On Children Transitioning to New Cultural and Linguistic Settings

"When in Rome … it's okay to be a tourist"

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ABSTRACT
There may be an implicit assumption amongst some New Zealand educators that minority cultures should assimilate wholly into the New Zealand way of life, shedding aspects of their own culture that conflict with the mainstream. Some others assert that encouraging minority students to maintain their culture, including language and traditions, results in positive academic and social achievement. This paper challenges some of the possible covert assumptions that may be prevalent amongst educators; assumptions that prevent these children from transitioning smoothly into our schools. It outlines the importance of valuing cultural differences, promoting a sense of personal identity and encouraging the use of first languages.

Research Paper
Keywords
Bilinguilism, cultural differences, ethnic identity, inclusion practices, minority students, refugees, transition programmes.

INTRODUCTION
The adage "When in Rome, do as the Romans do" is a familiar expression relating to one culture interacting with another in various settings. To an extent, it may be warranted that those "visiting" should take on aspects of the local culture as a means of showing respect and "fitting in". Conversely, the question of how much of a person's identity should be put aside in order to be accepted by others may be debated. Right now, the assimilation of cultures is occurring regularly right on our doorsteps, with students from ethnic minority groups transitioning into New Zealand schools on a daily basis (Ministry of Education, 1999). A valid question may be posed as to how educators should regard their presence in our classrooms and school communities. When transitioning into New Zealand schools, should ethnic minority students be expected to "do as the Kiwis do", or are there other approaches that can be taken to ensure that respect for both cultures remains intact?

THE OFFICIAL VIEW
In recent years, the number of migrant and refugee students in New Zealand schools has increased significantly (Kennedy & Dewar, 2007; Ministry of Education, 1999). These students hail from a range of backgrounds, with differing experiences that combine to shape their unique and individual identities. As a result, schools and educators at all levels have been directed to acknowledge and value the character of the communities they are situated in (Ministry of Education, 1997, 1999). *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) emphasises the value placed on our nation's cultural diversity and the traditions of all its people, outlining that all school students, irrespective of cultural background, will be accepted in the education system. The identities, cultures, and languages of all individuals will be supported, their experiences valued, and learning needs addressed. This is echoed in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), the curriculum document for early childhood education, indicating that it is a priority for ethnic minority groups in New Zealand. But just how successful has this mandate been? Baker (1997) suggests that modifying educational policies to acknowledge cultural diversity is one issue; however adjusting entrenched attitudes of some monolingual, monocultural teachers is far more difficult. Campbell (2000) concurs, saying that such reactionary teachers often attempt to change minority students to fit the "norms" of the mainstream culture they are familiar with, and find easier to teach. They tend to make few attempts to bridge the gap between home and school, immerse the student in English language and Western value systems, and fail to recognise the traditional cultural values that could academically advantage students from minority cultures.

WHAT COULD HAPPEN
Research shows that ethnic minority groups generally fail to achieve either academically or socially to a level that is comparable with dominant cultures (Chapple, Jefferies & Walker, 1997; Hirsch, 1990). There are several reasons cited for this, including an inequitable education system, poor self esteem, and external locus of control, where individuals look for fault externally rather than internally (Nowicki & Strickland, 1973). Campbell (2000) argues that one reason for poor achievement amongst minority students is the attitude of teachers. She believes that, while cultural diversity is now acknowledged and "celebrated" in national education policies, there is still an assumption amongst some educators that coming from a minority cultural background is a disadvantage. This underlying attitude sends mixed messages to students from minority groups who are readily enrolled into the system, but who are limited by racial stereotyping that underestimates their ability to cross the cultural barriers they encounter in order to succeed. Students who are not expected to succeed will often fulfil expectations and fail (Ministry of Education, 1999). Viewing cultural traditions, values, attitudes and language as deficits devalues the

essence of the child (Blackledge, 1994; Eckermann, 1994). Alternatively, genuinely acknowledging and appreciating cultural differences communicates to the minority student that they are valued as human beings. This has a significant impact on how they view themselves and others, boosting confidence, and positively influencing their academic achievement, social acceptance, and personal well-being.

WHAT THE THEORISTS SAY

Sociocultural theories propose that children's intellectual and social development are closely linked, and that their world is constructed through interactive social contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bruner, 1996; Eckermann, 1994; Erikson, 1968). During transition into unfamiliar social contexts, in times of change and challenge, individuals tend to depend on aspects of their self-concept that are core to their identity (Jackson & Warin, 2000). This may be paralleled with travel situations, where individuals spending time in other countries will often become unusually patriotic or exude more of their own culture whilst attempting to integrate into an unfamiliar context. For instance, New Zealanders embarking on the traditional "OE" (overseas experience) can perhaps be too readily identified by their "I'm from Down Under" t-shirts and hats, or accentuated "Kiwi" jargon. As well, many seek comfort by finding accommodation in suburbs that are known to be heavily populated by other New Zealanders, and searching out familiar foods in supermarkets or local bars to help with their adjustment during the transition. Students from minority cultures are no different, drawing on attitudes, values and belief systems that have been shaped through experiences in environments that may differ vastly from the milieu they are moving into.

Even when a child from a minority culture appears to be adapting personally, socially and academically to their new environment with ease, there may actually be a mismatch between school and home that confuses this transition. Baker (1997) refers to this as "home/school disarticulation", where norms, values and beliefs within the family unit differ from those of the education system. Students may merely "survive" by moving constantly from one cultural context to another, essentially learning what is "expected" of them and how they should conduct themselves in each situation (Campbell, 2000). The Ministry of Education (1999) outlines the importance of celebrating cultural differences and valuing diversity, not just to remove possible barriers to learning, but also to foster positive self esteem and identity. Paying "lip-service" to culture is demeaning and detrimental to a minority student's sense of who they are (Blackledge, 1994). When students from different cultural backgrounds are supported to develop a strong sense of self, they are more likely to move through the transition process with minimal stress (Merry, 2007). Embracing and supporting the individual ways in which minority students deal with transitions into the educational environment can deeply impact on their confidence, perceptions of self, and ultimately, their identity.

Bourdieu (1997) discusses the concept of cultural capital, which consists of values held by families that are handed on to their children. These may exist as beliefs that shape goals, attitudes and development, and they are influenced by economic, symbolic, cultural and social factors (Brooker, 2002). As with any child transitioning into a new school context, students from ethnic minority groups bring with them a "package" of individual cultural capital that largely defines who they are. The cultural capital that is possessed by the individual, and how it is perceived by others in the new context, can determine the level of control the minority student has over their transition. Cultural capital can be representative of levels of "power", which are ultimately used for "negotiating a place" in social contexts (Gibbons, 2002). The sometimes unfamiliar or threatening cultural capital a minority student brings with them can result in their peers or teachers positioning them at the lower end of this scale. Likewise, the minority student's own perception of their worth can have an effect on where they fit in terms of this assumed power in their new social context. Eckermann (1994) proposes that people are organised into a series of hierarchical positions according to aspects of capital such as class, socio-economic status and culture. She states that:

> A group's culture is relevant only to its own particular group, it helps to determine how that group perceive themselves, how they conceptualise or order their world, what propositions or beliefs they use to explain things, how they try to cope with their world as well as the sentiments and values which tell them what is good and what is bad, their proven mechanisms for dealing with other people and with material things in their world. (pp. 2-3)

Clearly, the extent to which these aspects of culture are accepted by individuals in the new social context will be a determining factor in how well the minority student copes with the migration from a familiar to an unfamiliar setting.

In his ecological model, Bronfenbrenner (1979) demonstrates the influence of different social systems that impact on individuals, emphasising the complexity of the interaction between people and contexts. He highlights systems that range from situations close to the individual, such as home and neighbourhood, to impacts from further afield, such as government or international influences, maintaining that the impact of these layers and the way in which they are responded to, combine to shape the individual. As mentioned previously, ethnic minority students can face challenges in transitions due to a mismatch between home and school environments. Returning to the illustration of the Kiwi traveller embarking on their OE, the sense of disequilibrium experienced in a new environment can be somewhat unsettling. Despite the exhilaration one may be feeling about exploring something new, the resulting apprehension is a factor that can often not be prepared for. Grappling with language, currency, customs and laws are all an exciting part of the new experience, but can leave even the most confident traveller rather perturbed. Just as the weary traveller must "find their feet" in order to glean the best from their overseas expedition, students from ethnic minorities are faced with a similar challenge. However positive minority students might feel about their new experience, the likely presence of some anxiety may impact on their initial engagement with the unfamiliar context.

The addition of another system of influence that in some situations conflicts with what minority children have experienced in life to that point can have devastating consequences for their achievement in the new context. Corson (1998) suggests that aspects of cultural capital other than language brought to school by children from minority backgrounds are what cause inequalities in academic performance. He states that teacher pedagogy and organisational arrangements need to be matched with children's home cultural values in order to reverse educational failure rates. In light of this, the relationship between school and home can impact positively on the child's ability to transition smoothly into their new environment. Schools can assist culturally diverse parents or caregivers to support their child's social and academic success by outlining cultural factors that may hinder achievement in these areas. Likewise, families can assist schools and educators to understand cultural traditions that have shaped their child's values, beliefs and practices (Whyte, 2005). This raises the question: Who holds the responsibility for instigating discussion regarding cultural aspects? Such dialogue should be considered with sensitivity from all perspectives, in order to successfully initiate and foster this relationship.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE

Language can be a key barrier to social interaction and academic achievement in the initial transfer to the mainstream school setting. The communication challenges experienced by some learners with limited oral English skills may result in the student being socially isolated by their English speaking peers, or reduce important interactions with teachers and other significant adults. In New Zealand schools, English should add to, not replace, the languages of minority students, as this acts as a reinforcement of their cultural identity (Blackledge, 1994; Kennedy & Dewar, 1997; Waite, 1992). Learning in all curriculum areas is language-oriented, and this can present challenges to students who are required to master language as well as content. May (2002) proposes that academic achievement and literacy development are actually increased when students are able to use their first language in the school setting, a notion supported by other experts in the linguistic field (Corson, 1998; Cummins & Swain, 1986). Proficiency in one language can aid in the learning of another, as linguistic knowledge is transferred from the native language to that which is being learnt. When minority students are encouraged to use their first language in the classroom, this may remove limits on their ability to communicate meaning. From the perspective of teacher practitioners and peers, developing an understanding of basic linguistic terms from minority students and their parents or caregivers may well be beneficial. This might enable them to gain insight into aspects of the student's culture and background that could not possibly be communicated by them with their limited knowledge of English and its meanings.

Supporting minority students to use their first language also makes it a "normal" occurrence for their peers, as they are not being influenced to view bilingualism as a "problem" that needs to be overcome (Smith, 2006), or as a point of difference that divides them. Such strategies support the inclusive intent of our national curriculum documents; however the practical implications for teachers are considerable. Educators must be open to continual modification of teaching practices in order to optimise learning opportunities for students whose primary language is not English. These may include using non-linguistic representations (for example, symbols and diagrams) to complement language use, and fostering support networks outside of the classroom to allow minority students to make links with prior experiences and knowledge (Alton-Lee, 2003). They must also work to create classroom cultures that are not characterised by intimidation by peers, and that promote acceptance and understanding of diversity. *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) states that effective teachers create supportive learning environments by attending to the cultural and linguistic diversity of *all* students. Obviously, with increasing multilingualism in their classrooms, appropriate resources will need to continue to be made available for teachers to cope with this expectation.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, the smooth transition of students from ethnic and linguistic minority groups into mainstream learning environments is impacted on by numerous intricate factors. Each interacts in such a complex way that it is difficult to separate any one as being significantly more important than any others. However, one aspect remains certain – that educators at all levels need to develop an awareness of the difficulties faced by minority students when moving into our predominantly English-speaking school environments. With numbers of students from ethnic minority groups expected to increase (Ministry of Education, 1999), it is in the best interests of New Zealand educators to adapt pedagogy and practice to support these transitions. This should result in an increased understanding of how to accommodate and enhance cultural and linguistic diversity within educational settings and the wider society. An important feature of the vision for our education system is to encourage our young people to create a nation in which all cultures are valued for their contributions (Ministry of Education, 2007). The conception that being in a particular social context should involve putting aside the very characteristics that make individuals who they are, expired the day that New Zealand, like many others, became a multicultural nation.

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