Introduction

This paper explores particular forms of intercultural relations that occurred for a group of Chinese immigrant children attending their first early childhood centre in New Zealand. We define intercultural relations as interactional phenomena such as language and other social practices that enable the co-existence of different cultures and cultural tools within a given setting. Through analysing examples of the children’s negotiations and creation of relations between their family culture and the culture of their early childhood centre, we argue that the presence or absence of Chinese-speaking peers and adults played a pivotal role in mediating intercultural relations. The analysis reveals a picture of the Chinese children as agentic and strategic drivers of their own learning.

Culture and cultural relations

In this study we use the term ‘culture’ to refer to those aspects of the social environment that are taken for granted by those who share the environment: customs, ways of being and acting and, in particular, a shared language. Tomasello (1999) suggested that culture is ‘the species-typical and species-unique “ontogenetic niche” for human development’ (p. 79). Thus, cultural learning involves comprehending ‘how “we” use the artefacts and practices of our culture—what they are “for”’ (p. 91). Within a cultural environment, people identify with others and this tendency provides the social and cognitive basis of their culture (Kruger & Tomasello, 1998). Focusing specifically on the relationship between culture and people, Kruger and Tomasello explained that the two are mutually dependent: they shape and are shaped by each other. Within a sociocultural framework, culture incorporates three key components: cultural tools, mediation and social relationships (Cole & Gajdamaschko, 2007; Leontyev, 1981). Vygotsky and Leontyev both argued that one’s association with an environment is a mediated process (Lantolf, 2000) for which social relationships provide the context and where learning occurs through such cultural tools as language. As Wertsch and Tulviste (1996) have pointed out, cultural tools and mediators are the most crucial contributors to human functioning.

Wadham, Pudsey and Boyd (2007) used the concept of culture as a ‘toolbox’ for dealing with situations in life, to create being, living, behaving and learning. In all
cases, the tools in the ‘toolbox’ consist of symbols, language, values, beliefs, norms, rituals and material objects (p. 6).

In recent times, theoretical discussions associated with culture have been characterised by the movement to a more contextually based perspective. Drawing on a range of cross-cultural studies, Rogoff (2003) clearly identified huge variations in people’s practices and expectations across cultural communities. For Cole, ‘culture is synonymous with cultural differences’ (1998, p. 11). Cole’s (1988; 1998; 2005) view is based on a strong belief that life experiences are extremely context-specific, and therefore should be understood in line with the contexts in which they occur. This point is key to understanding cultural relations as they occur in early childhood educational settings.

Focusing on metaphors about cultural relations in countries with migrant populations, Gobbo (2009) wrote that, when different cultures are brought together, there is a need to ‘valorize diversity and at the same time to underline what is common between migrants and the host population, namely culture’ (p. 322). This shift of focus away from differences of culture to viewing culture as a phenomenon that characterises all people assumes a particular ontological framework, which Slife (2004) called ‘relational ontology’, where everyone or everything is a nexus of relations.

From a sociocultural perspective of the learner–culture connection, cultural relations can be seen to contribute to learning by providing a context for two different cultures, thus creating a dual meditational process which one could call an intercultural phenomenon. The intercultural study presented in this paper is an example of such a phenomenon. Through examining how cultural relations played out during the peer interaction contexts of eight Chinese immigrant children in New Zealand early childhood centres, this paper opens a window onto how the children used a key cultural tool from their family culture—Chinese language—to mediate their learning experiences in non-family learning settings.

Children as creators of cultural relations

While Vygotksy recognised children’s biologically specified ability as an important component of their learning and development, he did not put too much emphasis on children’s use of autonomy and agency. Vygotksy’s colleague, Leontyev, on the other hand, explicitly attached importance to children’s agency and argued that children do not simply learn to become members of a community but transform their worlds ‘through [their] increasingly informed actions’ (Edwards, 2005, p. 53). Engeström (1999) suggested ‘boundary crossing’ to conceptualise the coordination of different activity systems, including the use of ‘boundary objects’ (Star & Griesem, 1989, p. 393) as an initial means of bridging the differences of these activity systems.

The concept of a boundary object offers a model for understanding how some practical objects provide means of connection to different social worlds (Star & Griesem, 1989). Engeström talked of learning as occurring in a changing combination of interconnected activity systems and ‘object transformation’ towards common goals. Recently, an Australian researcher Flückiger (2010) echoed these ideas when she equated young immigrant children’s successful adaptation to non-family learning settings with their ability to ‘culture-switch’ through ‘purposeful actions of mixing, transferring, and borrowing’ (p. 102).

Based on their intensive studies across cultural contexts, Rogoff and colleagues (2007) highlighted the importance of children’s creation of ‘hybrid forms’ of practices (p. 509) to find ways to participate in cultural communities different from their own. They claimed the cultural practices established by the children are critical to their participation in unknown situations, and there might then be an adjustment of their familiar repertoires to produce ‘their own repertoire of practice’ (p. 491) to cope with the new situational demands.

The hybrid forms of practice and repertoires of practice highlighted by Rogoff et al. (2007) point to significant learning opportunities that arise in settings where different cultures ‘meet, collide and merge’ (Engeström, 1999, p. 3). They show that, within their family or cultural community, children develop fundamental skills of seeing and doing things that assist their participation in other cultural communities. These concepts address how children can make contributions to their own learning processes by finding helpful strategies for certain circumstances (Rogoff et al., 2007).

Methodology

Eight case studies were conducted to investigate the learning experiences of eight three–five-year-old Chinese immigrant children in predominantly English-speaking New Zealand early childhood centres. The children spoke Mandarin (standard Chinese) as their first language, and had parents who had immigrated to New Zealand from China, Hong Kong or Taiwan within the previous 10 years.

We used two major methods of data collection for each case study: child observations; and interviews with the child, the child’s parents, and the child’s early childhood teachers. Direct observations of each child were made for five full days in each of the children’s early childhood centres. In each case we aimed for
‘portraits of the subjects; reconstruction of dialogue; description of physical setting; accounts of particular events; depiction of activities; the observer’s behaviour’ (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, pp. 113–114). In particular, a note was made of each child’s social interactions and their play and learning activities. Special attention was paid to the children’s use of language, the situations in which they spoke, the people involved, and the children’s body language.

In each child interview, the process was supported by five stories constructed around five typical life experiences: being at home for a day; starting the day at the early childhood setting; free play time; playing with peers; and playing with a teacher. A picture was created to initiate the story, which the child was then asked to continue in his/her own words.

A semi-structured interview with each child’s parents, and a similar one with the child’s teachers, took place after the third or fourth day of observation. The interviews sought the adults’ insights about their child’s learning and development, as well as answers to specific questions arising from the child observations.

Four of the children in the study were boys and four were girls. The parents of one child were from Taiwan and those of the other seven were from mainland China. Table 1 provides information about each child (all names are pseudonyms).

### Analysis

Data was analysed to identify any patterns that could throw light on the children’s learning experiences and to gain insight into the meanings the children were constructing from these experiences.

Four thematic categories were identified through this process: (i) bridging cultures: using family cultural tools as a bridge for involvement in the learning practices of the early childhood centre; (ii) converging cultures: mixing the cultural tools of the family with those of the centres; (iii) claiming group identity: togetherness and difference; (iv) battling constraints: failures in intercultural relations. The family cultural tools referred to in this study were primarily the Chinese language and the children’s peer choices. The rest of this paper elaborates on these thematic categories.

#### i. Bridging cultures: using family cultural tools as a bridge for involvement in the learning practices of the early childhood centre

The category of ‘bridging’ was used to bring together observational data in which the children were seen to draw on their family cultural tools, primarily language, to act as a bridge for their learning in the new context of the early childhood setting. Key examples of cultural bridging were evident when the case study children approached their Chinese peers and addressed them in their common language when they sought to understand what was going on within the centres. This strategy was particularly noticeable among the children new to the centre who could not speak English well; invariably, they singled out their Chinese peers to help them when they had questions about the unfamiliar learning demands of the centres.

For example, Jim, who had been at the early childhood centre just a month at the start of his case study, used Chinese on many occasions to ask his Chinese peer, Leah, for help. This reliance on Leah was in part because, as Jim’s teachers said during

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>1 English abilities</th>
<th>Length of centre attendance</th>
<th>Peers in the centre</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jim</td>
<td>3 yrs 1 mth</td>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>1 mth</td>
<td>Chinese and English-speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>3 yrs 3 mths</td>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>2 mths</td>
<td>English-speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eden</td>
<td>3 yrs 3 mths</td>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Basic conversations</td>
<td>3 mths</td>
<td>Chinese and English-speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rick</td>
<td>4 yrs 5 mths</td>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Almost competent</td>
<td>2 yrs 5 mths</td>
<td>Chinese and English-speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>3 yrs 6 mths</td>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>Routine conversations</td>
<td>4 mths</td>
<td>Chinese and English-speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>3 yrs 8 mths</td>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>Routine conversations</td>
<td>10 mths</td>
<td>English-speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leah</td>
<td>4 yrs 6 mths</td>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>Competent</td>
<td>2 yrs 4 mths</td>
<td>Chinese and English-speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xiaohan</td>
<td>4 yrs 8 mths</td>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>2 mths</td>
<td>Chinese and English-speaking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Data sources for compiling the children’s language ‘levels’ include parents’ and teachers’ informal assessment recorded during interviews, supported by observations of children’s language used in the ECE centres. ‘Minimal’ means children are able to cope with very few communication contexts in English. ‘Basic conversation’ refers to children’s ability to comprehend and respond to some routine-related communication tasks in English. ‘Routine conversations’ means children comprehend and respond to nearly all routine activities in English. ‘Almost competent’ requires children to manage many daily conversations in English. ‘Competence’ applies to children able to deal with all learning experiences that require the use of language.
their interview, ‘Leah was allocated to help Jim, when Jim first joined us’. This arrangement allowed Leah to spend time with Jim, which Jim made good use of as in the following example:

Jim walks over to Leah: ‘wo bu zhe dao ‘bottle’ shi shen ma’ [I don’t know what ‘bottle’ is].

Leah: ‘shi ping zi’ [It’s ‘ping zi’].

On this and nearly every other occasion that Jim used Chinese to seek help from Leah, Leah responded with helpful guidance, which seemed to confirm for Jim the value of his action.

Eden’s behaviour was very similar to that shown by Jim, with the observational data recording Eden’s search for his Chinese peer Joe, and asking Joe for help on numerous occasions. For example, Eden, who had been at the centre for three months, was observed listening to an instruction by his teacher, Rebecca. Clearly not understanding what Rebecca had said, Eden turned to Joe and asked, ‘Ta shuo shen ma? [What did she say?]’. With Joe’s explanation in Chinese, Eden was then able to comply with his teacher’s instruction.

In both examples, the children’s use of the Chinese language acted as a mediator for their gradual understanding of how the centre worked. In this way, the cultural tool of the Chinese language, and the presence of a social partner who shared the same cultural tool, provided the children with a bridge from one culture to the other.

This strategy of bridging cultures—that of the family and that of the early childhood centre—can be seen as an example of how the two worlds of these new immigrant children came together. Gaining access to the early childhood setting became the ‘object intention’, or motive, of the immigrant Chinese children who made use of the resources within their environment to achieve their objective. In this case, the resources available to the children were their command of the Chinese language and a peer who could understand Chinese and was interculturally competent. The Chinese immigrant children effectively rendered the interculturally competent peer their boundary object (Star & Griesemer, 1989) that enabled them to ‘boundary cross’ (Engestrom, 1999, p. 3).

ii. Converging cultures: mixing the cultural tools of the family with those of the early childhood centres

Another intercultural relation observable within the data was the convergence of the Chinese children’s family cultural tools with those of the centres. Cultural convergence was identified when the children used Chinese and English in the same learning encounter as in the following data excerpts:

Jim is playing in the water trough on his own. He sprinkles water onto the ground. As he plays, Jim laughs: ‘water, water jiao di di’ [water, water the ground].

Rick walks to Ben, his Chinese peer, holding a figure made of dough in his hand. Rick shows Ben: ‘see, dinosaur’.

Ben turns to Rick’s dough figure: ‘wo kan guo hao da de kong long’ [I once saw a huge dinosaur].

Rick: ‘wo men jia jiu you da kong long’ [I have a big one at home].

Eden turns to her: ‘pen’, pointing to the pen box.

In these examples, all the children moved between two languages, regardless of their differing English abilities. In the first example, Jim’s utterances included the use of the two languages despite the absence of English-speaking people in the water trough area and his very limited English ability. Rick, on the other hand, began using English with Ben and then switched to Chinese when Ben responded to him only in Chinese. Eden switched between the two languages to suit the people he spoke to.

A number of hypotheses are able to explain these actions. For example, by changing between the two languages, the children might have been demonstrating an intuitive awareness of the co-existence of two linguistic codes in their lives. This seems particularly likely in the case of Rick and Eden, who switched between English and Chinese, depending on whom they were addressing. It is also possible that underlying the Chinese children’s use of both languages was the recognition that both languages served a practical function within their early childhood centre. Additionally, when mixing one language with the other, the children connected the two cultures.

Another hypothesis highlights the role of language in facilitating the process of boundary crossing for the children: for them, the two languages acted as complementary tools or boundary objects (Star & Griesemer, 1989) that interconnected their two cultural contexts. The processes of mixing cultural tools appeared to be a reflection of the children’s intuitive analyses of how to expand skills in cross-cultural learning settings in order to play, express their feelings, and communicate with others.
iii. Claiming group identity: togetherness and difference

This category was developed from data that showed the case study children using their Chinese immigrant family culture as a marker of identity, to create a sense of togetherness with their Chinese peers at the same time as establishing difference from the mainstream culture of the centres. All the children were observed to have lengthy and engaged interactions with one or more Chinese peers. When asked during interviews whom they wanted to play with, replies were:

Xiaohan: Chinese children, we can all speak Chinese. We are friends.

Leah: I have many friends. I have Chinese friends. I have other friends too.

Eden: I like playing with Joe [a Chinese child].

Rick: I like Xiaohan and Peter [Chinese children]. They are my friends.

Jim: I play with Leah [a Chinese child].

Amy: Ken [a Chinese child] wants to play with me. I play with Ken.

It is evident that being Chinese played a role in the children’s peer preferences and, in at least two cases, being Chinese and being able to speak Chinese were specifically nominated as important criteria for their friendships. This finding is not a surprise, given the important role of similarity in friendship formation. For example, MacDonald (1996) claimed that ‘children are attracted to peers who are similar to themselves on a wide variety of traits’ (p. 53).

In the following data from the field notes, the immigrant children’s close relationships with Chinese peers are highlighted and their group identity as Chinese emerges clearly:

Rick climbs onto a plank where Peter (Chinese) is walking. Rick starts walking behind Peter. Peter leaves the plank and runs to the playhouse on the other side of the yard and, poking his head out of the playhouse, calls out: ‘Rick, lai ya’ [Rick, come here]. Rick climbs down off the plank and goes to the playhouse. On the way, he sings a song in Chinese: ‘du …’. Rick enters the playhouse and sits on the floor. Peter sits beside him. Xiaohan finds them and pushes herself in. Xiaohan climbs out of the window of the playhouse and the other two children follow. Rick: ‘wo men dao na hao ma?’ [Shall we go there?], pointing to the other side of the yard. He runs and so do Xiaohan and Peter. Rick then runs back to the playhouse. Xiaohan and Peter follow him and all three of them sit inside the playhouse. Ben (Chinese) walks across to them as well and joins them on the floor. Rick stands up, putting his arms around them all. He holds Ben’s hand, Ben holds Xiaohan’s and Xiaohan holds Peter’s hand. The children move out of the playhouse and as a group walk to the bridge that links the playhouse to the ground. They sit down on the bridge. Tony (English-speaking) comes over and stands on the ground looking up at them. Ben bends down and says to Tony: ‘You cannot come to OUR house’. He turns to the Chinese peers: Dui ba, zhe shi wo men de jia’ [right? This is our home]. Xiaohan: ‘Dui’ [Yes, you are right]. Ben then turns to Tony: ‘Go’. Tony shouts: ‘No’. Ben suddenly kicks Tony and Xiaohan calls out: ‘Shi wo men da jia. Rang ta zou’ [This is our home. Let him go]. She then stands up and waves her fist at Tony. Rick says: ‘Zou ba, dao fang li qu’ [let’s go to the playhouse]. But Ben continues to kick Tony. Xiaohan shouts at Tony: ‘Go, go’. Peter puts his fist up towards Tony. Tony cries and leaves them. Rick leads the way to the playhouse and the other three follow him.

This excerpt is interesting on a number of counts. First, the Chinese children followed one another closely and demonstrated a sense of belonging to their group by using the words ‘us’, ‘our’, ‘we’, as well as moving together and Rick cuddling them all. Additionally, Ben and Xiaohan referred to the ‘bridge’ and ‘the playhouse’ as ‘our home’, again demonstrating a clear sense of ‘we-ness’, connection and unity, indicating togetherness for the four children. Second, Ben, Xiaohan and Peter were fighting as a group against Tony, demonstrating again the children’s sense of togetherness: The children did not include Tony in their group, possibly because Tony could not speak their language, was not a regular play peer for any of them, and the children were in ‘their own’ shared place. Moreover, since the children had likened the playhouse to their ‘home’, Tony would have been regarded as an outsider, who, therefore, should not have come in without being invited. This behaviour by the Chinese children is a typical example of a ‘core group’ in peer cultures where the group members ‘often work together to resist the entry of new members … simply because they are not members of the group’ (Corsaro, 2005, p. 185). Of the four children, Rick did not join the fighting but suggested a change in the context. An explanation for his behaviour as an onlooker could be that as his mother and the teacher said: ‘Rick is very gentle and calm’, which possibly means that Rick did not like fighting with others. Even so, his words ‘Let’s …’ also indicated his attempt to move the group together. What the children did in this scenario illustrates that, for them, becoming a member of a group means finding ways of being together, as well as stopping other people (non-group members) from entering the group.
Within the scenarios where the Chinese children were together using only their first language, there was a sense that they were consciously using that togetherness to keep their family culture apart from the mainstream culture of the centre. Their motive appeared to be the maintenance of their own cultural identity, because, as Rick said when interviewed about his Chinese peers at the centre: ‘We are all Chinese here’.

Serpell (1993) understood this pattern of social relationship to be:

... the children taking on cognitive authority, demonstrating confidence and competence to act autonomously and also develop a sense of membership in the group and corresponding ownership in its cultural resources. The authority of this claim ‘this is my language, my culture, my community’ is simultaneously based in a sense of belonging (of being owned and accepted by the group) (p. 362).

Serpell’s statement is important as an insight to the power of a familiar culture to mediate children’s experience in an unfamiliar cultural community. Their language provided them with the most fundamental way of keeping their established sense of identity intact in a culturally unfamiliar setting.

iv. Battling constraints: failures in intercultural relations

As indicated in Table 1, Sarah and Luke were the only two children who did not have Chinese peers in their early childhood centres. A notable feature was their lack of success in interacting with peers and accessing social resources within the centres. When Sarah’s teacher, Amanda, described Sarah, she explained why Sarah played alone most of the time as follows:

... Sarah has not got enough English. She is also too cautious of how other children treat her. I observed Sarah many times watching other children playing but not trying to join in.

The following excerpt illustrates one unsuccessful bid to join in peer activity in which Sarah was clearly very interested:

Sarah walks to a tent built by the teachers for children to play in. Two children are inside. Sarah stops by a corner of the tent, pulling a piece of the tent cloth towards herself, leaning inside to watch. Another child walks up to the tent. As she walks past Sarah, she gives Sarah a glance, then continues inside the tent. Another child now comes along. Sarah turns her head towards him, looking at his face, seemingly wanting to be noticed. The boy also gives Sarah a glance, then turns his eyes away and walks inside the tent. Sarah’s eyes follow him. The four children inside the tent play together, laughing and shouting, while Sarah stands by the tent, one metre away from them, watching.

Sarah’s body language is clear here: By standing by the tent, leaning inside, watching peers playing, and making eye contact, she demonstrated an interest in joining her peers inside. However, Sarah also lacked the confidence to follow her peers, as indicated by the distance she kept from the other children.

In another episode Sarah again appeared reluctant to get close to her English-speaking peers, maintaining a physical distance from them even when her teacher, Anne, called her over:

Sarah walks to the seesaw where two children are playing. Her teacher Anne is sitting with some other children on a nearby bench. Anne: ‘Sarah, come sit here and wait’, pointing to a space by one of the girls on the bench. Sarah walks towards Anne. She stops by the bench, glances at the space and sits down. She keeps a big gap between her and the girl already sitting there. The girl turns her head to Sarah, looks through her as if Sarah did not exist and then turns her gaze to the seesaw again. Sarah stays where she is.

Judging from the blank stare that Sarah received from the girl on the bench, this excerpt also suggests that Sarah did not know if the other children would include her if she made a bid to join in their activity.

Luke’s teacher Nicole also saw Luke’s English difficulty as the reason for his limited peer experiences in the centre, saying, ‘Luke does not know English. He can’t follow the cues of his peers’.

Luke exhibited a profile of peer experiences that was very like Sarah’s; he too faced difficulties establishing peer relationships. Additionally, Luke’s data included evidence of physically aggressive behaviours, as in the following examples:

Luke walks around. He walks to an English-speaking girl, who had not been observed previously to have interacted with Luke. Luke reaches out and gives the girl a cuddle. The girl pushes him away. Luke hits the girl in the face.

An English-speaking girl is sitting on a cushion, reading a book. Luke walks to her, bends down to her and gives her a smile as he sits down beside her. The girl quickly stands up and leaves. Luke watches her leave, then stands up, chasing the girl. He reaches the girl and snatches the book from her hand: ‘Gei wu’ [give it to me]. The girl hits Luke on his chest with her hand, but Luke grabs the book and runs away with it. On the way,

In both these examples, Luke’s approach to the girls seemed motivated by a wish to interact with them in a friendly manner, but in each instance his friendly overtures were rejected. It seems likely that Luke’s physical attack of his peers was a reaction to his disappointment.

As Luke’s teacher and mother both indicated during interviews, Luke liked cuddling people, probably because Luke and his little sister were frequently cuddled at home as a way of expressing affection. Unfortunately, however, when Luke used this physical gesture in the early childhood centre his approaches were rejected. Luke’s teacher, Nicole, suggested that Luke’s cuddling was inappropriate because ‘children here do not like cuddles’. This makes them feel like babies’ (Teacher interview).

Both Sarah and Luke made many unsuccessful bids to engage in peer interaction, suggesting that the lack of a shared language was a significant barrier to successful intercultural relations. All too often, their English-speaking peers appeared dismissive of Sarah’s and Luke’s attempts to be included, thus creating intercultural relations that appeared to ‘collide’ (Engeström, 1999) rather than bridge cultures. Specifically, for Sarah, being Chinese appeared to be ‘troubling’ rather than beneficial. In Luke’s case, the key to his difficulties lay in the difference between his home cultural practice of cuddling and the peer practices in the centre, and his apparent inability to adapt his behaviour when he shifted contexts. Unlike Sarah, who appeared cautious and sensitive of opportunities to relate to peers, Luke assertively exercised his home cultural practices even when they continued to be rebuffed. These failures in Luke’s peer interactions reveal another type of cultural collision which acted as a constraint for Luke’s learning.

**Intercultural relations: Reflections and implications**

In the context of this study, the experiences of Luke and Sarah emerge as remarkably different from those of the other six children. While the other children were able to successfully use their Chinese cultural tools to either bridge the two cultures, bring the tools of their two cultures into a convergence, or create a sense of togetherness and identity within an unfamiliar context, Luke and Sarah found themselves battling to establish successful interactions with peers in their centre and repeatedly experiencing rejection of their attempts. This is despite that, to all intents and purposes, Sarah and Luke possessed the same cultural tools from their families as the other six children. The only key difference in the experiences of the two groups appeared to be the presence of Chinese peers (and adults) in the centres attended by the six children and their absence in the centres attended by Sarah and Luke. This suggests that, as Vygotsky (1932, cited in Ivic, 1989) argued, if it is only through the mediation of people in social interactions that a child becomes able to use the tools of a new culture, then it is likely that the Chinese peers were crucial social partners for six of the case study children: they understood them, befriended them, and acted as their cultural mediators within the predominantly English-speaking environment of their centres. By extension, it is likely that the absence of peers (or adults) who could act as cultural mediators in the other centres accounts for Sarah’s and Luke’s repeated failures to establish successful intercultural relations.

This insight leads to a number of important reflections. First, it suggests that in this study the possession of family cultural tools—primarily language—was not by itself a guarantee that the tools would be used to facilitate the establishment of intercultural relations. Rather, to be effective, family cultural tools needed to be used in a receptive and responsive environment. In other words, the environment needed to provide its own connections (such as speakers of the same language), to which the Chinese immigrant children could link their existing cultural tools. Rogoff, Mosier, Mistry and Gonçü (1993) showed in their study with toddlers that ‘[young] children [also] seek connections between old and new situations’ (p. 235). Sarah’s and Luke’s experiences show that, when connections between family cultural tools and the culture of the early childhood centre were unable to be established, the family cultural tools were rendered unusable in their pursuit of becoming competent social partners and learners within their new environment.

This study has shown that, by and large, the case study children were expected to negotiate their social interactions in the centre by themselves, with the teachers explicitly stating during interviews that they did not treat the Chinese immigrant children any differently from other children. Specifically, the teachers prided themselves on treating ‘children all the same’. The data in this study, however, suggests that, irrespective of the teachers’ intentions, the children’s experiences of social interactions were not ‘all the same’. Instead, they differed considerably in whether or not they could access peers who could act as their mediator to open up the new culture of the centre. As a consequence, the social processes experienced by Sarah and Luke can be described as intercultural relations that ‘collided’ (Engeström, 1999, p. 3) rather than ‘mixed’, ‘borrowed’ (Flückiger, 2010, p. 102) or otherwise bridged and converged, as they did for the six children who had Chinese peers (and Chinese-speaking adults) in their centre.
It is imperative that early childhood centres attend to the nature of the social processes experienced by immigrant children in New Zealand. This means that teachers need to assist Chinese immigrant children to create connections between their family cultural tools and those within the centre.

Focusing on the experiences of the six children with Chinese peers in their centre, this study has demonstrated that the children were active and strategic drivers of their own learning.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the learning experiences of Chinese immigrant children in New Zealand early childhood centres can be usefully conceptualised as a process of negotiating and creating intercultural relations. Using multiple case-study data from the experiences of eight Chinese immigrant children, it has demonstrated that the children's experiences were strongly affected by their ability to use the cultural tools of their home culture—primarily language—to mediate their experiences in their new context. The children sought peers who could speak Chinese in order to interpret the expectations and instructions of their teachers as well as their peers' social behaviours. Six of the children succeeded in this, but two children did not—resulting in experiences of failure and social rejection.

In this research, language and peer experiences were related in both positive and negative ways. It seems important that future studies are undertaken to explore the extent to which language and peer skills influence each other for immigrant children in early childhood centres.

References


