



## ***Socially relevant curriculum: Cultural otherness, racism and religion***

***New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work, Volume 17, Issue 1 & 2, 10-26, 2020***

---

**JANETTE KELLY-WARE**

*The University of Waikato*

### **ABSTRACT**

*Socially relevant curriculum and the importance of opening up spaces for negotiation and 'meaning making' to occur are increasingly common ideas in my academic writing. In this article, I argue that cultural otherness, anti-racism, spirituality and religion are fundamental to contemporary socially relevant curricula. In it, I report how student teachers made meaning in an asynchronous online discussion forum in the aftermath of the terrorist massacre at Christchurch mosques in Aotearoa New Zealand in March 2019. Dominant discourses and critical questions are highlighted for teachers in early childhood and tertiary education settings about religion, racism and cultural otherness. The central argument is that these issues are highly pertinent to all: they speak to the things that matter at this time. This article makes an original and timely contribution to understandings of how teachers, including preservice teachers, and children and their families can be supported to make sense of traumatic events.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Silin (1995) argued that contemporary curriculum needs to speak to “the things that really matter in children’s lives or in the lives of those who care for them” (p. 40). Curriculum that balances the interests of the child with the interests of the community should focus on issues like fairness, justice, anti-racism and the concept of a shared humanity—issues of concern to society as a whole (Kelly-Ware, 2018). What knowledge is valued and spoken about, and what knowledge is ignored or silenced in early childhood education (ECE) settings are issues of concern to all those concerned with social justice.

On 15 March 2019 New Zealanders were confronted by “the horror of a lone gunman’s terror attack on communities of worshippers in two Otautahi Christchurch mosques” (Gunn et al., 2020a, n.p.). Fifty-one children, women and men were killed or died subsequently in the massacres at Masjid Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre. News of the massacre sent “seismic shocks throughout the country” (Hunt, 2019). Arndt and Tesar (2020) document that “the shootings were directed specifically at Muslim worshippers, were livestreamed on social media, and brought to the fore many questions about

what racial ‘otherness’ means in New Zealand, as well as related concerns about social relations - and disintegration” (p. 36).

In the dedication of Gunn and colleagues’ second edition ECE text about inclusion, social justice and equity, the authors acknowledged the attack on communities of worshippers was borne out of “prejudice, intolerance and hate, the very things [we] are working against...The lasting consequences of what happened are yet to be fully recognised let alone understood” (Gunn et al., 2020a, n.p.). Meanwhile, Hannigan (2020) argues that the mass shootings, “underscore the need for a genuine responsiveness towards religious and spiritual diversity to achieve a tolerance whereby *all* elements of a culture are acknowledged, and not only those with which the secular world is most comfortable” (p. 160).

In this article I report on a study about how I enacted socially relevant curriculum in an ECE initial teacher education (ITE) graduate programme (one year fully online) in the immediate wake of the mosque massacres to support student teachers to make sense of traumatic events for themselves and for the young children they are going to teach. My inquiry question was: What can be learned from student teacher responses (in an online discussion forum) when they were discussing socially relevant curriculum issues – terrorism, racism and spirituality – in the aftermath of the Christchurch Mosques terrorist massacre?

## **SOCIALLY RELEVANT CURRICULA**

As a result of my PhD research (Kelly-Ware, 2018) I am committed to supporting teachers to engage in discussions with young children about difficult subjects including cultural otherness, anti-racism, religion and spirituality. Children are citizens *now*, not only in the future, and the evidence I gathered in my Doctoral study demonstrated children’s awareness of, and interest, in complex social issues. In *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 1996, 2017) curriculum is interpreted broadly and includes “the sum total of experiences, activities and events, both direct and indirect, which occur within an environment designed to foster children’s learning” (1996, p. 10). And there is an expectation that children will experience curriculum that empowers them for their [life’s] journey (2017, p.7).

*Te Whāriki* is a critical curriculum framework, with transformative potential, consistent with critical multiculturalism (Schoorman, 2011) and anti-bias education (Gunn, 2003). Significant possibilities exist for social inclusion, and each ECE setting is expected to weave its own ‘whāriki’ (MoE, 1996, 2017). Hence whether individual settings are ECE or tertiary (such as ITE settings), the curricula that they weave should be contemporary and relevant, reflecting collective and shared values, being responsive to contemporary issues and happenings, and balancing the interests of the child/student and the community – that is, socially relevant curriculum (Kelly-Ware, 2018).

## **ENACTING SOCIALLY RELEVANT CURRICULUM**

*It’s not enough, so we ask ourselves, what next can be done?*  
(Jason Gunn, 2019)

As a teacher educator/researcher committed to social justice and socially relevant curriculum, the Christchurch Mosques terror attacks challenged me to urgently respond, as there was a strong likelihood that there were Muslim and other students deeply affected in classes I was teaching. The Graduate Diploma of ECE cohort is made up of mature student teachers who already hold degrees. They come from diverse national, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, to study in a fully online (NET) environment. Whilst a number of these student teachers were working in ECE centres on a full- or part-time basis, I sensed that many others could be feeling isolated in their homes at this time, in contrast to on-campus students. In the week following the massacre, University of Waikato staff and students offered their support, shared their grief and donned headscarves amidst flowers, candles, and message boards made available outside the Student Centre.

It seemed highly inappropriate to proceed with our proposed online discussion about play and creativity in the wake of the horrendous tragedy. Therefore, from 18-24 March 2019, I set up an alternative discussion forum entitled: *What happened to our world? And does God go to preschool?* Provocations in the form of responses to catastrophes and tragedies in ECE through the arts (Greenman, 2005; Gross & Gurewitz Clemens, n.d.), and religion and spirituality (Cowhey, 2006; Hannigan, 2012) were provided. Additional links included a website article: *What to tell children about the Christchurch mosque shootings* (Fallon, 2019) and a Human Rights Commission video: *Give nothing to racism* (2017).

Recognising the 'generative possibilities' that conversations, statements and incidents have (Blaise & Taylor, 2012), I asked students to consider being teachers in troubled times, and what they might say to children and their parents if they were working in an ECE centre anywhere in Aotearoa New Zealand during the coming week. The question was posed, 'what does 'give nothing to racism' mean in our lives as women, parents, grandparents and teachers?' Twenty two student teachers (from an all-women cohort of 25) participated in the optional discussion forum during the paper called *Play and Creativity in the Curriculum*. Some student teachers posted once while others posted several times during the week. Given the horror that led to the discussion topic and its optional nature, I did not enter the forum regularly during the week, apart from sometimes commenting and raising probing/provocative questions to encourage students to think more critically. The discussion forum was a space for me to also process the events and aftermath of March 15, 2019 and to share with students what was happening on campus as a way of including them vicariously.

## **THEORETICAL CONTEXT**

My pedagogy, and consequently this research study, is informed by social constructionism, a useful theoretical framework for seeing knowledge and how knowledge is produced. It recognises that shared understandings of the world are given and received by others, and that these shape reality. Through this lens, 'truth' in any situation is the result of people's interpretations and choices (Gordon-Burns et al., 2012). For example, dominant constructions of 'normal' and 'other' are evident in ECE settings in relation to aspects of diversity i.e. gender, culture, or ability. These constructions can lead to inequitable

practices that “work in the interests of some ideas, knowledge and understandings whilst simultaneously problematising others” (Gordon-Burns et al., 2012, p. 178). Furthermore, dominant constructions of us/them maintain and perpetuate a fear of the ‘Other’ (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2016); a fear entrenched “when what is ‘normal’ is measured by ‘white, middle-class, social, cultural [religious], and educational norms” (Yelland, 2008, p. ix). Challenging this normalising and othering discourse is social constructionism, which allows researchers and practitioners to view people and the meanings they develop as fluid, dynamic and various. This means that conditions favouring attitudes and practices that include or exclude cannot be seen as static, and teachers can and should influence them (Gordon Burns et al., 2012; Gunn et al., 2020b).

Discourses have a powerful effect on how people see themselves (their identities and subjectivities), how they act (their agency), and how they ascribe meaning to their experiences and those of others. In ECE settings for example, discourses have power that can have positive or negative effects on people including young children, enhancing or limiting participation, agency, and voice. For Gordon-Burns et al. (2020),

discourses that define difference as abnormal and undesirable can lead to practices in education that exclude. Inclusion, however, is more likely in contexts in which discourses that draw on the notions of social justice and human rights exist. Such discourses construct difference and diversity as positive and valuable. (pp. 8-9)

Dominant and deficit discourses are influential, shaping beliefs and behaviours, identities and subjectivities, and the way the identities and subjectivities of others are regarded. These discourses originate from various contexts and institutions, including home, popular culture, the media and education settings – in short, they are socially constructed. Normative understandings limit, or narrowly define, acceptable ways of being in education settings and the wider community. They can also negatively impact on the wellbeing of young children who are neither naïve nor innocent as they are often posited to be. Discourses can show, or hide children from, the realities of the world of which they are part (Blaise & Taylor, 2012).

How teachers act in relation to children (or student teachers) is determined to a considerable extent by the discourses to which they subscribe, and these will be based on their values and beliefs, and their experiences and attitudes (Gordon-Burns et al., 2012; Gunn et al., 2020a). Some discourses become dominant over others based on particular conditions at any given time and place in history, politics and society. These authors argue that “the time is right for discourses of inclusion, social justice, and equity to lead educational thinking and practice” (2020a, p. 9), and I concur.

## **THE RESEARCH**

Realising that the discussions of the student teachers in the alternative discussion forum (18-24 March) could be valuable for others, retrospective approval was gained from The Faculty of Education Ethics Committee (FEDU

049/19), followed by informed consent from students, to use their discussion posts as data for research purposes. Fifty discussion posts were recorded over a seven-day-period and 16 out of 25 students (65% of the class) consented to their forum posts being analysed and shared publicly, in presentations and publications to teacher/ student teacher and other audiences, for the purposes of continuing the dialogue and supporting pedagogy in this area.

The discussion forum posts were akin to data that might emerge from an asynchronous online focus group (Gaiser, 2008), and data for this study was obtained from 36/50 of the discussion forum posts. Graffigna and Bosio (2006) argue that asynchronous online focus groups are commonly used in academic research because of their advantages. They cite richer deeper discussions because participants have flexibility and control; can contribute at a time convenient to them, and are able to think through, revise and polish their contributions before sharing them with the group. The transcript of this discussion forum records the diversity of the participants' voices over a week as they engaged with the material provided in the form of provocations for their discussion. Gathering evidence in this way aligned with socially relevant curriculum in the sense that it was relevant and responsive to contemporary issues and happenings, and I was seeking to balance the interests of the students and the community (Kelly-Ware, 2018).

The question that I asked in my analysis was: What can be learned from student teacher responses (in an online discussion forum) when they were discussing socially relevant curriculum issues – terrorism, racism and spirituality – in the aftermath of the Christchurch Mosques terrorist massacre? Using methods of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), I analysed the transcript and identified discourses such as childhood innocence, cultural otherness, and cultural homogenisation. I also used frequency analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) to identify and categorise responses to the literature I provided and/or questions I posed about 'what they might say to young children and their parents in ECE centres' or what 'give nothing to racism' means. These additional analysis methods recognise that the issues discussed in this research are discursively located, meaning that people, including children, explore and come to understand ideas such as ethnicity, spirituality, religion, and terrorism even, in the context of the discourses made available to them.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

In the sections that follow “attention [is drawn] to different discourses and how they conflate to include and exclude” (Gordon-Burns et al., 2020, p. 10). Salient ideas from the forum discussion are contextualised through reference to relevant readings provided to the students, with the intention of stimulating and provoking teachers/readers to (re)think what counts as curriculum, and what roles teachers might take up in difficult times. Unless otherwise identified, the quotes in *italics* featured at the beginning of each section originate from posts by student teachers during the online discussion.

### **Personal connections**

*I know the sense of peace and mindfulness that occurs during juma*

In a small country like Aotearoa New Zealand it was unsurprising that several students made personal connections with the attacks in Otautahi Christchurch in their posts. One student had a friend whose children were involved in a school 'lockdown' in Christchurch, while another related that the owner of their local dairy in a Hamilton suburb lost nine friends in the attack. A further student mused what might have happened to her friend who lived near the Christchurch mosques if he had not been visiting her in Auckland at the time of the attacks. Another student recognised that Muslim communities throughout New Zealand including in the Waikato region would be deeply affected as the attack was on all of them, as well as on the entire nation. The final post in the discussion came from a student who identified herself as Muslim and wrote "I know the sense of peace and mindfulness that occurs during juma (the congregational prayers on Friday) and am deeply saddened by what happened in a place that is viewed as safe for many people".

### **Vulnerability, safety and support**

*This is your home and you should have been safe here*  
(Ruby Jones, 2019)

Themes of safety and vulnerability were ever present at this time. An artwork by graphic artist Ruby Jones, depicting two women embracing – one a Muslim wearing a hijab – entitled, 'This is your home and you should have been safe here' (Woolf, 2019), gained international attention on social media following the attacks. The vulnerability and lack of safety felt by people whose cultural otherness singled them out existed well before the terrorist attacks. Previous disclosures that occurred in my face-to-face and online classes resonated with the findings of Arndt and Tesar (2020):

Students of diverse cultures disclosed the everyday racisms with which they had long been confronted, but which they had never before revealed, for fear of shattering the peaceful image of New Zealanders as welcoming and accepting of otherness, where 'they are us' (p. 38)

Ten students mentioned 'safety' in their forum posts—some expressing shock and disbelief that this country was not safe for everyone. Students described New Zealand as "a peaceful country", or noted that they had "always felt safe in Otautahi (Christchurch)". In a reflexive response one student referred to Robertson (2004) stating that whilst she believed everyone was safe in New Zealand, "this belief highlights once again how colourblind I am". Another student employed metaphors noting that "the recent Christchurch terrorist attack has shattered this peaceful nation, but this nation won't bow down against this cowardly attack of racism and is trying its best to stand tall again". Other students cited the *Te Whāriki* curriculum statement that "children experience an environment where they are kept safe from harm" (MoE, 2017, p. 24), or mentioned reassuring children of their safety when referring to what they might say to young children at this time. Cyber safety was also raised where a student who is a parent suggested in her post that it is increasingly difficult to restrict

what children have access to in the media. Quoting Greenman (2005) she penned, “we live in a 24-hour pounding news culture where dramatic images of horror or grief surround us constantly, millions more children watched the television thinking that could have been me or my friend or relative or someone I love” (p. 6).

### **Otherness and sameness**

*They are us and we are them*  
(Hon Jacinda Adern, 2019)

In the aftermath of the killings, New Zealand’s Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern made famous the statement, ‘they are us and we are them’. Ardern, wearing a Muslim headscarf, exclaimed ‘they are us’ when speaking about Muslim victims of the Christchurch terrorist attack. Arndt and Tesar (2020) focus on otherness and its implications underlying the Prime Minister’s statement. They raise questions including: what do ‘oneness’, ‘they are us’ and ‘we are one’ mean? And what is the impact of these statements? Only one forum post problematised this statement of otherness and sameness.

The student, who identified herself as a practising Muslim, purported that many people do not have an in-depth understanding of Islam apart from what they see in international news. She reasoned that this lack of understanding was due to New Zealand not having a large Muslim population. Media reporting of the events of 15 March 2019 surprised the student.

The events were more confusing for me because I did not expect the media to refer to this as a terrorist attack. I expected to see the viewpoint I have grown accustomed to hearing ‘they brought their problems to our country’. Instead, there was an overwhelming display of aroha, manaakitanga and unity from New Zealand as a whole. This was an attack on Muslims but all of New Zealand felt the effects.

This student’s sense of otherness was seemingly mitigated in some small way by the media description of the events as ‘a terrorist attack’ where the victims and not the perpetrators were Muslim, and her identification of New Zealand as a unified country. Arndt and Tesar’s (2020) observation that “dominant stories of terrorists in the media...conflate Islam with terrorism” (p. 48) appears consistent with her perspective.

The universalising discourse of sameness, or ‘cultural homogenisation’, was represented uncritically in several students’ posts in the forum. One student ended her post with a YouTube link and the phrase, “People over the world, reach out your hand, and touch each other, people over the world, we are the same, just different colours” borrowed from a song. Other students talked about the attack being on ‘all of us’, not just Muslims, statements including, “all of New Zealand was hurt, all of New Zealand needs to heal”, and “this unitedness [sic] that is pouring out now shows everyone else feels the same”. This universalising discourse contrasts starkly with recognition of an alternative side of the tragedy. Arndt and Tesar (2020) describe how “online platforms became both places of condolence and support as well as re-escalations of the violence

and extremist acts, and views behind them, surreptitiously re-lived online” (p. 36).

After the attacks, Prime Minister Adern distinguished the gunman from the victims and from New Zealanders:

Many of those who have been directly affected by this shooting may be migrants...even refugees here. They have chosen to make New Zealand their home...they are us. The person who perpetuated this violence against us is not....There is no place in New Zealand for such acts of extreme and unprecedented violence. (New Zealand Herald, 2019).

The Herald reported that this phrase appeared in an inverted form in subsequent addresses. When talking about the gunman, the Prime Minister said, “You may have chosen us [but] we utterly reject and condemn you” (New Zealand Herald, 2019).

In the discussion forum one student commented on how the practice of attaching a frame to personal social media profiles that read, ‘this is not who we are’ was increasingly common among her friends and acquaintances at the time. She questioned whether the statement represented the truth, stating her perspective that, “we have learnt that racism is alive and kicking in New Zealand, but in recent years up until this point it has shown itself in a subtle manner”. Another student agreed that the practice of adding a ‘this is not who we are’ frame was an insignificant action in the face of racism. This evidence suggested emergent critical thinking and a developing awareness on the part of these students. From a social constructionist perspective, however, the first student presents ‘truth’ problematically as a singular discoverable construct, and racism as subtle and seemingly divorced from her personal experience. This suggestion of racism showing itself in a subtle manner contrasts with the experiences of students from diverse cultures as previously mentioned.

### **Racism and ‘give nothing to racism’**

There was general support among the cohort for the expressed view that, “we have already established as a country that our attention needs to be drawn to [the campaign] ‘give nothing to racism’” (Human Rights Commission, 2017). Experiences shared in the forum from students who could be viewed as ‘cultural others’ referred to their own experiences of being subject to racist comments and actions. Meanwhile, other students referred to examples common in the media at this time where people described racist behaviour they had been subjected to and fears for their safety due to their ‘cultural otherness’. Almost every student referred to the Human Rights Commission video noting that racism starts small with seemingly insignificant jokes, statements and acts, and that it has a cumulative effect. This phenomenon was clearly represented visually in ‘the Racism Pyramid’ (Anti-Defamation League, 2005) introduced by a student which enhanced understanding among her peers according to their comments.

Five students connected racism to notions covered in their previous summer trimester paper about colourblindness (Robertson, 2004) and

'whiteness' a 'taken for granted' construct that privileges and normalises white identities "in contrast to other identities which are blackness and brownness...Whiteness functions through discourses of racism and cultural homogenization" (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2016, p. 286). Many students recognised their unique positions as teachers and parents – one student identified that teachers were responsible for "building a positive foundation in terms of cultural awareness and diversity". Another student succinctly summarised what 'give nothing to racism' means, stating it is, "to not just ignore racism but to reassess how we contribute to racism as a society and to stand up against it even when it feels uncomfortable to do so." Another student cited Gandhi saying "it is not so important how large the thing you do, but simply that you do it (cited by Cowhey, 2006, p. 13)."

### **Spirituality, religion and faith**

*I believe it was an act against race and religion as those who were targeted were all Muslim who practised Islam.*

The issues of spirituality, religion, faith and culture were keenly debated by the students in the forum as the resources made available channelled their discussion towards key issues in this arena. For one student, "religion is personal to me for many reasons and [since] it can be a polarizing topic for discussion, I prefer not to talk about it". Nevertheless, as students sought to make meaning, five of them declared their faith identifying as Christian, Catholic, Sikh, Muslim and Atheist respectively. A sixth student shared a quote from a recent Buddhist community newsletter, while a seventh student suggested that "a broad perspective on spirituality is the way to go in the early childhood environment...[so]...it can be relevant to every faith. My beliefs are that of a higher consciousness and I do not prescribe to an organised religion." In their posts many of these women sought to share a little of their faith, identifying it as being fundamental to their identity.

After watching television coverage following the terror attack, another student related how she used her five-year-old child's questions about the flowers and a Muslim woman's headscarf as a learning opportunity. This parent contrasted the Sikh faith of their family with that of Muslims. Showing her daughter the karha (bangle) and turban that Sikhs wear, she differentiated these from the headscarf [khimar or hijab] and [skull] caps that Muslims usually wear [topi or tāqiyā]. She noted that explaining differences this way would translate into her teaching with young children and their families about religious harmony and respecting each other and our differences.

Six students referenced the article *Black ants and Buddhists* (Cowhey, 2006) in relation to critical teaching practices. Comments included "teaching children about serious issues, thinking critically and having philosophical decisions about what is going on around them is important for our future citizens". What this laudable view fails to recognise, however, is children's citizenship *now*. Students commented on the helpfulness of this article in which a teacher describes children's ongoing investigations sparked by a child arguing that ants are living things and we should not kill them. There was recognition of the ways in which young children were taught to listen to and affirm a minority voice that challenged the status quo. "I loved the example of the black ants and how she [the teacher] listened to one child and led the class on a journey to

learn about other cultures, religions and beliefs”. Tacit in this comment is recognition that education/ school/ curricula are typically ‘monophonic’ – there is one channel of transmission – that of the majority culture (in our case the dominant English speaking, white, middle-class) that reinforces the position of ‘cultural and linguistic other’ as secondary and inferior. Hence, what was reinforced was the importance of critical thinking, critical theories (MoE, 2017), and socially relevant curriculum that is inclusive of minority voices that challenge the status quo.

The example of socially relevant curriculum in Cowhey (2006) spoke to the things that mattered in the classroom lives of young children. The important role of the teacher in this domain was recognised by students with one noting:

the teacher very cleverly facilitated a journey of positive learning about diversity (Cowhey, 2006). I think as kaiako [teachers] we are in a unique position when it comes to building a positive foundation in terms of cultural awareness and diversity.

In response to Hannigan’s (2012) call, the ongoing investigation described by the teacher in Cowhey (2006) helped the forum participants to visualise how they might address issues of spiritual beliefs and religious differences with young children.

Provoking them to consider what counts as ‘socially relevant curriculum’ has, for some of these students, meant rethinking the place of religion/ spirituality in the ECE curriculum. Hannigan (2012) was especially thought provoking, causing them to (re)consider the position of religion, spirituality, holistic development and wairua in ECE settings where they currently teach or will teach. A common position taken by students from this reading was that religion is connected to culture with several students recognising that when children’s religions are absent from early childhood settings, part of who they are is invisible. One student influenced by Hannigan (2012) wrote that, “seeking to normalise a multicultural society, to normalise different religions/cultures we need to be actively and meaningfully supporting all religious contexts”, while another described how this reading had begun to open her (atheistic) mind to religion today.

The powerful influence of this chapter bodes well for Hannigan’s new chapter (Hannigan, 2020). Gunn et al., (2020b) suggest that “the question of whose interests take priority within a curriculum seeking to respect religious diversity makes for a terrain that is difficult to negotiate” (p. 241). This suggestion requires careful consideration by teachers and ECE communities, and resonates at this time.

### **Childhood innocence - knowing and not knowing**

*Children have an innocent and accepting view to difference, but as they grow, they soak up the views of their influential adults/society*

How to address tragic events with children in collaboration with families was raised by several students in response to the question of who should be talking to children at times like these—teachers or parents or both? The

importance of teachers and management in ECE settings creating or reviewing policies and procedures in this domain was stressed by participants. Their overarching rationale was that policies and procedures should support significant adults in children's lives "working together to support each other and the tamariki during stressful times".

There was some evidence of a discourse of childhood innocence as student postings reported that, in their ECE workplaces and their families, young children aged-under-5-years had no inkling of the tragic events on 15 March 2019. There was also evidence of this discourse realigning to the realisation that, as "many of the preschoolers have older siblings... snippets will come through to preschool so we do need to know how to deal with any questions or comments or behaviours that arise". Another posting pointed out that although children "have an innocent and accepting view to difference...as they grow, they soak up the views of their influential adults/society".

Furthermore, despite pre-school children not having an inkling of the events, one posting noted that some parents had "needed to talk" to staff at the centre on Monday following the terrorist attacks. Several students noted that families had been provided with information by centre staff about what they might say to their children depending on their age. The most cited advice was from psychologist Dr Sarb Johal, who specialises in helping children in the aftermath of tragedies (reported by Fallon, 2019), and who provided age-appropriate guidelines after the massacre.

Age-appropriate 'knowing' was widely discussed in the forum prompted by a student's description of seeing nine-year-olds playing a 'killing game' in the school playground as she dropped her children off to school on Monday morning (18 March). "Hey Muslims, I'm going to shoot all of you!" she heard children saying. The student took a range of actions in the school and online communities which she was part of, and the school called a special assembly to discuss the incident and its precursor with students. The playground incident proved controversial in our online discussion as students took positions such as that "terrorism and hate crimes should not be 'played out' by children" in contrast with a student who made a case for play as a way for children to process disasters and catastrophes supported by the Greenman (2005) and Gross and Gurewitz Clemens (n.d.) readings supplied to them. The general consensus was that by age nine, students should know better, and that teachers and parents had key roles to play.

## CONCLUSION

This study provides support for socially relevant curriculum in and beyond initial teacher education (ITE) programmes. It adds to the growing body of scholarship around difficult conversations, dangerous knowledge, cultural otherness and diversity and difference. This contribution is intended to continue the dialogue, support pedagogy in these complex areas of curricula, and enhance understandings of how preservice teachers (and young children) can be supported to make sense of traumatic events.

The massacres that took place at Christchurch mosques were significant, traumatic events, and the initial impact of what happened on 15 March 2019 was widely felt across tertiary classrooms, ECE centres, schools and workplaces throughout Aotearoa New Zealand. The asynchronous online

discussion at the centre of this research illustrates a teacher educator's negotiation/mediation of traumatic events to support student teachers. The availability of a dedicated space supported students' negotiation and meaning making, and enabled them to hear and value multiple perspectives and possibilities (Kelly-Ware, 2019), and to engage with cultural and religious differences. Betts and Gaches (2020) reinforce this action arguing that "early childhood kaiako have a critical role in supporting whānau and community recovery and can lead by example, by opening up spaces for dialogue and from learning from and with each other" (p. 83).

The discussion forum took place at a difficult time. As the women in this student cohort shared their values and beliefs along with their attitudes and experiences, their ethnic, religious, cultural and spiritual diversity became apparent. They had been at The University of Waikato for two months at the time of the Mosque killings and had only spent one week face-to-face for orientation purposes. The online discussion forum arguably offered a space in troubled times where a partnership in learning emerged that was "supportive of both students and teachers as whole human beings with complex lives" (Balakrishnan & Claiborne, 2017, p. 51). Subsequent discussions with these and other student teachers, in and out of virtual and face-to-face classrooms, have reinforced the need for educators and students to be prepared to speak about the things that matter (Silin, 1995).

The research project discussed in this article explored what socially relevant curriculum can and might look like in the wake of a massacre that occurred in places of worship in our country. The research question that I sought to answer was: What can be learned from student teacher responses (in an online discussion forum) when they were discussing socially relevant curriculum issues – terrorism, racism and spirituality – in the aftermath of the Christchurch Mosques terrorist massacre?

On the basis of this research I would encourage teachers/teacher educators to be courageous and not to shy away from difficult conversations—they have generative possibilities as this research has shown. It should not be assumed that national or global events are irrelevant to students or children, as they and their families potentially have relevant personal and other connections. Nor should teachers and teacher-educators be afraid to show vulnerability within the safe and supportive learning environments they provide.

Critical thinking and understandings from a social constructionist perspective are necessary if students/teachers are to problematise the notion of 'truth' as a singular discoverable construct. Otherness and sameness are key issues that students/teachers from the dominant culture and diverse cultures need to grapple with as society becomes more diverse. The universalising discourse of sameness or 'cultural homogenisation' does little to address prejudice and discrimination on the basis of racism or any other discriminatory 'ism'. Despite a shared humanity, privilege is not evenly applied. Furthermore, diverse spiritual beliefs, religions and faith require the values implicit in socially relevant curriculum to avoid homogeneity, universal thinking, metanarratives or stereotypes. As Betts and Gaches (2020) argue, being "open to, and engag[ing] with, cultural differences has become critical in light of the...terror attack" (p. 83).

Nor should young children be presumed to be innocent or ignorant. They are observant and perceptive to the emotional climate, adult conversations and the media. They are fellow citizens of a complex, diverse, multi-faceted society and globalised world. Therefore teachers and other adults should respond to children's questions, conversations and games in honest and 'age appropriate' ways, celebrating cultural otherness, 'give nothing to racism', and being courageous. Waiho i te toipoto, kua i te toiroa - Let us keep close together, not far apart. As-salāmu 'alaykum - Peace be upon you

### **Acknowledgements**

Special thanks to the student teachers enrolled in the Graduate Diploma in Teaching ECE programme at The University of Waikato for their openness and willingness to share what they had written - meaningful words from a time when we were all struggling to process the horror. Their honest, reflective and critical contributions during the online discussion vindicated my decision to forego the planned topic in favour of socially relevant curriculum. Thanks also to the official and unofficial reviewers and the editors for their work. Your suggestions have improved this manuscript immensely.

### **Funding**

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Glossary of Māori terms**

Aroha: love, compassion, empathy, affection

Kaiako: teacher(s)

Manaakitanga: hospitality and care for others

Tamariki: children

Te whāriki: a woven mat

Wairua: spirit

Whānau: extended family, multigenerational group of relatives

Manuscript Submitted: April 28, 2020

Manuscript Accepted: November 25, 2020

## REFERENCES

- Anti-Defamation League. (2005). *Racism Pyramid*.
- Arndt, S., & Tesar, M. (2020). Risking a great dithering: Changing the story of otherness through revolt. *Somatechnics*, 10(1), 35-51. <https://www.eupublishing.com/doi/10.3366/soma.2020.0299>
- Balakrishnan, V., & Claiborne, L. (2017). Partnership among multicultural peers in the scholarship of teaching and learning: Moving beyond research boundaries. In B. Cowie, & R. McNae (Eds.), *Realising innovative partnerships in educational research: Theories and methodologies for collaboration* (pp. 45-54). Sense Publishers.
- Betts, R., & Gaches, S. (2020). Entering unknown spaces: Tamariki and whānau from refugee backgrounds. In A.C. Gunn, N. Surtees, D. Gordon-Burns & K. Purdue (Eds.), *Te aotūroa tātaki: Inclusive early childhood education. Perspectives on inclusion, social justice and equity from Aotearoa New Zealand* (2nd ed.) (pp. 72-89). NZCER Press.
- Blaise, M., & Taylor, A. (2012). Using queer theory to rethink gender equity in early childhood education. *Young Children*, 67(1), 88–97. <https://www.naeyc.org>
- Braun, V., & Clark, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Boyatzis, R.E. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. SAGE.
- Cowhey, M. (2006). *Black ants and Buddhists: Thinking critically and teaching differently in the primary grades*. Stenhouse Publishers.
- Fallon, V. (2019, March 16). *What to tell children about the Christchurch mosque shootings*. Stuff. <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/111331094/what-to-tell-children-about-the-christchurch-mosque-shootings>
- Gaiser, T. (2008). Online focus groups. In N. Fielding., R. M. Lee & G. Blank (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of online research methods* (pp. 290-306). SAGE Publications. doi.org/10.4135/9780857020055.n16
- Gordon-Burns, D., Gunn, A.C., Purdue, K., & Surtees, N. (Eds.), (2012). *Te aotūroa tātaki: Inclusive early childhood education: Perspectives on inclusion, social justice and equity from Aotearoa New Zealand*. NZCER Press.
- Gordon-Burns, D., Gunn, A.C., Surtees, N., & Purdue, K. (2020). Introduction: Thinking differently about early childhood inclusive education in Aotearoa New Zealand and beyond. *Te aotūroa tātaki: Inclusive early childhood education: Perspectives on inclusion, social justice and equity from Aotearoa New Zealand* (2nd ed., pp. 1-17). NZCER Press.
- Graffigna, C., & Bosio, A.C. (2006). The influence of setting on findings produced in qualitative health research: A comparison between face-to-face and online discussion groups about HIV/AIDS. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 2006, 5(3), 55-76. <https://doi/10.1177/1609.40690600500307>
- Greenman, J. (2005). *What happened to my world? Helping children cope with natural disaster and catastrophe*. Comfort for Kids.

- [https://www.brighthorizons.com/resources/pdf/talktochildren/docs/what\\_happened\\_to\\_my\\_world.pdf](https://www.brighthorizons.com/resources/pdf/talktochildren/docs/what_happened_to_my_world.pdf)
- Gross, T., & Gurewitz Clemens, S. (n.d.). *Painting a tragedy: Young children process the events of September 11*. <https://www.thelearningcollaborative.org>
- Gunn, A. C. (2003). A philosophical anchor for creating inclusive communities in early childhood education: Anti-bias philosophy and Te Whāriki: early childhood curriculum. *Waikato Journal of Education*, 9, 129-141. <https://hdl.handle.net/10289/6251>
- Gunn, A.C., Surtees, N., Gordon-Burns, D., & Purdue, K. (Eds.), (2020a). Dedication. *Te aotūroa tātaki: Inclusive early childhood education. Perspectives on inclusion, social justice and equity from Aotearoa New Zealand* (2nd ed., n.p.). NZCER Press.
- Gunn, A.C., Surtees, N., Gordon-Burns, D., & Purdue, K. (Eds.), (2020b). Puzzling over inclusion: Concluding remarks. *Te aotūroa tātaki: Inclusive early childhood education. Perspectives on inclusion, social justice and equity from Aotearoa New Zealand* (2nd ed.) (pp. 232-247). NZCER Press.
- Gunn, Jason. (2019, March 21). *My hometown* [Video]. You Tube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lkvDA3ItLOU>
- Hannigan, B. (2012). Does God go to preschool?: A case for religious inclusion. In D. Gordon-Burns, A. C. Gunn, K. Purdue & N. Surtees (Eds.), *Te Aotūroa Tātaki – Inclusive early childhood education: Perspectives on inclusion, social justice and equity from Aotearoa New Zealand* (pp. 135-154). NZCER Press.
- Hannigan, B. (2020). Spiritual wellbeing and the inclusion of religious cultures. In A.C. Gunn, N. Surtees, D. Gordon-Burns & K. Purdue (Eds.), *Te aotūroa tātaki: Inclusive early childhood education. Perspectives on inclusion, social justice and equity from Aotearoa New Zealand* (2nd ed., pp. 159-176). NZCER Press.
- Human Rights Commission. (2017, June 15). *Give nothing to racism* [Video]. <https://www.hrc.co.nz/news/give-nothing-racism/>
- Hunt, P. (2019). *Inclusivity in the age of anger*. Stuff. <https://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/opinion/116114922/inclusivity-in-the-age-of-anger>
- Kelly-Ware, J. (2018). *Negotiating fairness and diversity: Stories from an Aotearoa New Zealand kindergarten*. [Doctoral thesis, The University of Waikato]. The University of Waikato Research Commons. <https://hdl.handle.net/10289/12132>
- Kelly-Ware, J. (2019). An 'open letter to teachers'. *Teachers and Curriculum*, 19(1), 55-60. <https://doi.org/10.15663/tandc.v19i1.335>
- Ministry of Education. (1996). *Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa. Early childhood curriculum*. Learning Media. <https://education.govt.nz/assets/Documents/Early-Childhood/Te-Whariki-1996.pdf>
- Ministry of Education. (2017). *Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa. Early childhood curriculum*. Author. <https://education.govt.nz/assets/Documents/Early-Childhood/ELS-Te-Whariki-Early-Childhood-Curriculum-ENG-Web.pdf>

- New Zealand Herald. (2019, April 6). *What Jacinda wrote in the minutes after Christchurch mosque terror attacks revealed*. The New Zealand Herald. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/what-jacinda-ardern-wrote-in-the-minutes-after-christchurch-mosque-terror-attacks-revealed/4TPCDFROUW4ZMIXUYJ2N6N52YY/>
- Robertson, N. R. (2004, July). On equality and colourblindness. *Bulletin of the New Zealand Psychological Society*, 102, 26-27. <https://hdl.handle.net/10289/1698>
- Robinson, K.H., & Jones Diaz, C. (2016). *Diversity and difference in childhood: Issues for theory and practice* (2nd ed.). Open University Press.
- Silin, J. (1995). *Sex, death, and the education of children: Our passion for ignorance in the age of AIDS*. Teachers College Press.
- Schoorman (2011). Reconceptualizing teacher education as a social justice undertaking: Underscoring the urgency for *critical multiculturalism* in early childhood education. *Childhood Education*, 87(5), 341-344. <https://10.1080.00094056.2011.10523210>
- Woolf, A-L. (2019, March 17). 'This is your home' Wellington artist's response to Christchurch shooting shared internationally. Stuff <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/111350696/this-is-your-home-wellington-artists-response-to-christchurch-shooting-shared-internationally>
- Yelland, N. (2008). Series Editor's Introduction. In C. Genishi, & A. L. Goodwin (Eds.), *Diversities in early childhood education: rethinking and doing* (pp.ix-xi). Routledge.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JANETTE KELLY-WARE  
*The University of Waikato*



Janette Kelly-Ware is a Senior Lecturer in Education and the Academic Coordinator - Graduate Diploma in Teaching ECE at The University of Waikato. Her research interests include spirituality, sexualities, diversity and social justice, picturebooks, and nature-based education.

Contact email:

[janette.kelly@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:janette.kelly@waikato.ac.nz)