

What does belonging mean to us? Experiences of a Burmese refugee family.

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In early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand, parental belonging is a fundamental contributing factor to home-centre partnership, promoting quality outcomes for tamariki (Education Review Office, 2016; Treweek et al., 2020). In this article, the author discusses what belonging means for a Burmese refugee family who have lived in Aotearoa New Zealand for 10 years, with three of their children who have attended early childhood education and care centres. The parents' ideas were elicited through an interview structured according to Allen et al.'s (2021) framework of belonging that focuses on four key components which are competencies, opportunities, motivations and perceptions. The author found that while language was recognised as a limitation, the family's overall sense of belonging was supported by kaiako who were inclusive and welcoming, treating them as equals in the centre. However, there is a lingering tension between the parents' aspirations for their children's education and teachers' perceptions, which calls for a stronger mutual understanding on cultural perspectives of education and care. Recommendations for teaching practice are provided for early childhood practitioners to support their work with families from refugee backgrounds.

Introduction

Belonging is a basic human need and is a critical component to health and wellbeing (Kurt, 2020). Having a sense of belonging is especially important for families from refugee backgrounds who may be experiencing trauma, family separation, culture shock, and language barrier (Chan, 2011; Cun, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2020). By applying Allen et al.'s (2021) framework for belonging, the author seeks to contribute to the current understanding of belonging for refugee families in Aotearoa New Zealand. Looking closer at the components of competencies, opportunities, motivations and perceptions, helps identify enablers and barriers for belonging, and develop implications for teaching practice.

Definition of belonging

Belonging is about social connectedness, one's connections to place and culture, participation, and being affirmed in one's identity (Allen et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2020). In the national early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki, He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017), belonging is evidenced when "whānau feel welcome and able to participate in the day-to-day curriculum and in curriculum decision making" (p. 31). Culturally appropriate social interactions amongst the kaiako, parents/whānau and tamariki, and the opportunities created in the centre environment also foster a sense of belonging (MoE, 2017).

Lähdesmäki et al. (2016) and Sumsion and Wong (2011) caution that the concept of belonging needs a constant negotiation with recognition of diverse cultural perspectives. Therefore, the author uses Allen et al.'s (2021) framework of belonging with one Burmese family to gain understanding of their cultural perspectives of belonging to help develop strategies that early childhood practitioners can use as a guideline for working with refugee families. The below is an image of the framework.

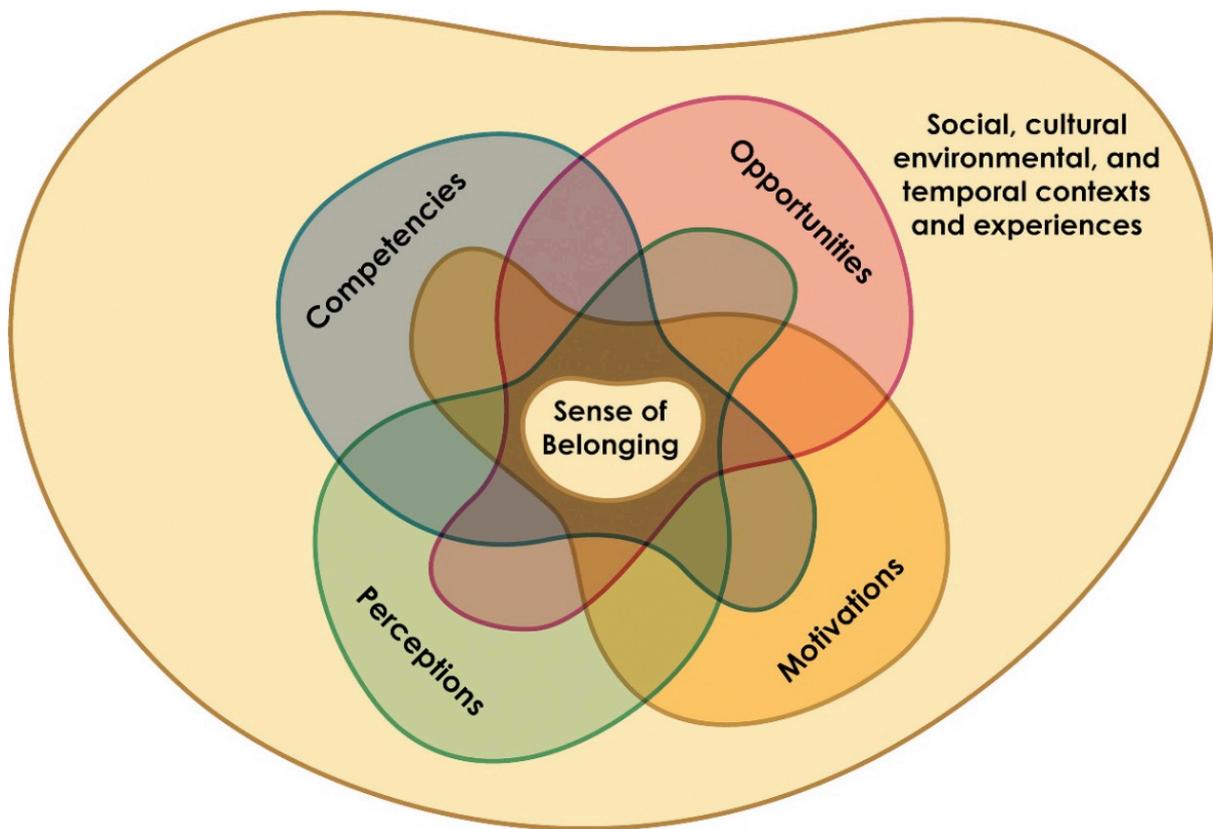


Figure 1 - An integrative framework for understanding, assessing, and fostering belonging. Four interrelated components (i.e., Competencies, Opportunities, Motivations, and Perceptions) dynamically interact and influence one another, shifting, evolving, and adapting as an individual traverses temporal, social, and environmental contexts and experiences (Allen et al., 2021, p. 92).

Family background information

The couple, Denpo (40 years old) and Gawa (32 years old), are both from the Chin state in Myanmar and they share the home language of Zotung. Under the threat of a military ruling group that imposed forced labour, Denpo and Gawa sought protection to seek better lives. In year 2000, Denpo was transferred to the Malaysian refugee camp and Gawa later joined him in year 2007. In 2012, they were accepted to resettle in Aotearoa New Zealand alongside their first child. They spent the first six weeks at the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre where support was given

to help them prepare for life in New Zealand. After that, they were housed in Wellington and supported by a group of volunteers including the author herself for another six months. Denpo's mother and six siblings are all still in the Chin state, and one other sister is in Malaysia. Gawa's parents and four siblings are all in Malaysia.

Denpo and Gawa both completed primary level education in Myanmar. At Mangere, they both attended English classes. Denpo had attended English classes for four years, whereas Gawa only attended for six months. As Christians, both Denpo and Gawa are active members of a Burmese community church. Denpo is currently working as a painter and Gawa a stay-at-home parent. They are now parents to four children aged eleven, nine, and six years, and five months old. The first three children attended the same childcare for a year and a half before moving on to a kindergarten when they turned four years old. The couple intend to enrol the youngest child in the same early childhood centres.

Discussion

In the following I will explore how parents' competencies, opportunities, motivations and perceptions impact on belonging in early childhood. The four components are interconnected and non-hierarchical in nature.

Competencies for belonging

Competencies refer to the social, emotional, and cultural skills essential for developing a sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2021). Social-emotional skills enable individuals to be mindful of themselves, to communicate effectively, to have emotional and behavioural regulation abilities in order to conduct themselves according to social conventions (Allen et al., 2021). The family's social skills are fostered by opportunities created by the early childhood centres to socially interact with the teachers and other families. Being able to connect supports the family's confidence in dealing with new people which is a key factor of wellbeing.

Cultural skills refer to one's understanding of his/her identity, heritage, and values (Allen et al., 2021). In the interview, the family demonstrated their cultural skills as they confidently articulated their aspirations for their children's education, their role as parents, and the support they wish to have from their children's centres. They are grateful for the teachers' effort to include, support and treat them equally, in addition to promoting their culture in the centre.

Opportunities to belong

Opportunities refer to the "availability of groups, people, places, times, and spaces that enable belonging to occur" (Allen et al., 2021, p. 92). A process called *bridging* occurs when there is social reciprocity, such as people coming together to share resources and interact face-to-face, whereas *bonding* occurs when people share similar backgrounds or characteristics such as interests and attitudes (Putnam, 2000, as cited in Allen et al., 2021).

From the parents' perspective, the centres provided many opportunities for them to belong. Bridging occurred through opportunities such as centre events, family evenings and children's profile books. The family found the centre events effective to support their social connections and the profile books to "see what the children are doing and how they are learning" (Gawa). Bonding occurred when there was a shared value between the teachers and the parents. Gawa shared, "The teachers told us that it is important that our kids don't forget our own language and culture which made us very happy." According to Mahar et al. (2012) shared values and respect contributes to a sense of belonging.

Opportunities need to be provided with care and consideration. Due to language barrier, kaiako need to be mindful of the challenges individual parents face when creating opportunities for home-centre collaboration. Chan (2011) found that in some cultures, home-centre partnership or parent involvement is a foreign concept, resulting in families not fully understanding what is expected of them. In addition to limited language skills, it is also found that some families struggle to find time to be involved in centre activities (Broome & Kindon, 2008; Egilsson et al., 2021). Language barriers and time limitations can cause a lack of engagement, resulting in teachers forming negative perceptions of parents (Chan, 2011), which is detrimental to the development of relational trust. Therefore, although parents have competencies that allow them to develop a sense of belonging, the external opportunities provided by the centre should be tailored to take each family's competencies and needs into account.

Motivations to belong

This component represents the need and desire to engage in social interactions (Allen et al., 2021). People who are motivated to belong will seek opportunities to connect and to feel accepted. They also tend to connect with their own identity or with a place (Allen et al., 2021). It is found in the interview that the family's motivation to belong is influenced by the inclusiveness and responsiveness of kaiako and their familiarity to the centre. Hence the family has decided to enrol their youngest child to the same childcare centre. Tension can be minimised when refugee families are informed about the centre's education perspectives and care practices (Deng & Marlowe, 2013). This familiarity enables the family to know what to do, what to expect, and how to behave, giving them a sense of security.

The language barrier was overcome when kaiako used culturally appropriate ways to communicate, such as: "They listened to us very carefully" and "the centre manager helped fill in the form" (Gawa), helping the family to feel supported and included. The family also feel motivated when kaiako value their efforts and participation, which generates a sense of self-worth. When being asked what they appreciate most, Gawa shared that: "We really like the compliments from the teachers. No matter what, the teachers encourage us". Sammons et al. (2020) agree that valuing family's input and contribution can promote a sense of belonging and empower parents to continue to be involved.

Perceptions of belonging

Perceptions are defined as "a person's subjective feelings and cognitions concerning their experiences" (Allen et al., 2021, p. 94). Perceptions include beliefs people form for themselves on whether they fit in with those around them. These beliefs are informed by past experiences and influence one's desire to connect with others (Allen et al., 2021).

Hence there is a need for teachers to understand the history and reason for migration as it influences parents' perceptions and thinking (Sammons et al., 2020). Denpo and Gawa had experienced hardship back in their home country resulting in having a strong desire for equal treatment and being valued for who they are. They expressed their appreciation of the teachers' inclusive and supportive practices, which were practices fundamental to promoting a sense of belonging (Stratigos et al., 2014).

Belonging for this family also means having their beliefs and aspirations understood and responded to. However, it is found that there is a lingering tension between the teachers' and parents' understanding of their role in teaching and learning due to the effects of language limitation and perceptions of parent and teacher roles. The family experienced a lack of confidence in helping their children learn due to limitations in language and literacy skills. Although the family are invited to contribute to children's learning, they feel rather helpless in doing so and were even criticised by their children of their competencies. Denpo shared, *"If the children are given homework or something, as parents we can't read with them. Even if we read with them, the kids told us our pronunciation is not right."* This is a good reminder for kaiako to be cautious when working with children and families from a refugee background to prevent respect for their parents being compromised (Deng & Marlowe, 2013). When expectations on parents are not managed appropriately by teachers, parents can develop a lack of self-efficacy that is detrimental to the motivation for them to be involved (Tobin, 2020; Yulianti et al., 2019). Also, due to cultural beliefs and experience, the parents entrust teachers with the authority to educate their children. In the interview, the family voices their belief that teachers are second parents and should have a key role to play in their children's education.

As parents, we are the first ones to teach the children behaviour and love. Teachers are like their second parent so it's very important for the teachers to teach them...We want our children to gain good behaviours, like good manners and good attitude. We want our children to gain good education, like learn English as well as general knowledge. The environment is very different from where we come from too so we want to make sure they adapt to the different environment. (Gawa)

This cultural belief that teachers have equal or more authority in education is aligned with Tobin (2020) who indicates that many immigrant parents "have a tendency to show deference to teachers" (p. 18). After having three children graduate from the same centre, the family still expressed their desire for the teachers to take the lead. This tension from a lack of mutual understanding of parent and teacher roles can affect the connection parents have with the teachers, affecting their sense of belonging. With this, kaiako should strive to understand families' point of view and engage in ongoing reflections on their beliefs and practice (Mitchell et al., 2015; Sammons et al., 2020; Tobin, 2020). Having awareness of the different cultural perspectives of education and care is the first step to making families feel understood and respected, promoting their sense of belonging.

Recommendations for teaching practice

Below are some recommendations for teaching practice that can act as a guideline for supporting families from a refugee background gain a sense of belonging.

Figure 1: Recommendations for teaching practice

Components	Recommended teaching practice
Competencies	Create opportunities for families to socially connect with teachers and other families. Due to language limitation, be mindful of what support the families might require to engage in communication and social interactions.
	Promote the families' culture in the centre by consulting them on what is important to them.
	Treat the families equally by including them in all aspects of education and care.
Opportunities	Demonstrate sensitivity to the challenges the families face and their needs as a result of that.
	Opportunities created such as social events or parent input need to be sensitive of the families' level of confidence and their perceptions of teacher and parent roles.
	Show the families how their values, beliefs, and aspirations can be supported in the centre.
Motivations	Introduce to families the centre's perspectives of education and care, and help them understand the curriculum and centre's practice.
	Make families feel important by showing appreciation to all kinds of parent contribution, no matter big or small.
	Modify communication strategies to overcome language barriers.
Perceptions	Seek to understand families' perceptions of parent role and teacher role. Identify what is important to them and validate their aspirations, even if it is different from best practice.
	Be mindful of the types of participation parents see as valuable. Manage expectations on parent involvement sensitively.
	Reflect on our own cultural knowledge, identity and biases to prevent from homogenising culture.
	Be aware of the different cultural perspectives and understanding on education and care. Accept the families fully for who they are, where they come from, what they value and believe in, what they can bring, and what they need and want.

Conclusion

Refugee families' prior experiences in their home country and their current affordances determine their aspirations for children, their perceptions of education and care, and their level of engagement. The teaching practices recommended within this article are informed by this refugee family's circumstances and harness their competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions conducive to accentuate their sense of belonging. For more responsive and equitable provision, early childhood practitioners need to be proactive in getting to know each individual family that they work with. With a strong sense of parental belonging, meaningful home-centre partnerships can then be built to enhance outcomes for tamariki.

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