

**‘Culture’ or teaching? Japanese women’s learning experiences  
in New Zealand high school and university classrooms**

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**Introduction**

The international education literature that investigates learning issues for international students from Asia frequently emphasises ‘culture’<sup>1</sup> as a key factor in students’ learning experiences (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997; Li, 2004; Ward, 2001). In this paper, we refer to culture as a binary notion of so-called collectivist and individualist traditions<sup>2</sup>, where collectivist or Confucian heritage culture, unlike individualist traditions, is argued to value collective consciousness and attitudes of agreeing with, harmonising with and maintaining face of others in a group (Holmes, 2005). In terms of the learning and teaching context, the role of the teacher in the collectivist culture is to transmit knowledge to the students who are expected to receive that knowledge (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997). In the individualist culture, on the other hand, it is argued that students are often encouraged to have their own opinions, be assertive and verbally engage in dialogue (Holmes, 2005). Therefore, according to the literature, different cultures can generate different learning approaches and communication styles in the classroom. Consequently, as research has found, a majority of international students from collectivist cultures struggle to ‘adjust’ their learning style in individualistic cultures (e.g. Holmes, 2005).

Therefore, the literature commonly attributes students’ learning/teaching issues to ‘cultural differences’ between those two traditions of collectivist and individualist cultures.

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<sup>1</sup> We align ourselves with Nieto’s (2000) understanding of culture as “consist[ing] of the values, traditions, social and political relationships, and worldview created, shared and transformed by a group of people bound together by a common history, geographic location, language, social class, and/or religion.” (p. 139)

<sup>2</sup> While Ward (2001) groups “collectivist cultures” as “most Asian countries” (p. 18), other authors (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997; Holmes, 2005; Hostede, 1994 in Baker, 1997) identify China, Indonesia, South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan as examples of collectivist societies. On the other hand, countries such as Britain, the United States, Australia, New Zealand and Denmark are identified as individualistic cultures (Baker, 1997).

Consequently, international students from the collectivist cultures are often categorised, homogenised and constituted as ‘Others’ or ‘Asian’ international students who should optimally ‘adjust’ their learning to unfamiliar classroom contexts (Ward, 2001).

This paper argues that framing the learning/teaching ‘issues’ solely within the notion of ‘cultural differences’ produces deficit discourse<sup>3</sup> of ‘Asian’ international students. The paper further contends that constituting and positioning the international Asian students within such a discourse can marginalise the students and perpetuate unquestioned practices of the dominant Western discourse (See also Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005).

We also argue that less of the literature attends to the role of classroom teachers and teaching practices in relation to the experiences of international Asian students. Therefore, our aim is two-fold. One is to disrupt the dominant deficit discourse. We attempt to do so by employing a poststructuralist analytical tool and examining the accounts of the young Japanese women who took part in a broader Master’s study exploring the experiences and subjectivities of some Japanese international female students in New Zealand. Of the six participants discussed in this paper, three participants were studying at secondary school and three at a university. The other aim is, through a theoretical lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT), to make explicit and place significance on the participants’ voices and stories which described teaching practices from their New Zealand experiences.

This paper first introduces the methodology of the study, which includes the introduction of theoretical frameworks, and data gathering and analysis methods. It then proceeds to the findings and discussion, which are comprised of three sections. The first section discusses the

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<sup>3</sup> Deficit discourses “exist... when educators hold negative, stereotypic, and counterproductive views about culturally diverse students and lower their expectations of these students accordingly.” (Ford & Grantham, 2003, p. 217).

collectivist/ individualist cultural binary and the participants' multiple subjectivities which disrupt the discourse produced by the binary cultural frame. The second section discusses the university participants' data which described teaching practices that helped enhanced their learning. The third section reveals the high school participants' experiences which described a sense of their teachers communicating a disinterest in international students. The analysis of the high school participant's data precedes a discussion on a discourse of relationships and the theoretical conception of an ethic of care, which emerged strongly and unexpectedly from the participants' stories. The paper concludes with some practical recommendations and research implications which emerged from the participants' insights and our analysis in order to improve the quality of international education.

## **Methodology**

### Theoretical frameworks

The individual and focus group interview data was analysed with the theoretical tools of poststructuralism, CRT and an ethic of care. The poststructuralist theoretical framework enables us to reveal the dominant Western discourse where 'Asian' international students are often situated. It further reveals the ways in which the discourse operates and can marginalise the international Asian students in particular. We draw on particular poststructuralist conceptual analytical tools of: discourse (Foucault, 1972; Scott, 1992), power (Foucault, 1997/1984 in St. Pierre), subjectivity (Foucault, 1982; Davies, 2000) and positioning of the subject (Davies, 2000). The term discourse captures ways of acting, thinking, speaking, writing, reading and believing that can be used to position oneself, or be positioned, as a member of a particular group (Gee, 1996). For example, we have discourses of 'Asian' international students as 'quiet' and 'withdrawn' (Ward, 2001). Davies (2000) claims that a discourse operates with its constitutive force in the contexts where "people actively produce

social and psychological realities” (p. 88) or discursive practices, and that “the constitutive force of each discursive practice lies in its provision of subject position” (p. 89). In other words, certain discourses authorise the availability of certain subject positions and some Asian international students may find it difficult to position themselves outside of those discourses. With these tools, we discuss the ways in which the participants responded, or did not respond, to the question on their learning experiences.

The poststructuralist analysis can powerfully examine the participants’ experiences and the learning/ teaching contexts in depth. Nonetheless, it can lead to the rejection of human agency and human feelings, which can undervalue significant notions such as love and care for others (Stone-Mediatore, 2003). We therefore use CRT to complement what we perceive as lacking in poststructuralism and to restore the human aspects in international education.

A key tenet of CRT focuses on the use of *voice*, that is, “the assertion and acknowledgement of the importance of the personal and community experiences of people of colour as sources of knowledge” (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005, p. 10). Its aim is to subvert the ‘reality’ of dominant white ‘norm’ (Gillborn, 2006). Thus, in terms of international education and Japanese women studying in New Zealand, CRT can be used as an instrument to provide “a voice for students who are otherwise not heard, thus allowing students to provide their own perspectives on their educational experiences” (Teranishi, 2002, cited in Dixson & Rousseau, 2005, p. 11) and as a tool to challenge the dominant ‘norm’ and discourses of white European Pakeha New Zealanders and literature that has emerged within the framework underpinning the dominant forces.

From the CRT view, the present paper makes explicit the students' voices and struggles in their learning environment. We claim that they are legitimate and should be viewed as the essential knowledge for the interrogation of the learning/ teaching issues. When we analysed the data in light of CRT, however, an unexpected concept of *caring* emerged, which was not investigated in the existing international education literature. The concept of caring emerged particularly from the learning and teaching theme during the interviews. For this reason, an additional lens of an ethic of care (Noddings, 2003; Tronto, 1993) was unpacked and some data were analysed with this theoretical tool.

An ethic of care is a theory that has been developed to attend to the role of people in relation (Noddings, 2003; Tronto, 1993). Noddings (2003) emphasises that caring exists within *relations* between a person and the other(s), people or things, such as sentient or insentient beings, ideals and goals. Noddings theorises that caring occurs reciprocally between, what she terms, the *one-caring* and the *one cared-for*. She argues that one-caring is required to have *engrossment* and *motivational displacement* to the cared-for. When one-caring, for example a teacher, regards his or her student and has engrossment towards the student, motivational displacement may occur and the teacher's interest and enthusiasm will shift and flow towards the student.

#### Data gathering and analysis methods

The participants of this study were six Japanese international women who were, at the time of the interviews, studying at the secondary and tertiary level in New Zealand. Of six, three were at three different secondary schools and the other three were at a university. The method of recruiting the participants was through the first author's networks and assistance from some schools.

The research design of this study employed qualitative data gathering methods. The participants were asked to participate in one individual and one focus group in-depth interview. The interviews were approximately one hour, semi-structured and conducted in English or Japanese depending on the participant's preference. The Japanese interviews were transcribed by transcribers into Japanese text and translated by the first author into English. The focus group interviews were used to discuss the themes that were identified in the individual interviews with the participants and invite their feedback and critical comment. The participants were also encouraged to comment on ways in which international education can be improved in New Zealand.

Data analysis began as the first author translated the Japanese interviews. The transcripts were then read and re-read through the lenses of the theoretical frameworks. Themes began to emerge through this immersion in the data. Next we discuss three of these themes that arose from the questions: "How was your school?" and "How was your class?"

## **Findings**

### **Disrupting the Discourse of Cultural 'Other'**

Often, international students from the collectivist cultures are categorised, homogenised and constituted as 'Others' (Collins, 2006) or 'Asian' international students who should optimally 'adjust' their learning to unfamiliar classroom contexts (e.g. Ward, 2001). We argue that framing the learning/ teaching 'issues' solely within the notion of 'cultural differences' and positioning the international students in the discourse of the individualistic culture produce a deficit discourse of 'Asian' international students, 'quiet', 'withdrawn', 'incapable' and 'non contributors' (Bird & Holmes, 2005; Ward, 2001).

Unlike such fixed representations of ‘Asian’ international students, we argue that poststructuralist theory allows us to see multiple ways of being, or the fluid constituted, constituting and constitutive subjectivities of the women who participated in this study (Davies, 2000).<sup>4</sup> We argue that the multiple ways of being disrupt the deficit discourse of ‘Asian’ international student. For example, while all three university participants, Laura, Seiko and Rachel (code names), shared their pains, frustrations and stress with the first author that they struggled in the learning context, Laura, however, shared her experience at an English language school where she had talked to an academic staff member in trying to convince the teacher that she had a higher level of English proficiency and could go up to a class which is up one level:

The class I was in for the last three month is called English for XXX [university], and the class is to prepare us to go to the university. It’s like the class between the Foundation year<sup>5</sup> and the university. If you can pass the English for Xxx class, you can go straight to the university. ... But there is a hurdle before that. In order to get into that class, there is a test. The qualification to sit the test was you have to be in a class above the Upper Intermediate class. Now, here [Laura explains using a glass we had on the table], if this is the day for the test, you have to be in a class above the Upper Intermediate till that day. ... That’s the qualification. But I was in the Intermediate class. But I thought, “I **absolutely** want to go to the English for XXX class!” Moreover, the Intermediate class was too easy for me, so I thought, “I can go to Upper Intermediate.” So I went to talk to someone in a higher position. ... I said, “The Intermediate class is boring for me. I think I have the ability to go up and catch up in the Upper Intermediate class.” I imposed my opinion on the teacher. [smile] Then I was told, “OK, then, you can have a go taking a test.” Then I said, “If I don’t do well on the test, please go ahead and fail me. But if I do, do well, you will definitely let me in.” And then that person was convinced and said, “Oh, alright.” ... So I told myself “It’s okay even though I might fail the test, just do your best!” ... Then I passed the test, and I was extremely pleased about that.

(Laura, Initial Interview, 25/07/07, pp. 9-10, **bold** indicates original emphasis, ... indicates omitted material)

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<sup>4</sup> The subjectivity being constituted or constituting, for example, could be where the participant unknowingly (in the case of being constituted) or actively (constituting) takes up the dominant discourse of ‘Asian’ international student. On the other hand, being constitutive in relation to the discourse could mean that the participant goes outside of the dominant discourse and actively creates alternative discourse(s).

<sup>5</sup> The Foundation year is a year long preparatory programme, which teaches school subjects and gives a qualification to enrol at the university.

Significantly, she exercised her agency which resisted the dominant discourse of ‘quiet’, ‘withdrawn’ or ‘incapable’ ‘Asian’ international student (Ward, 2001) discussed earlier. Drawing from Cameron (2001), she performed an assertive, mature, and independent student, who approached the teacher and convinced her/him of her high competency. In addition, she challenged the discourse of language incompetence. Therefore, she disrupted the dominant discourse and constitutively created an alternative discourse of being competent and strong. We assert that it is crucial, particularly for teachers and schools, to attend to such fluidity of subjectivity, because the possible existing marginalisation of the international Asian students and perpetuation of the stereotypical discourse can be disrupted. In so doing, the teachers and the schools can help enhance the students’ learning, such as demonstrated in Laura’s experience.

### **‘Culture’ or Teaching?**

The literature reviewed earlier frames students’ learning/ teaching experiences within ‘cultural differences’ between so-called collectivist and individualist traditions. However, the data from the individual and focus group interviews with the participants found that while some were aware and recognised the issues of ‘cultural differences’, the significant issue for many of them was their *teachers* and classroom teaching practices. Particularly the university participants, Laura, Seiko and Rachel, significantly placed an emphasis on their teachers, teaching practices and the teacher-student bond that they established with their teachers. For example, Laura commented on her teachers and peers, and their support which were effective for her learning:

Laura            For [paper], I thought the course would be difficult content wise because it’s a 200 level paper, and I went into the class with that thought. In fact, it was hard, so I felt I’d better prepare well before the class. My level of English isn’t high enough to catch up in the class. That’s what I found. I was struggling with it at the beginning. But one of the teachers teaching the course Dr. Suzuki [code name] decided to make some extra time to tutor



the international students in the class specifically on writing essays. We started the extra tutorial today. But really, um [pause] ... Because he can't favour us and treat us differently from other students, he told us to study hard, and we said "Yes." ... In [a different paper], the teacher Dr. Fiona [code name], who teaches the paper, is extremely good. She is an extremely good teacher! She is very unique, and she gives us interesting things to do in class everyday. And, the **tutor** is so good, too. The tutor focuses on international students in the class. There is a rule in our tutorial that each group has to include international students. ... So, in a sense, although the paper is about linguistics and its social aspect, the class is like everyone is interested in how international students acquire their second or third languages. Because of that, Kiwi people are kindly interested in us. So, it's easy to talk as well. Because they listen to us so attentively like "And, and?", even though my English is poor, I feel like "I have to talk, I have to talk." So, at these kinds of moments, you know, English just comes out smoothly. But if I'm pressured being told like, "Laura, what do you want to say? What do you want to say?", "Why is that? Why is that?" then I get panicked like "Um, that's, um, um, um." I just speak poorly and the poor English makes me feel even worse. I feel, "Ahh, they are not understanding me" and therefore, I panic, and then I get disappointed about myself that I couldn't speak English.

Researcher ... How about [name of another paper the researcher knew Laura was taking]?

Laura **That!** I'm **extremely** enjoying it!

Researcher Yeah, that's because you **want** to talk, right?

Laura That's right! That's because I **want to talk**, and they **listen** to us so much. They listen to us like "And? And?" and I can feel that they are **interested in** us. So it's very comfortable and much easier to talk.

(Laura, Initial Interview, 25/07/07, pp. 12-15)

Laura significantly highlighted good teachers, good classroom teaching practices and supportive peers. What positively affected Laura to keep persevering in the learning context despite of the difficulties seem to be: the extra time and support that Dr. Suzuki concretely offered to the international students, Dr. Fiona's and the tutor's good classroom teaching practices, which appear to have provided a space for the international and local students to learn from each other, and good peers who listened to and showed interest in Laura.

In a similar vein, Rachel repeatedly placed a strong emphasis on her "great teachers [who] dedicated their lives to teaching the students [and] had *affection* on the students" (Rachel, Initial Interview, 27/07/07, p. 13, emphasis added). She commented that having those

teachers, she and her classmates “learnt so much” (p. 13). Rachel then even made an extensive comment on the expensive fees and teaching. She made explicit that paying expensive fees is within the range of acceptance *if* the international student had a good teacher and as a result learns English and other skills satisfactorily. If not, she implied that it is not adequate to pay such a considerable amount.

We argue that what emerged from Laura’s above excerpt and the learning experiences of other university participants, Seiko and Rachel, was the notion of *care* that they experienced from their teachers and peers, as well as the practical support. CRT argues that the voice of people who are experiencing marginalisation or oppression provides essential knowledge (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). Therefore, we assert that those voices and the experiential knowledge of the participants need to be significantly articulated and investigated further at a localised level. Attending to and investigating them locally may help New Zealand international education develop with more sustainable practices.

### **‘Othering’ or Teaching? An Ethic of Care**

In contrast to the university participants’ experiences, the high school participants appear to have less close relationships with their teachers. The comments from the high school participants, Anne, Kana and Michelle (code names), seem to indicate discontented and distressed experiences regarding teachers’ behaviours and attitudes toward some of the participants. Anne, who was on a year exchange programme at a high school, commented:

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|------------|---|
| Researcher | Do teachers at your school pay attention to you?  |
| Anne       | Not at all. It’s like that during the ESOL class as well. The class is made up of only Japanese students and, the ESOL teacher has her favourite students, so she is kind of favours <b>only</b> that student |
| Michelle   | Ah~, that happens, eh.  |
| Anne       | She listens to her students a lot. But for any other things she is like “Do it by yourself.”  |

Michelle I also experienced the similar thing last year. I changed school in my first year, and I felt like that a lot as well at the school [where] I was before. That's why I changed to a new school. You know, because it was like teachers saying, "Eh, you are an 'international' [student], alright, you, guys, do whatever you like, we don't care." They were like "I just teach my own students."

(Focus group interview #2 with Anne, Michelle & Rachel, 21/11/07, p. 15)

Anne's and Michelle's experiences seem to indicate uncaring and disinterested behaviours of some teachers. Michelle shared that she felt as if teachers were telling her or international students, "You are **Others**, OK?" (Focus group interview #2 with Anne, Michelle & Rachel, 21/11/07, p. 16, original emphasis). She appeared to be aware of the positioning and situatedness of the "international", the "Others" or the international students, which is for her the subjectivity imposed by the teacher.

Sidorkin (2002) and other relational theorists (Biesta, 2004; Margonis, 2004; McDaniel, 2004) illustrate how learning occurs in *relation*, or in the space where the teacher and the students communicating with each other. Therefore, we argue that in the case of the high school participants in this study, good learning would not happen in such a relation where the student is 'othered' and has a distant relation with the teacher.

Some may argue that we do not know the teacher's perspective, thus, the above argument is not legitimate. From a poststructuralist view, nevertheless, there are multiple truths and realities (Davies, 2000). Therefore, the above claim is but one reading. However, Noddings (2003) argues that in the case of caring relationship, care occurs in the *reciprocal* relation where the one cared-for must feel the care offered from the one-caring. Furthermore, as CRT asserts, the voices of the participants provide essential perspectives (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). Therefore, we argue that the high school participants' feeling of being 'othered' and disinterested from their teachers is legitimate. In fact, none of the high school participants

spoke about academic related topics, which is a striking contrast to the data of the university participants who had caring teachers.

The significant emergence of the relational discourse and ethic of care was an unexpected finding. We strongly suggest that the further investigations on learning and *teaching* should be investigated through the lens of an ethic of care along with other critical theoretical frameworks. We argue that the theoretical conceptions of an ethic of care appear to appropriately inform the participants' experiences, which could not be analysed sufficiently with poststructuralist or CRT theoretical tools alone (see the Masters research of the first author for more detailed discussion on an ethic of care and learning/teaching in international education).

### **Concluding thoughts/ Implications**

This paper closely examined the fluid subjectivities of the participants. We argued that they disrupted the deficit discourse of 'Asian' international students, which is in part produced by the binary discourse of collectivist and individualist traditions and by positioning the students within the dominant individualist discourse. While much existing international education literature frames the learning/teaching issues within the 'cultural difference', emerging literature (Mayuzumi, et al, 2007; Ninnes & Hellsten, 2005) examines dominant discourses within which international Asian students in Western countries are discursively situated and positioned. The literature has begun to closely examine factors beyond the cultural frame, such as teachers and peers. Nevertheless, schools and teachers may not be up-to-date with the current academic findings. We hope that this paper would contribute in reinforcing the necessity of closing the gap between participants' experiences and some of the literature, as well as the gap between the newly emerging literature and teachers' professional knowledge.

We also discussed the findings from the participants' experiences which described the significance on teachers and teaching practices. The voices from high school participants in particular, revealed that some teachers were 'othering' international students and showed a disinterested attitude towards the students. On the other hand, the university participants emphasised that their learning was enhanced due to the encounters with inspiring and caring teachers.

From those findings and discussions, we suggest some significant implications for the further research. Firstly, classroom teaching practices need to be investigated not only through a cultural lens, but also by closely examining the teacher's practices. Secondly, there may be a need for further investigations on learning and teaching with an ethic of care, along with other theoretical tools. Thirdly, learning and teaching in the high school context needs to be carefully examined in New Zealand, as there are few studies that investigated the secondary school context specifically. Lastly, this study only examined the experiences of female students. Further studies can attend to gender differences.

Some recommendations for educators working with international students which can be drawn from the findings are to:

- Consider hybrid curriculum/teaching practices where international students can participate without being marginalised (Ninnes & Hellstén, 2005);
- Find ways to demonstrate that teachers genuinely care for students' well-being (Noddings, 1992);

- Create space and time at institutions for discussions and support for teachers and students specifically for learning and teaching for international students (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007); and,
- Provide funding for all of those practices and support mechanisms.

Depending on one's epistemological orientation, a limitation of this study, could be the small number of participants which gives rise to concerns regarding validation and generalisation. However, we have sought to avoid overgeneralisation while at the same time highlighting the implications of our findings. Thus the point of this project is not to generalise the participants' stories. The aim is by revealing and making explicit the individual participant's voice and the dynamics of her subjectivities, we hope to place renewed emphasis on the human aspect of international education so that we can improve the quality of sustainable international education.

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