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“I DON’T KNOW IF I’M WORKING WELL OR NOT”:
HOW BEGINNER ECE TEACHERS FROM MIGRANT BACKGROUNDS
NEGOTIATE PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

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“I DON’T KNOW IF I’M WORKING WELL OR NOT”: HOW BEGINNER ECE TEACHERS FROM MIGRANT BACKGROUNDS NEGOTIATE PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

Rachael S. Burke

INTRODUCTION

Aotearoa New Zealand is now recognised as a superdiverse nation (Chan, 2020). Initial teacher education (ITE) programmes reflect this change with increasing numbers of student teachers coming from migrant backgrounds (Rana, 2020). Early childhood centres also serve as spaces where the cultures of home intersect with the culture of the host society (Tobin et al., 2013). While research has been undertaken on the experiences of migrant children and their families in the ECE sector (Chan & Ritchie, 2016; Lees & Ng, 2020; Mitchell & Kamenarac, 2022; Paul, 2015; Shuker & Cherrington, 2016; Takemoto, 2021), few studies have investigated how teachers from migrant background negotiate these tensions. The overarching purpose of this research was to interrogate the “image of the child” (Malaguzzi, 1994) held by early childhood education (ECE) beginner teachers from migrant backgrounds. A key finding of this study was how contrasting images of the child can impact on professional practice, which is significant for these beginner teachers who are negotiating both an unfamiliar cultural context and a new professional role.

The image of the child has been influenced by historical, cultural, political, and social forces (Araujo, 2022; McCartney & Harris, 2014). In Aotearoa New Zealand, European colonial children were originally seen as chattels by their families (McDonald, 1978) in contrast to Māori children who were regarded as taonga or treasures in their community (Salmond, 1991). Children have transitioned from being viewed as passive to having their rights safeguarded by legislation such as UNCROC (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child) and recognised as capable and confident learners (Ministry of Education, 2017). The concept of the image of the child acknowledges that the views that teachers hold about children and childhood are influenced by their own cultural backgrounds. This approach also recognises that ideas about ECE are cultural, social, political, and historical constructions (Burke & Duncan, 2015). The lens through which teachers view children can therefore impact decisions around all aspects of the ECE experience, such as curriculum, pedagogy, resources, learning, and interactions (Malaguzzi, 1994).

Our Code, Our Standards (Education Council, 2017) outlines the expectations for professional ECE teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand. A key aspect of these expectations is fostering collaborative relationships with colleagues to enhance both individual and organisational teaching practices. However, this study found that beginner teachers from migrant backgrounds faced a number of challenges to developing professional relationships. This article focuses on three main themes which emerged during analysis of participants’ narratives: conflicting images of the child, contrasting cultural expectations around professional practice, and the need for more guidance or support from a professional mentor. Drawing on participants’ narratives, this article will show how these beginner teachers negotiated tensions around their own culturally constructed ideas about professional ECE practice in Aotearoa New Zealand.

METHODOLOGY

The research project is positioned within a qualitative framework and draws on narrative inquiry to unpack the stories and experiences of 12 beginner teachers from migrant backgrounds. The participants are all teachers who had recently completed their initial teacher training through a New Zealand institute, graduating with either a Master of Teaching (ECE) or Bachelor of Teaching (ECE). At the time of interviewing, all the participants had secured work in the education sector in Aotearoa New Zealand and been working as fully qualified ECE teachers for between four and nine months. Most of the participants were of Chinese and Indian ethnicities (eight Chinese and two Indian) with one from Hong Kong and one from Malaysia. As this study draws on narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2023), semi-structured interviews of approximately one hour with each of the participants were conducted. Clandinin identifies the relational, continuous and social aspects of lived experience as fundamental to a narrative inquiry approach. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee at the researcher's institute. A list of questions was used to prompt discussion with participants and to loosely guide the interview process. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Participants were given the opportunity to view their transcript to verify the content and make any changes to their text and were assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity. The data was analysed using a thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021), which is a widely used method in qualitative research. Thematic analysis is "a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 27). By looking at significance throughout a data set, thematic analysis enables researchers to perceive and understand collective meanings and experiences, in contrast to identifying unusual or single experiences. Thematic analysis therefore involves recognising commonalities and interpreting the significance of those shared experiences.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Sociocultural theories underpin Te Whāriki, the national early childhood curriculum of Aotearoa New Zealand. These theories recognise that children learn through their interactions and are capable, competent creators of knowledge (Ministry of Education, 2017). One of the core tenets of sociocultural theories is the idea that human development is influenced by social and cultural factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This means that the term 'culture' extends beyond ethnicity to include all the values, understandings, and behaviours associated with the diverse environments encountered by children (Ministry of Education, 2017). Drawing on sociocultural theory, this article considers the way the image of the child held by beginner teachers from migrant backgrounds impacts on their practice. This, in turn, can shape their relationships with families and ECE colleagues and impact outcomes for children.

THE SHIFTING DYNAMICS OF THE EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKPLACE

As Aotearoa New Zealand has come to be classified as superdiverse due to the arrival of migrants, early childhood settings have also become more culturally and linguistically diverse (Chan, 2020; Shuker & Cherrington, 2016). At the same time, Aotearoa New Zealand has also seen a rapid increase in the number of international students enrolling to study ECE at tertiary institutions (Rana, 2020). Despite this increasing multiculturalism there has been minimal research dedicated to teachers originating from migrant backgrounds, as noted by Arndt (2018), Cherrington and Shuker (2012), and Leaupepe (2009). Furthermore, little attention has been paid to how these changing dynamics may be influencing understanding, practices, and retention in the workplace (Gould et al., 2023; Griffiths et al., 2022).

Arndt (2012, 2014, 2018) is one of the few scholars who has written extensively about the experiences of migrant teachers in the early childhood space. She draws on Kristeva's (1991) lens of "foreignness" to argue the power that these 'outsiders' hold to disrupt the workforce, noting that:

Regardless of opportunities for success, Kristeva's hard working foreigners are a disturbance. They disrupt the local comfort and stability, arousing feelings of inadequacy, misfit and uncertainty. By their foreignness, these foreigners call into question the very structure of existing social norms and hierarchies. (Arndt, 2012, p. 26)

Arndt contends that the early childhood context in Aotearoa New Zealand can be conceptualised as an "imagined community" (Anderson, 2006), its boundaries flexible, yet defined and shaped by factors such as teacher qualifications, beliefs, or geographical scope. From this perspective, documents such as the national early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) and *Our Code, Our Standards* (Education Council, 2017) can be seen as sets of general rules and values which also govern membership to this imagined community. However, as Arndt (2012, p. 27) argues, "the complexities of immigrant otherness, the local social and political climate, and the presence of immigrants with diverse values explode this illusion" of a monolithic community.

Due to Aotearoa New Zealand's largely monocultural workforce, Gould et al. (2023) point out that there is little recognition of cultural diversity, leading to early childhood teachers struggling to promote inclusion, equity and belonging in the sector. Several factors contribute to cultural diversity in ECE in Aotearoa New Zealand, including a significant emphasis on fulfilling bi-cultural responsibilities as outlined in *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* (Arndt, 2012). While recognising that Aotearoa New Zealand is a bi-cultural nation and that learning *te reo Māori* is important, participants in Rana's (2020) study argued that other cultures besides the Māori culture should be recognised. Rana (2020) asserts that there is "a need to celebrate the existence of more cultures beyond the two prominent founding cultures of Aotearoa New Zealand" (p. 7). In their study of the environmental identities of migrant Indian ECE teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand, Rathore, Eames and Kelly-Ware (2020) found that their professional practice was influenced by their cultural backgrounds. Similarly, Kumar (2022) reported that Indo-Fijian teachers' feelings of belonging were enhanced when they felt supported by their colleagues and were encouraged to demonstrate their own cultural and linguistic knowledge. At a micro-level, Rana and Culbreath (2019) drew from their own experiences as tertiary educators, acknowledging that the cultural backgrounds and experiences of both teachers and students influence how pedagogy is carried out in practice.

Robinson and Jones-Diaz (2016) note that discourses of neoconservatism and neoliberalism work together to problematise diversity and difference, as the latter are positioned as challenging Western values and conventions perceived as upholding moral standards in society. They point out that "within this discourse, founded on the cultural binary opposition of us/them, a fear of the Other is maintained and perpetuated" (Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2016, p. 4). Research has exposed educators' awareness of the prejudice and discrimination that young children can extend towards others different to themselves (Gunn, 2015; Osgood & Robinson, 2019). However, less attention has been paid to how early childhood educators might perpetuate stereotypes that privilege the dominant culture, and how this might impact the well-being of staff in early learning workplaces and their understanding of appropriate practice. Although it is beyond the scope of this article, when cultural assumptions conflict with dominant discourses the ripples can also reverberate out to disrupt children's learning and sense of belonging.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

According to *Our Code, Our Standards* (Education Council, 2017) there are expectations for professional early childhood teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand to collaborate with colleagues to improve teaching practices. With *whanaungatanga* as one of the four underpinning values (Education Council, 2017), relationships lie at the core of ECE, where teachers work in teams unlike in other educational contexts such as the primary, secondary or tertiary sectors. This means that it is crucial to have a common understanding of children to work harmoniously and meet the standards set by the Teaching Council (Education Council, 2017). However, while *Our Code,*

Our Standards mentions the term “relationships” 12 times, “diversity” is only referred to three times, and each of these is in relation to the heritage, language, and culture of learners or families. The complex multicultural identities of teaching staff, who are the main resource for building relationships with learners and families, appear overlooked.

As McLelland (2023) argues, the importance of an emotionally safe climate in early childhood contexts cannot be understated. Therefore, it is vital that beginner teachers are supported to foster strong relationships with their teaching team. Yet, if these “hard working foreigners” (Arndt, 2012, p. 26) disrupt and trouble the ECE workplace when positioned as Other (Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2016), how can harmonious connections be established? It is commonly assumed that teachers have a natural ability to build strong relationships, but McLaughlin, Aspden and McLachlan (2015) argue that this aspect of their role requires more support and professional direction. From the narratives of participants, this study identified three main challenges to establishing authentic relationships and developing their practice in the ECE workplace: conflicting images of the child, contrasting cultural expectations around professional practice, and a lack of support from colleagues or professional mentors.

Conflicting images of the child

Malaguzzi (1994) asserts that a teacher’s image of a child is shaped by their own childhood encounters, cultural background, social context, personal identity, values, and the educational concepts that they encounter. Tong (2023) has suggested that early childhood teachers should have the opportunity to engage in critical reflection around views on children and the concept of childhood. This means examining how cultural constructions of childhood influence their teaching practice and exploring how these perceptions impact on their role as teachers.

A common image of the child held by participants when they initially arrived in New Zealand was one of dependence and of someone “in need of constant guidance and protection” (Burke, 2024, p. 32), as “Shui” explains:

Te Whāriki ... is very new to us because we have totally different opinions and different views on that part. We think children are really weak and need to be protected and cannot learn, they only know how to play. They just want mess everything and they just want to play as their nature. So, they don't want to learn unless we build a rich environment for them to learn or force them to do it. This is what we thought, but Te Whāriki said that children are born and they are already prepared to learn. (Shui, China)

As Shui articulates, he negotiated his original image of the child to align it more closely with the one outlined in Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) which regards children as proficient and having agency (Tong, 2023). All of the participants in this study were graduates of initial teacher education (ITE) programmes. The combination of engaging with socio-cultural theories and workplace practice has deeply impacted on their beliefs, asking them to reconsider their ideas around how children best learn and develop (Burke, 2024).

However, while these beginner teachers may have accepted New Zealand’s dominant child-centred pedagogical approach, there remains anxiety around ensuring that they are respectful to their colleagues, even if certain practices contrast with their own ideology or professional philosophy:

I really want to [advocate for children] sometimes when I see other teachers are not, when it is different, when they have different thoughts, sometimes I feel what should I do? What should we do? Yes, this is challenging I don't want to challenge the others. (“Ling,” Hong Kong)

Early childhood educators’ identity and sense of belonging play a significant role in supporting young children’s well-being. However, as Arndt (2018) has argued, this role is often overlooked in both ECE research and broader

discussions on diversity. She proposes that greater focus should be placed on supporting early childhood teachers to deconstruct their own realities and evolve as professionals.

Contrasting cultural expectations around professional practice

Research suggests that there is a need to support exploration and curiosity in the early learning context, by focusing on how early childhood teachers interpret their own cultural experiences and evolve in the workplace (Arndt, 2018). One of the participants in this study, “Rong,” shared an example of this where he had been directing children to line up as a group each day while he applied their sunblock. He was therefore initially surprised when his mentor advised him to change his practice in order to show more respect for children and their autonomy. The mentor recommended that Rong give the children choice by asking them individually if they would like some sunblock and, if so, whether he could apply it to their bodies. Upholding the mana of children (Ministry of Education, 2017) and valuing their rights (Te One, 2011) are important aspects of New Zealand pedagogical approaches. As he reflected on this event, Rong recognised that his practice was linked to his image of the child as helpless, as well as his experience of authoritarian childrearing practices and Communist ideologies (Liu, 2022):

My mentor and my manager gave me some ideas that are important for my teaching, for example ... they influenced on me that we need to respect children as an individual person, not an object. We need to give them choice and that inspired me, that New Zealand is also a democratic country. (Rong, China)

According to Arndt (2012, p. 29), “diversity is often posited as a ‘problem’, that can be ‘managed’ and overcome by implementing particular strategies and practices.” While Rong’s example stemmed from contrasting pedagogical and ideological approaches, challenges can stem from practical issues, as “Feng” (China) explains: “I think different cultural backgrounds have [created] some problems, especially sometimes my colleagues have no patience for my spoken English.” As Te Whāriki takes a holistic approach, rather than the directive curriculums that participants may be familiar with from their home countries, it can result in confusion about what exactly they should be doing, as “Diu” (China) explains: “For example, if my role is inside, I should set up for next morning and so the teacher will tell me I like your setting up and then the other teacher will tell me that you should do it like this.”

Arndt (2012) identifies the challenge facing teachers who question their ability to nurture children from diverse backgrounds while feeling a lack of nurturance themselves. This can make them uncertain about sharing their own culture as they simultaneously grapple with feelings of detachment from home, and struggle to develop a sense of belonging in their professional team:

I try to ask myself to be patient and thoughtful, reflective, or responsive, to be a responsible and respectful teacher at work so that I can have a sense of belonging and can contribute to what I learned here. I can contribute to my knowledge or my labour here. So, in this aspect I try to fit in with the group, fit in with the other teachers. (“Yuxi,” China)

The moment when one realizes that knowing about someone is not the same as truly understanding them or their cultural traditions marks a critical juncture (Arndt, 2012). As migrant teachers “trouble and disrupt” their workplace, they also long to share their own feelings and experiences within this context. However, “as Kristeva (1991) reminds us, speaking can be scary. As a relational engagement speaking is variously argued, for example, as grounding and characterising identity, as the carrier of familial traditions, and as an emblem of our cultural selves” (Arndt, 2012, p. 30).

Lack of support from colleagues or professional mentors

For beginner teachers, a key person in their few months of practice is their Associate Teacher (AT). According to the Education Review Office (ERO), a government body evaluating quality of education in Aotearoa New Zealand, ATs have a “major part to play in the placement experience and learning of student and newly graduated teachers” (Education Review Office, 2017, p. 18). The primary expectation of an AT is demonstrating effective teaching practice by role modelling, offering coaching and mentoring to new teachers, and delivering constructive feedback. ATs should also cultivate a safe environment that encourages beginner teachers to take risks, experiment with new teaching approaches, and critically reflect (Education Review Office, 2017). Yet, for many of the participants in this study, such support was sorely lacking. As Diu (China) explained, “To be honest, no one in my centre gives me any feedback about my job. I don't know if I'm working well not.”

The connection between early childhood teachers' identity and sense of belonging is crucial for young children's well-being (Arndt, 2018); however this aspect is frequently neglected at a research level, and, this study would argue, at a policy level. There are implications here for staff well-being which also impacts on staff retention rates at a time when the ECE sector is desperate for staff. As “Anjali,” from India, identified, “So, it's poor management, leadership and these things which make it at the end of the day.”

Griffiths et al. (2022) argue that teachers need to feel appreciated and at ease with their identity within their professional environments. They believe that this is achieved by centre leaders fostering collaborative opportunities, allowing the exchange of ideas, questioning existing beliefs, and collectively working together to ensure an inclusive space for diverse teachers. For those participants who were in supportive environments like those described by Griffiths et al. (2022), their experiences were very different to those of their peers: “In the first two or three weeks, I got lots of support from the centre manager and after that I started to get used to the routine” (“Xiang,” China); “We're always advised to speak to our team leader before we bring [conflict] to the team and our team leaders are actually quite seasoned with workplace conflicts. We just be patient and try to understand each other by sharing our culture” (“Mayang,” Malaysia).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Supporting beginner teachers to connect culture, ideology, and practice

This study proposes that increased focus should be directed towards assisting early childhood teachers from migrant backgrounds to examine and understand their own cultural experiences and journeys as professionals. This is not a process that should be undertaken alone, but one that needs to be nurtured and fostered within the environment of a supportive team of teaching colleagues and mentors. As Deo and Jain (2023) have argued, relational leadership is critical here, to build a positive team culture based around strong relationships. Professional development sessions could be focussed around unpacking implicit cultural assumptions and reflecting on the image of the child held by all staff members.

On a smaller scale, applying a critical cultural lens to teacher practice could be as simple as allocating time during a staff meeting to discuss cultural artefacts brought from home. While the pedagogical value of creating spaces for the stories of diverse children and families through artefacts is recognised (Sammons et al., 2020; Tong & Kumar, 2022), minimal consideration has been afforded to using this approach with teaching teams. Resources such as diversity discussion icebreakers and activities are also freely available online and can be another useful way to conduct conversations around cultural constructions and suppositions. Arndt (2012, p. 29) advises making a concerted effort “to integrate and allow for, rather than to eliminate or homogenise, differences and lead to an overall more meaningful, increased commitment and sensitivity to your realities, and to those of your colleagues.”

Early childhood teachers working in the diverse context of Aotearoa New Zealand are asked to foster, cherish and commemorate the identities of children and their families. However, to achieve this, teachers themselves need to feel a sense of belonging, and to feel that they belong within their early childhood centre (Arndt, 2018). Building and sustaining an inclusive workplace culture is also key to attracting and retaining teachers from diverse backgrounds in the ECE sector (Griffiths et al., 2022). It is important to understand that migrant teachers benefit from the opportunity for their own culture to be recognised and acknowledged. This could form the basis of reflection and discussion for other staff members around certain practices. These teachers can act as a bridge between migrant families and their children, and the centre, as they may understand the thinking behind cultural behaviours. This makes them a valuable resource in Aotearoa New Zealand's increasingly diverse early childhood context.

Avoid universalising difference

Cherrington and Shuker (2012) highlight the importance of engaging with teachers' cultural identity and otherness and how they engage with children, their own, and their peers' cultures. They contend that in addition to embracing cultural differences among teachers, it is important to move away from universalising methods of addressing differences and instead adopt a more culturally inclusive pedagogical approach. Arndt (2018) has argued that being perceived as culturally Other can lead to anxiety and, if teachers from diverse backgrounds are working in an ECE context that favours sameness, this can lead to cultural invisibility. Early childhood settings that frame approaches to diversity as grounded in fairness by treating everyone the same can, therefore, ironically result in perpetuating dominant cultural discourses and normalising the curriculum (Arndt, 2012). However, most migrants in the twenty-first century also maintain close connections with their home countries and uphold their cultural and linguistic heritages while integrating into the host country, and they are heterogeneous in terms of ethnic identity, language, culture and religion (Chan, 2020). Arndt (2014, p. 29) makes a plea "for critical, sensitive, open orientations towards those who are Other, and for teacher orientations to break – rather than perpetuate – cycles of ostracism or levelling, as marginalising practices of exclusion or non recognition."

The need for more guidance or support from a professional mentor

During beginner teachers' initial months of practice, Associate Teachers (ATs) play a pivotal role; however, Vaughan (2023) has recognised the absence of clear expectations and support for ATs or mentors in the early childhood context. In Aotearoa New Zealand, teachers receive a Full Practising Certificate after completing a minimum two-year induction and mentoring programme. During this period, a professional leader, employer, or another approved organisation can verify the teacher's ability to meet the Standards of the Teaching Profession (Education Council, 2017). This means that the AT role in an ECE workplace maybe be filled by a teacher with just two and a half years of experience. The decision to appoint teachers as an AT can therefore depend on centre management (Stover, 2019). As AT leadership plays such a crucial role in the development of beginner teachers, more attention needs to be paid to purposefully cultivating leadership traits in the ECE sector, and motivating ATs and beginner teachers to engage in broader leadership activities (Hendrie & Thynne, 2023).

CONCLUSION

In Aotearoa New Zealand, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) acknowledges cultural diversity and entrusts teachers to enact pedagogy that considers children's cultural knowledge and encompasses diverse ways of knowing, being and doing (Tong & Kumar, 2022). Our Code, Our Standards (Education Council, 2017) expects ECE teachers to foster reciprocal and collaborative relationships with colleagues to strengthen professional teaching practices. However, both these documents espouse the value of enacting cultural diversity within ECE settings. This could present challenges for teachers, unless, as Chan (2011) argues, ECE teachers as frontline

workers manage to authentically implement cultural diversity in their teaching. The illusion of a unitary “imagined community” (Anderson, 2006) is shattered by the complex dynamics of migrant difference within the unique social and political environment of culturally diverse ECE workplaces (Arndt, 2012).

This research has highlighted the significance of examining teachers’ cultural identity and sense of the ‘Other’ in their interactions with their colleagues, arguing that engaging with these ideas can lead to more culturally responsive professional practice, particularly for those from migrant backgrounds who have just began working as emerging ECE educators in Aotearoa New Zealand. This study contributes to the limited analysis that has been carried out in relation to ECE teachers from migrant backgrounds in Aotearoa New Zealand. It hopes to provide guidance for professional leaders and mentors who are supporting beginner teachers, particularly those who come from a migrant background. Collegial discussions about this study could also foster whanaungatanga and improve relationships between beginning ECE teachers and their colleagues.

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