

A response to Bae (2021): An agenda in search of an opportunity?

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Abstract

In 2021, Bae presented a critical analysis in *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* [22(3)] of the Incredible Years parenting programme which has been repeatedly validated, and is currently in use in Aotearoa New Zealand and other countries. Bae contends that Incredible Years Parent is a tool of colonisation and oppression and that it is representative of Foucault's concept of governmentality and discursive normalisation. However, the author's Foucauldian interpretation fails to acknowledge either the significant childhood problems that the parenting programme addresses or the social contexts within which these problems arise. Bae's analysis also does not respond to many of the programmatic details of Incredible Years Parent that create respectful collaborations with parents and which actively promote cultural responsiveness. The original author's intention is to 'disrupt' Incredible Years and this would likely contribute to the return of irredeemable parenting problems and widespread suffering.

Keywords

Bae 2021, childhood conduct problems, collaborative processes, cultural responsiveness, early childhood education, evidence-based practices, Foucault, Incredible Years, Māori, parent education, post-colonisation, post-structuralism

Introduction

Bae (2021) is a critical analysis of the Incredible Years parenting programme (IYP) using post-colonial and post-structural theories. Utilising Foucault's concepts of governmentality and discursive normalisation, Bae contends that IYP reinforces 'privileged' Western knowledge about parenting and science to bring about conformity to the majority white culture in New Zealand (NZ). Apparently, migrants and members of ethnic minorities in our country are viewed by advantaged Anglo-European people as uncivilised savages, or incomplete human beings, and as societal burdens. According to this viewpoint, the parenting programme is a site of colonisation that enters the psychic space of Māori participants, seizes their souls, and leaves them docile and subjugated. Conformity to the dominant culture is believed to be at catastrophic personal cost; and not least because it denies Māori and Pasifika

epistemologies and heritage. In Bae's analysis, the complexities of ethnic identities are regularly reduced to simplistic, fragmented, and deficit stereotypes; and the IY parenting programme is portrayed as an instrument of cultural genocide operating within totalitarian power structures.

Bae describes IY Parent as operating as a 'panopticon' (which is a prison designed for inmate observation) and this is a Foucauldian metaphor for complete social control. The present authors suggest that we should start by stepping aside from the highly theorised, and damning, rhetoric that has been offered and review the real structure and substance of IY Parent (<http://www.incredibleyears.com>). Incredible Years Training for Parents actually comprises a baby, toddler and preschool series, a school-age series, and dedicated programmes for particular groups such as children challenged by autism. These manualised preventions and interventions have been applied in more than 20 countries world-wide; and collectively they have been subjected to multiple evaluations over the past 30 years. A standout confirmation of IY parent training is a meta-analytic review of 50 reported, controlled studies conducted by Menting et al. (2013). This evaluation showed consistent effects for the IY group programme in diminishing disruptive behaviour, and in increasing prosocial behaviour, according to teachers, parents, and observers. Furthermore, it found that IYP is successful with diverse families, and that it works especially well when a child's behaviour is particularly difficult for themselves and others. Contrary to what Bae believes, there has never been anything resembling a top-down authoritarian approach with IYP in NZ. The first initiators of the parent programme in this country were basic grade psychologists in the North Island city of Tauranga (including the second author) who found it assisted caregivers to make the changes to family life that they wanted. It is our understanding that the continuing expansion of IYP in Aotearoa New Zealand has largely retained its consultative and community character.

It is a commonplace academic understanding that the relevance and adequacy of a model, framework, or other interpretative structure, is judged according to how well the depiction aligns with the situation that is being commented upon, and it is in this correspondence that understanding is enhanced. With respect to Bae's (2021) article, there is a remarkably poor fit between the author's reliance on Foucault's preoccupations with power relationships and the IY parenting programme designed by Emeritus Professor Webster-Stratton. Moreover, the alignment and analysis that is attempted is dependent on a repetitively false rendering of IY Parent that includes no real appreciation of the target populations that the programme serves, that has seemingly no understanding of collaborative processes in helping relationships, and that shows only a superficial knowledge of the meaning of culturally responsive practices in IYP. It is intended to respond to these derelictions, and to a number of other omissions, oversimplifications, and unsustainable extensions in Bae's assessment which distorts and denigrates the lived experiences of IY children, parents, and group leaders.

Clients

When the first author was in practice as a psychologist he received innumerable referrals for preschool children of normal intelligence, who had restricted language skills, negligible early

academic abilities, and such explosive tempers that they frequently damaged property, coerced their parents and supervisors, and tyrannised their siblings and other children. These youngsters, who are often referred in large numbers to professional services for oppositional behaviour, do not represent typical reactions to the strictures of socialisation. As an early qualitative study by Webster-Stratton revealed, the parents of these children report living under siege, and in a private hell, with increased incidences of anxiety, depression, and marital discord. Meanwhile, the children themselves are also afflicted with affective issues; and they can have somatic complaints, and they are frequently without friends (Webster-Stratton, 1994).

A compendium of longitudinal research makes clear that elevated levels of childhood aggression and noncompliance can lead to a plethora of adolescent and adult problems of living, and this has been known for many decades now. Among teenagers, early conduct difficulties can translate into depression, bullying, school failure, delinquency, teen pregnancy, suicide, and motor vehicle accidents. For adults, the personal and social price of antisocial careers is also immense, as pathways can culminate in sustained unemployment, substance abuse, criminality, incarceration, and lengthy psychiatric engagements (Fergusson et al., 2004; Walker et al., 2004). It is disappointing that Bae does not engage with the extant research on human development trajectories because her analysis would be much richer, and more meaningful, for doing so. Presumably, this omission is because the author sees scientific evidence as just another story with value-laden constructs. Or it could be that radical skepticism and postmodernism have trouble acknowledging, and accommodating to, the details of actual human experiences. Nonetheless, on an incidental level, parent training may bring about a 'conformity' to the behavioural expectations and practices of the majority *parent culture*; and this is probably because the mindful and responsive approaches that these parents use work well for them. Notably, however, IYP is also about responding to the distress and suffering of large numbers of children, adolescents, and adults in our community.

Collaboration

Bae accuses IYP of a Cartesian dualistic world view that sees only the West's ideals of parenting as desirable, and the parenting of the rest (i.e. 'savages') as needing to be 'corrected' and 'cured.' Parent training, and the 'fixing' of them, begins with the 'dissection' and 'diagnosis' of client details, and the application of labels to them such as 'not-functioning,' 'uncivilised,' and 'at-risk family'. Yet, even a passing familiarity with IYP would ordinarily show that such a characterisation of the parenting programme is blatantly discrepant. Webster-Stratton has written a lengthy guide book for therapists and group leaders entitled *Collaborating with Parents to Reduce Children's Behavior Problems* (2012), and IY Parent is highly saturated with strategies that acknowledge individuality, and which enable and empower parents. In fact, Bae also seems to be revealing an ignorance of general advances in child and family therapy. Collaborative approaches are now common in the human services, and they sit alongside other contemporary emphases like early intervention, prevention, non-stigmatising interventions, affirming diversity, best practices, and providing accountable services (Stanley & Stanley, 2005). Bae's depiction of IYP is

actually its antithesis. If it was anything like how she describes it to be, this parenting programme would simply be unable to do what it was designed to do, which is consistently improve family life, parenting, and children's conduct problems (www.incredibleyears.com/research-library/; Leijten, et al., 2018; Mingeback et al., 2018). As a corollary, it could be acknowledged that therapeutic psychology has known for a long time about authority and power in relationships (and about the influence of language) and IYP is assiduous in breaking down interpersonal boundaries, and barriers, and in promoting inclusivity.

Bae's description of IY Parent is especially inaccurate, and particularly discordant, when she describes it as promoting "one-size-fits-all parenting principles" (p. 258), and as containing "no consideration of the complexity involved in relationship-building, such as family dynamics, beliefs, values and contexts" (p. 264). As it happens, each parent/caregiver in an IY group decides on the treatment agenda and strategies to meet the goals that they have for their child and family. The therapist/group leader is most accurately understood as an interpreter, facilitator, and coach who individualises knowledge of human development, family dynamics, and behaviour management principles to every participant's circumstances, values, and goal commitments. Adopting new skills and perspectives is encouraged by the two group leaders who are present as they listen and question, support and scaffold, and involve the parenting group in problem solving, role plays, and modelling. At the end of each group session, all parents provide an evaluation so that the group leaders can ensure that the session content continues to be best suited to each family's needs and learning preferences. As is probably apparent, the therapeutic processes of IYP intentionally model the participative and collaborative approaches that parents can use with their own children. (Webster-Stratton, 1994; Webster-Stratton, 2012). In one sense, Bae is right that the parents who attend IY training are members of a marginalised and stigmatised minority group, but this is a grievous and unfortunate consequence of having children who are problems to themselves and others. In response, Webster-Stratton's programme gives caregivers the confidence, and competencies, to parent in a way that they are comfortable, while it supports them to develop new connections and sustaining social relationships.

Culture

Bae acknowledges some of the attempts that have been made to make IY Parent relevant and acceptable to Māori in New Zealand, but the "unyielding power of colonisation is still present at the root of the framework" (p. 261) and 'success' for these people "depends on the distance they have moved from their own heritage, and how well they have adjusted to wearing white masks" (p. 262). There are three sources of retort to this condemnation of IYP in NZ, and these are: (i) the efficacy of the programme when deployed with diverse populations worldwide and locally, (ii) the positive evaluations of IYP by Māori parents and the substantial contributions by Māori to the programme, and (iii) the comprehensive adjustments that have been made to IY parent training in this country to promote cultural responsiveness. IYP has achieved demonstrable, positive effects for a succession of minority groups in the US, including immigrants, African Americans, Asians, and American Indians (Webster-Stratton, 2012; Zhou et al., 2021). IY Parent also *travels* well, and it shows comparable effects, and sometimes stronger effects, in regions that are globally distant and

culturally distinct (Gardner et al., 2015; Leijten et al., 2016). The probable explanation for the cross cultural success of the parenting programme is that it is based on attachment and social learning principles that are universal and which transcend culture. Something else that might be considered is that the US proving ground for IYP is racially diverse, and children of colour under 18 years are now the numerical majority in that country (Zhou et al., 2021). Two homegrown studies in Aotearoa New Zealand show that IYP is effective for both Māori and non-Māori families and, in the more recent of these investigations, similar and significant benefits were maintained in child behaviour, parenting, and family relationships 30 months after the parent training was completed (Fergusson et al., 2009; Sturrock et al., 2014).

IYP is valued by both Māori and non-Māori alike. Fergusson et al. (2009) showed high parent satisfaction, with positive responses of 80 percent across both groups. In a review of participant retention, Dunn (2012) found that 85 percent of her combined group (including completers and withdrawers) enjoyed attending IYP and they reported that they found it very valuable. The parents in the Sturrock et al. (2014) sample indicated high to moderate satisfaction with the IYP programme, and this was at the 30-month follow-up point. Almost 9 out of 10 parents here said that IYP had made a difference for them and they now had additional learning and communication strategies, and better understanding of their children and more confidence. Families were calmer, happier, and less stressed. It is our understanding that Bae did not consult with Māori (specifically the Incredible Years Māori Advisory Group) regarding her article despite the fact that they have been hugely involved in hui (meetings) over many years and in discussing all aspects of the programme and its suitability. IYP Māori and Pasifika group leaders were present from very early on, and this included contributing to the original multisite programme provision funded by the Ministry of Education in 2005. And Mauri Ora Associates (2017) record that, in the year given, there were 331 Māori, and 91 Pasifika, amongst 1452 group leaders in NZ. This history and statistics aside, an obvious display of Māori esteem is the strength of self-referrals to IY parenting groups. Mostly, these are parents who have seen the benefits of the programme in others, or who have heard of IYP from someone who has attended a group themselves.

Ensuring that any psychological, social, or education programme is culturally responsive is a complex endeavour as there are both setting and process considerations to attend to (Evans, 2013). For instance, making sure that there are culturally-competent and experienced Māori facilitators for Māori parents is a setting factor, and it is considered ideal by Webster-Stratton (2012); although Bae regards it as just another strategy of the colonising power “to strengthen its control over the minds of the colonised” (p. 263). Next, there are process aspects which span culturally unique motives, cognitions, learning styles, talents, and traditions; and it will now be apparent that IY’s collaborative approach is optimally suited to addressing these considerations. Note, it is the parents that generate the rules for their group concerning such matters as confidentiality, right not to speak, and respect for others. And to the standard collaborative framework is now also added karakia and waiata (prayers and songs) and valued images and metaphors, such as the whare, the kete, and the weaving of flax, to explain developmental concepts. Language skills and traditional knowledge are celebrated as personal strengths and protective factors. The past is acknowledged by incorporating oral history, and whānau (extended family members) are

welcome to attend the parenting group. Clearly, these measures (amongst others) are not intended to relegate Māori epistemology and identity to the periphery as Bae believes. Instead, by attending to both setting and process considerations, and by building strong and supportive family relationships, the parenting programme actively promotes cultural connections and community.

Contexts

Bae makes a pejorative mention of “white middle-to-high class contexts” (p. 256), but this is the only reference the author countenances for socioeconomic status (SES), social class, or neighbourhood determinants of human behaviour and outcomes. This is a major omission. A full explanation of human functioning demands that we attend to all of the important contexts in which people operate. For example, it is well-established that poverty can adversely impact on parenting with life-long negative consequences for children (Belsky et al., 2020; Santrock, 2022). Significantly, IYP has been shown to achieve good outcomes for parents from low SES backgrounds that are independent of ethnic minority status (Leijten et al., 2015). More generally, there is increasing understanding that highly effective intervention systems for children’s psychological problems need to involve the young person themselves as well as the family, school, and community. For this reason, Webster-Stratton has developed the IY Child and IY Teacher training programmes, to complement IY Parent; and both of these additional interventions are of proven efficacy (Webster-Stratton, 2011). Explanations of human conduct that rely solely on cultural identity, or any other single entity, are inherently reductionist and essentialising. They are much less able to acknowledge and respect what parents bring to the coaching group, and they cannot account for positive developmental outcomes in children (Stanley & Stanley, 2005). Nonetheless, in Bae’s interpretation, it is IYP providers who are said to be ‘blinded’ to participant uniqueness “by the brilliance of modern disciplinary power” (p. 261); although the meaning of this last statement by the author is uncertain.

Conclusion

Bae seeks to establish parallels between Foucault’s theory and IYP practice that are unsustainable, and frequently her interpretation mistakenly fuses with the programme she believes she is describing. For instance, somehow the ‘knowers’ are white males, when the majority of IY Parent trainers are women, and there is significant Māori participation. It is also intriguing that Bae *knows* that IYP actually works, but the central concern here is not objective truth but with notions of sociopolitical power that are presumed to perpetuate social injustice. It transpires that the totalising lens of post-colonial theory only allows the author to perceive Western oppression, and so this is all that she is capable of finding in the structure, delivery, and outcomes of IYP. At the same time, a colossal body of evolved research and theorising in human development studies is disregarded as irrelevant and it is rebuked. But how can we proceed in any sort of meaningful way to help children if we turn away from empirically-supported programmes like IYP that have proven highly effective in producing significant behaviour changes that can be maintained (as shown by Scott et al., 2014, and Webster-Stratton et al., 2011) for up to ten, or more, years later? Bae says it is not her intention “to find an ultimate parenting truth to replace the current practice” (p.

264), and she would rather make space “for what is unthinkable or unimaginable” (p. 265). Those of us who have long memories, and who worked in the human services before best practices like IY Parent, know only too well what it was like, and it was largely a workspace of intractable and multiplying problems, weak responses and therapeutic ineptitude, and client and therapist despair.

Bae’s reified, rebarbative, and exclusive analysis of oppressors and oppressed, and of perpetrators and victims, that is directed at the IY parenting programme in New Zealand is purposefully intended to disrupt and devalue, and to denigrate and dismantle; and it may already be causing doubt and dismay. Māori author and social commentator Alan Duff (2019) personally objects to such dominating discourses being foisted upon him by people who claim to speak in his name and who wish to restrict his choices. Meanwhile, all of us who have experienced the special synergies, and the endless positive outcomes, of an IY parent group know that what Bae says does not correspond with what our eyes and ears tell us. We believe that IYP represents a major achievement by our human services over recent years (Stanley & Stanley, 2018), and why should Māori parents, and Māori tamariki (children), suddenly be denied the best supports and interventions that are available to others in Aotearoa New Zealand; and especially given the higher rates of conduct problems that Sturrock (2014) indicates that Māori young people experience? Significantly, children are invisible in Bae’s narrative and this fact gives support to the contention that there is actually another repudiation within the author’s postmodern analysis. This negation is more insidious, and more far-reaching, because it effectively denies the significance of parents in children’s development and in promoting their mental health. The spread of this idea may account for a loss of confidence in some parents and caregivers today, but such a disturbing inference is seriously disputed by the everyday magic of parent-child interactions everywhere (Masten, 2014), and by the efficacy and success of the IY parent training programme.

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