Conclusion ...................................................................................................................... 165
Findings and Discussion................................................................................................ 166
5. Documentary Review................................................................................................ 166
Introduction .................................................................................................................. 166
A brief context of New Zealand ECE and Te Whāriki .................................................. 168
Parental involvement.................................................................................................... 169
Issues of parental (dis)engagement .............................................................................. 171
Catering for cultural diversity ....................................................................................... 172
Catering for linguistic diversity & supporting NESB children to learn English ......... 176
Children's learning at kindergartens ............................................................................ 178
Exploration and play ..................................................................................................... 178
Literacy .......................................................................................................................... 180
Children's portfolios: Documentation of children's learning and development .... 182
Transition to school........................................................................................................ 184
Conclusion ...................................................................................................................... 186
List of documents reviewed .......................................................................................... 187
6. The participants' stories: (Non)involvement in children's ECE ............................ 190
Introduction .................................................................................................................. 190
Let the stories begin … ................................................................................................. 192
Demographic and familial background of participants................................................... 213
Chinese parenting models: Beyond authoritarian and authoritative ......................... 216
An inappropriate metaphor: ‘Tiger mothers’ ................................................................. 219
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. A repertoire of transcultural spatial strategies</td>
<td>309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental perceptions and basic expectations: Hope is the first step on</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the road to disappointment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental perceptions: Kindergarten teachers</td>
<td>316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lessons learnt from the past</td>
<td>319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disempowering experiences</td>
<td>322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do children get out of attending kindergartens?</td>
<td>327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play</td>
<td>327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English: The importance of linguistic capital</td>
<td>334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation for primary school</td>
<td>340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence and social competence</td>
<td>342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art and craft</td>
<td>344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diverse learning experiences</td>
<td>346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transnational perspectives of ECE</td>
<td>349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural adaptation: Active and strategic transcultural spatial</td>
<td>354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strategies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Conclusion</td>
<td>363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key findings</td>
<td>366</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconsistent and/or contradictory narratives</td>
<td>366</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High parental aspirations and contrasting involvement in public and</td>
<td>368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>private spaces</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The politics of in/exclusion: Identities, habitus and discourses</td>
<td>369</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptation: A repertoire of fluid and strategic transcultural spatial</td>
<td>372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>practices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributions of the thesis</td>
<td>373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogical recommendations: Critical multicultural education</td>
<td>374</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging in critical reflections</td>
<td>375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconceptualising discourses and avoiding essentialism</td>
<td>376</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitating parent-teacher dialogue, supporting third spaces and</td>
<td>378</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transforming pedagogy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application beyond the current study</td>
<td>380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy implications and future research</td>
<td>380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final thoughts</td>
<td>383</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td>385</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>