

Indo-Fijian early childhood teachers in New Zealand and their experiences of belonging viewed through a Community of Practice lens.

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Indo-Fijian early childhood teachers who are newcomers in New Zealand early childhood settings have unique challenges in becoming established early childhood teachers. Findings from a recent master's research project (Kumar, 2022) highlight the challenges as well as the affordances experienced in becoming established early childhood teachers. In the main, when the Indo-Fijian teachers felt supported by other experienced teachers and were encouraged to use their culturally and linguistically diverse [CALD] knowledge, their feelings of belonging were enhanced. When culturally diverse children and families join early childhood settings, they may also encounter cultural barriers to understanding the dominant early childhood culture. Drawing on the theoretical perspective of a community of practice (CoP), this article describes how Indo-Fijian early childhood education teachers can enact the role of cultural brokers for Indo-Fijian children and families. The implications of this broker role will also extend to other CALD teachers supporting children and families from similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds in the early childhood education settings.

Introduction

According to Statistics New Zealand (2018), 27.4% of the population were born overseas, which was an increase of 2.2% (25.2%) from the 2013 census count, confirming that the early childhood landscape in New Zealand is becoming more culturally diverse (Chan, 2020, 2019; Rana & Culbreath, 2019). Recent research, however, has raised concerns about the sector's capacity to meet the needs of immigrant families and children. Chan (2019) points out that while *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum (Te Whāriki)* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) aspires for a culturally inclusive and equitable curriculum, some teachers feel uncertain how to implement it. Shuker and Cherrington (2016) suggest that how teachers conceptualise the notion of 'culture' varies, with the risk of culture being explored in simplistic, generic ways, which may be compounded by a communication barrier with the children's parents (Tobin, 2020). Moreover, understanding children's funds of knowledge, which constitutes the households' culturally developed and historically accumulated knowledge (González et al., 2005), can be a challenge to teachers who do not share similar backgrounds. In addition, the United Convention on the Rights of the Child, states through Articles 29 and 30, that children have a right to be educated about their own and other's cultures and to respect these cultures regardless of whether their culture is dominant or not (United Nations, n.d.).

This article presents a sample of Indo-Fijian teachers' experiences as newcomers to early childhood in New Zealand by sharing stories of their challenges as novices as well as the opportunities that afforded them to overcome these challenges (Kumar, 2022). The author aims to raise awareness and understanding amongst early childhood educators about the essential role CALD teachers can perform in supporting CALD children, families and teachers from similar CALD backgrounds. Often, families' cultural knowledge remains silent because parents encounter difficulties in articulating and showing their cultural practices, beliefs, and values (Hedges & Cooper, 2016). Teachers from the same backgrounds could bridge the gap between early childhood settings and understanding CALD children's cultural and linguistic diversity.

Indo-Fijian language and culture

Indo-Fijian ECE teachers belong to the wider CALD group in New Zealand. Indo-Fijian is a term given to descendants of indentured labourers taken to Fiji under the indenture system from India between 1879 and 1916 to work on sugarcane plantations (Lal, 2016; Mohanty, 2017; Ramesh, 2017). Having largely lost their ties to their motherland, many of these labourers chose to stay on in Fiji, which gave rise to their own distinct Indo-Fijian culture and language (Lal, 2015; Naidu, 2017; Voigt-Graf, 2008). From the fragments of their shared past also emerged other experiences such as authentic bonds of brotherhood known as *jahajibhais* (brothers from the ship journey) and a common dialect known as 'Fiji Hindi' (Prasad, 2010).

Fiji-Hindi remains the first language of Indo-Fijians (Hundt, 2019; Shameem, 2017), and the Indo-Fijian population in New Zealand also value their Fiji-Hindi language (Hundt, 2019; Shameem, 1998). Fiji-Hindi, a local variant of Standard Hindi, is used as a common language by different sub-Indian ethnicities such as Muslims, Tamils, and Punjabis (Hundt, 2019; Shameem, 2017; Willans & Prasad, 2021). In the past, the speakers of Fiji-Hindi viewed the language as having a lower status than Standard-Hindi (Hundt; 2019; Shameem, 1998; Willans & Prasad, 2021). The use of negative labels to describe Fiji-Hindi generally draws criticism from Indo-Fijians as illustrated in Hundt's (2019) research when one of the interviewees commented, "I don't like it when people call Fiji Hindi slang cause it's not actually it's just another- it's another language, I think" (p. 14). Nevertheless, Indo-Fijians who cannot speak Standard Hindi (taught in schools) can still converse in Fiji-Hindi (Shameem, 2017) and carry the Fiji-Hindi legacy of Indo-Fijian migrants globally. Statistics New Zealand (2018) state that 50.8% of the Indo-Fijian population speaks two languages, 34.8% one language, 9.2% speaks three, and 1.6% speak four. Since the Indo-Fijian population is mainly immigrants (Statistics New Zealand, 2018), the Indo-Fijian early childhood teachers also bring their own culture and language to New Zealand's early childhood settings.

Communities of practice

The communities of practice theory argues that learning happens between learners and their environment and explains the acquisition of professional skills through legitimate peripheral participation [LPP] (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Kumar (2022) uses the concept of LPP to describe individuals' inwards trajectories from the periphery of their CoP as novices to becoming full participants. Newcomers who first join a CoP, such as new teachers in an early childhood setting, are positioned on the *periphery* or the *boundary* of the centre's practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Being on the periphery of a CoP, places the newcomer neither wholly inside

nor outside the CoP, yet affords the newcomer opportunities to gain knowledge and competence associated with the CoP's function leading to continuity and possibilities of participation (Wenger, 1998). A boundary is similar to the periphery as it includes the edges of the CoP too. However, a boundary refers to discontinuities, a clear distinction between inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. Individuals who are often placed on their CoP periphery; as legitimate peripheral participants may acquire full CoP participation with experience (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The journey to full participation depends on the affordances present in the environment, including the nature of relationships with experienced team members (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

CALD teachers as brokers: helping children and families cross home-centre boundaries

Experienced team members who are culturally and linguistically diverse, can act as brokers for CALD children and families since they may share deep cultural understandings and are situated to identify inclusion and equity concerns. The CALD teachers can be the first contact person for the new CALD children and families, collaborating and creating a supportive environment that reflects an understanding of their languages, their cultural and religious beliefs and their socio-economic backgrounds. The act of brokering can help newcomers move from LPP to greater participation in the centre. Tobin (2022) shares insights from a decade-ago study of immigrant/refugee parents of preservice schools across five European countries to highlight the roles of bicultural staff as members who “play a key but often under-appreciated role” (p. 17) in functioning as cultural brokers for the immigrant children and families with the host countries’ language, customs, and expectations.

Since culturally and linguistically diverse children and their families often encounter challenges when settling in new early childhood settings (Barron, 2009; Chan, 2020; Chan & Spoonley, 2017; Tobin, 2020), understanding their new environment’s challenges and affordances will support new children and families’ legitimate peripheral participation. When children and their families join their early childhood settings, they are new (at the boundary) and do not know much about their early childhood settings initially. With the affordances available in their settings, including support from the teaching team, management, other whānau, teaching strategies and learning experiences reflective of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, they begin their trajectory from being a novice to becoming confident and competent learners.

However, some immigrant children and families may experience a setting in which their “heritage, languages and cultures [are] ... subordinated, marginalised, or not being visible at all” (Chan, 2020, p. 562). A striking example was discussed by Barron (2009) on power dynamics between Pakistani heritage staff and white European heritage teachers, which took place in a preschool setting in England. The children of Pakistani heritage had no prior knowledge and experience of free play, which was in contrast to the setting created by the teachers, resulting in disengagement from free play activities (Barron, 2009). Bilingual staff familiar with both Pakistani and Western cultures could have bridged the gap between the cultures in this situation with their wealth of cultural knowledge.

CALD teachers’ own funds of knowledge are more influential in forming teachers’ professional roles than their qualifications because their lived experiences support decision-making through a more holistic lens (Hedges, 2012; McDevitt & Kurihara, 2017). The teachers’ funds of knowledge can therefore be considered a strength that they bring to their teaching roles. McDevitt and Kurihara (2017), for example, share a CALD student-teacher’s success

story: “Miyuki successfully found a way to teach and reach the children with diverse interests and needs by sharing her own personal and cultural funds of knowledge that are interwoven with the interests, curiosity, and emotions of the young children in her classroom” (p. 45). Here the early childhood teacher’s collective cultural knowledge and first language from their home country provided brokering between the early childhood centre and families from the same cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Indo-Fijian teachers’ perspectives: becoming a member in a learning community

The author’s master’s thesis presents a qualitative phenomenology study that explored the experiences of eight qualified Indo-Fijian early childhood teachers in New Zealand early childhood settings. The study included individual interviews and a focus group discussion. The participants were recruited using flyers and a social media message. The study used thematic analysis. Key challenges and affordances experienced by the Indo-Fijian participants in their journey of becoming established members of a learning community are presented below.

Challenges and affordances; Boundary encounters, relationships with experienced teachers, language and culture

Peripheral experiences allow newcomers access to learning a CoP’s practice through observations or with some degree of engagement within the practice (Wenger, 1998). For example, Manpreet explained that initially she “learned a lot of things” through “just observations,” while Koyal explained “... I’ll observe what they [colleagues] were doing and I try to get into that and get involved in what they were trying to do” (Koyal, Interview). Peripheral experiences afford teachers the opportunities to gradually learn their early childhood settings’ practices while knowing that “full participation is not a goal to start with” (Wenger, 1998, p. 166).

Peripheral experiences are often initiated at the boundary with support from colleagues. The degree of support afforded to the new CALD teacher by more experienced members of the teaching team was instrumental in recognising and valuing their contributions and legitimising their peripheral participation. Through these interactions the more experienced teachers were able to structure the newcomers’ trajectory, recognising common struggles and build a sense of community. Reflecting on these relationships, Jyoti commented,

I think [the] main thing with all of us was [that] we all were foreigners...they were quite established when I joined in, ... where they have spent quite a number of years in that centre... but I think they were very supportive, very understanding because they come [came] from a similar background where I started. (Jyoti, Interview) ...they guided me, they supported me and I believe the main thing that worked out over there, how we became so connected was because we all were immigrants. We all were from another place. So, somehow we could relate to each other. (Jyoti, Focus Group [FG])

Jyoti’s experiences demonstrate that relationships between novices and experienced team members are particularly effective when they have the shared experience of being CALD (Iyer & Reese, 2013; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

The participants brought their home language and culture into their early childhood education settings. Understanding their culture is important because the Indian diaspora has generated varied cultures due to colonisation. The participants' appreciation of their Indo-Fijian culture affirms their distinct cultural heritage. This affirmation is pertinent to the study of CALD children and families because it provides an insight into the cultures that are meaningful to them and perhaps knowing children's cultures can support their sense of belonging to early childhood settings.

The Indo-Fijian culture as a boundary object supported the participants' legitimate peripheral participation. For example, Neetu advised that she was "able to bring that [rich knowledge of culture] into every centre that I've worked in. Like I have organised ... functions like our cultural functions ... Diwali, Holi and everything" (Neetu, Interview). Neetu's statement illustrates how her own cultural knowledge contributed to her teacher knowledge (Hedges, 2012, 2014). She used the term 'everything' to demonstrate her confidence as a teacher when implementing culturally informed practices. Festivals like Diwali and Holi are examples of culturally developed funds of knowledge that supported Neetu's inward trajectory.

While culture contributed to participants' professional roles, it also presented barriers as experienced by some participants. For example, Tanvi stated "... in my family, we had [a] deep respect for our elders, our seniors even... as a teacher we wouldn't question our leaders". A cultural understanding of respect for elders seemed to demonstrate obedience as a traditional approach (Nesbitt, 2017; Sung, 2001). The participants' value of respect clashed in many ways with their participation in their teaching teams in the centres. For example, for Tanvi, her respect for elders initially led her to repress her 'teacher voice':

When I started working in this early childhood setting, my leaders were obviously senior to me [and] anything that they said often ... I would not question it and just follow it because these were directives coming from my leaders and I was taught in my culture to respect the leaders and whatever they say without questioning. And ... looking back at it today, I'd be like "Okay no if ... something doesn't sit right with me I ... have to question that and not just follow because it is coming from someone senior to me. (Tanvi, Interview)

A reluctance to question colleagues in positions of authority because of cultural values initially affected Tanvi's legitimate peripheral participation. The excerpt above also seems to demonstrate her changing subjectivity concerning her teacher role. For example, she showed more acceptance towards her changing belief about respect for elders/seniors. Moreover, collaboration between experienced teachers and novices supports the latter's LPP because often, experienced teachers would have attained considerable knowledge before mentoring novices in order to enable their construction of meanings of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Respect for the participants also refers to how the children addressed the teachers in their early childhood settings. For example, for Neetu being addressed by her name was an experience of culture shock.

The first thing that struck me was when children call you by your name. Like back home we were addressed as Madam or Miss ... I may [have] felt uncomfortable at that time ... Because back home [Fiji] it was more of a respect thing and an age thing that your student addresses you as Madam or Sir. (Neetu, Interview)

Koyal also explained that when children in her early childhood education setting called her 'aunty' instead of taking her name, she felt a sense of belonging. Koyal's early childhood education setting had all children addressing male and female staff as uncles and aunts instead of by their names. Both Neetu and Koyal's cultural beliefs, described above, again allude to their deep roots in Indian (Nesbitt, 2017) and Pasifika cultures (Rimoni & Averill, 2019). Nesbitt (2017) discusses explicitly that in the Indian diaspora community, some children "... learn to refer to aunts and uncles and other relatives by terms such as "mamaji" [respected brother of my mother] or "chachaji" [respected younger brother of my father] [which are Hindi names].

The second challenge to LPP identified by almost all participants included understanding aspects of New Zealand-based teacher practice due to their CALD backgrounds, such as children's agency and play. Children's agency is explained as an ability "to act independently, both shaping their social environment and being shaped by it" (Prout & James, 1990, as cited in Powell et al., 2016). For example, Manpreet said,

Coming from [an] Indian descent, we are very overprotective. We don't let children do things on their own. We will stop them, you know, from doing things like especially when you see them climbing up, you know, you will stand next to them ... just to make sure that they are safe... it was quite shocking for me, ... the teachers ... standing far away and just supervising. (Manpreet, Interview)

Te Whāriki is a credit-based emergent curriculum emphasising children's agency, strengths and interests (MoE, 2017). Many immigrant teachers with their own cultural beliefs and values initially encounter challenges when developing an understanding of providing children agency through play. Manpreet's beliefs about children's risk-taking collided with *Te Whāriki's* expectations of teachers needing to appreciate and support children to test their physical abilities through exploration (MoE, 2017).

Together with culture, another essential CALD characteristic is the teachers' first language. Sometimes first languages could present challenges to early childhood education teachers. For example, Neetu felt her "personal sense of belonging and identity were challenged when I was told by a teacher from India that our Fiji-Hindi language is not even a language" (Neetu, Interview). Neetu's exchange with her Indian colleague demonstrates a juxtaposition between identities and in/exclusion, for Neetu, her Fiji-Hindi attributes give her an Indo-Fijian identity, and to be told that it is 'not even a language' challenged her sense of identity. Indo-Fijians value their unique identity as Indo-Fijians while they still value their Indian heritage and Fijian/Pasifika cultures. Commenting on this sense of difference, Devaah reflected "While I do acknowledge my ethnicity or my background as an Indian ... for five generations I've lived in Fiji, so I very closely relate to the Pasifika values or ways of doing, being and things ... I strongly believe I am a Pasifika".

This finding is pertinent to both Indian and Indo-Fijian early childhood education team members in understanding their individual identities and their unique places in early childhood education settings because the first language is a vital manifestation of one's culture for defining their identity (Hundt, 2019). *Te Whāriki* curriculum is also based on a collaborative learning approach that produces learning experiences through shared endeavors and active engagement with others (Rogoff, 1998). *Te Whāriki* advocates for early childhood teachers to share their power with children through the aspiration that children should be viewed as “competent and confident” learners (MoE, 2017, p. 9).

Fiji Hindi as a boundary object also supported participants' LPP since it strengthened their relationships with children, whānau and teams from the same linguistic backgrounds. Manpreet commented, “I was the only Indo-Fijian teacher and I think that was a bonus for the centre because I was able to communicate in Fiji-Hindi to the Fijian [Indo-Fijian] parents. *Te Whāriki* acknowledges that New Zealand is becoming increasingly multicultural and states that “children more readily become bi- or multilingual and bi- or multiliterate when language learning in the education setting builds on their home languages” (MoE, 2017, p. 12).

The Indo-Fijian participants' support to Indo-Fijian children and their families was crucial since not every teacher in their teams would know the children's first languages. A teacher's ability to effectively communicate to children and parents on behalf of their teams in their first languages creates a work culture based on trust and collaboration (Rodd, 2013).

Empowering Indo-Fijian teachers to better support children and families

This article argues that CALD early childhood teachers can be given opportunities to step up into brokering roles for the children and families from their CALD backgrounds since they have deep cultural understandings. CALD teachers such as the Indo-Fijian teachers, can be the first contact person for the new CALD children and families, and use their home language to help Indo-Fijian children build relationships and support them in developing an understanding of their learning experiences (Barron, 2009). The Indo-Fijian teachers as brokers could mediate between the early childhood teachers and Indo-Fijian families to negotiate a balance between different cultural knowledge and understandings. Chan (2020) explains that negotiating a local curriculum includes a responsive approach to diverse families' aspirations, “unsettling ingrained beliefs and routines ... willingness to listen and share decision-making, and an open-mindedness to evaluate and relinquish certain dominant practices and to transform pedagogies” (p. 570). Indo-Fijian teachers would further enrich their teams by providing insights into Indo-Fijian children's cultural beliefs and values.

The research also highlights on why some Indo-Fijian children may be hesitant in risk-taking learning experiences in their early childhood settings, knowing Indo-Fijian parents' reservations around risk-taking play. Tobin (2020) reiterates that “practitioners need to be encouraged to see working collaboratively and responsively with parents in general and with immigrant and refugee parents in particular, as just as important an aspect of best practice as the way they teach and care for young children” (p. 16).

Conclusion

Drawing on the Indo-Fijian early childhood teacher participants' experiences in New Zealand early childhood settings in becoming established early childhood teachers themselves (Kumar, 2022), this article suggests that CALD teachers from children's same cultural and linguistic backgrounds could step up in broker roles to negotiate the gap between their homes and early childhood settings meaningfully. These gaps could not only include an understanding of CALD children's cultural and linguistic backgrounds but their cultural and religious beliefs, socioeconomic backgrounds and an understanding of equity issues.

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