

Identity and connection to place: migrant Indian teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood education.

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Abstract

An increasingly multicultural Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood education (ECE) landscape that includes a growing number of Indian teachers forms the context for my Doctoral study in progress. *Kaitiakitanga* or respect for the natural world and a sense of place are integral to the ECE bicultural curriculum *Te Whāriki*. There is also acknowledgement in the curriculum of the teacher's role in facilitating children's development of an identity based on meaningful, responsive, and reciprocal relationships with places. In order to fulfil this role, teachers need to be aware and conscious of their own sense of place and environmental identity. A sense of place holds significant value for migrant teachers who come from other places, shaping their distinctive teaching philosophies and practices. Given this context, it is pertinent to explore how migrant teachers' sense of place and environmental identities evolve as they nurture the environmental identities of children in Aotearoa New Zealand ECE. My research explores migrant Indian teachers' understandings of their culturally embedded and negotiated environmental identities where the environment may hold different meanings and place in their home and host cultural systems. For the study, I collected data in the form of in-depth interviews with Indian teacher participants; interviews with their centre managers, contextual centre observations, analysis of children's learning assessments. In this summary, I discuss some insights into teachers' interpretations of their transitioning environmental identities in terms of influences of their early childhood environmental experiences, acculturation into the Aotearoa New Zealand ECE environmental context, importance of environment in ECE, as well as factors that affect self-exploration of their environmental identities, beliefs and teaching practices.

Environmental identity and sense of place

The environment is the crucible in which our identities, our relations with others, and our “being-in-the-world” are formed ([Sauvé, 2002](#)). Nurturing a relationship with this environment is more vital today than ever before. There is a growing awareness of the detrimental impact of human activity on the environment ([Eames & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2017](#); [Hill, 2008](#)). This impact requires a re-consideration of human-environment relationships including an examination of human attitudes and behaviours that can facilitate sustainable interactions between humans and the environment ([Soga & Gaston, 2016](#)). Given this context, an individual’s identity must include a human-environment element that can be explored and encouraged to bring about these desired changes.

People understand and interpret themselves in relation to the Earth and environment in different and unique ways (Thomashow, 1996). They develop this understanding in terms of their identities, self, values and behaviour with reference to the environment. This process is the basis for their environmental identities. Within the context of environmental education, the human-environment relationship described above has several dimensions that need consideration: the associations between identity, culture and nature; rich links between biological and cultural diversity; relationships with our immediate living spaces; and a sense of belonging ([Sauvé, 2002](#)).

Environmental identity and sense of place in Aotearoa New Zealand ECE

Early childhood has been recognised as an important stage when children can be encouraged to develop life-long dispositions of care for the environment ([Duhn, 2012](#); [Barratt, et al., 2014](#)) and develop a sense of belonging in their place ([Ministry of Education \[MOE\], 2017](#)). Additionally, a teacher’s environmental identity is crucial to a child’s environmental experiences and their resulting worldviews, as well as to the success of an early childhood environmental programme/ component ([Pelo, 2009](#); [Ritchie et al., 2010](#); [Wilson, 1993](#)).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, *Te Whāriki, He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa* Early Childhood Curriculum framework recognises the place of environment in its many guises in ECE through aspects such as spiritual development, exploration of the natural environment and physical spaces, as well as a sense of place. *Kaiako* are recognised as key resources in ECE and are responsible for creating opportunities to develop a sense of environmental stewardship or *kaitiakitanga* in children (([MOE, 2017, p.46](#); [Ritchie et al., 2010](#)).

Indian teachers and environmental identity in Aotearoa New Zealand ECE

A teachers' sense of place as part of one's environmental identity is especially significant in these times of increased migration and human movement. A place holds meaning for one's existence and hence identity ([Elbaz-Luwisch, 2004](#); Orr, 1992). Thus, a sense of place may hold unique value for a teacher whose place changes, such as with migrant Indian teachers.

Indian immigrants are one of the fastest growing cultural groups in Aotearoa New Zealand ([Statistics New Zealand, 2013](#)), and this growth is being reflected in the increasing numbers of migrant Indian teachers ECE. They have typically emigrated from a cultural context that does not prioritise the natural environment within the curriculum, yet they find themselves now practising in an early learning context that values awareness of, and interaction with, the natural environment on a regular basis (Enviroschools, 2020; [MOE, 1996, 2017](#); [MOE, 2015](#)). Implementing an environmentally inclusive curriculum such as *Te Whāriki* ([MOE, 2017](#)) in an environmentally-conscious context might challenge migrant Indian teachers' thinking about their own relationships with the natural environment. Like all migrant teachers, Indian teachers bring their unique/different home sociocultural histories and biogeographies to host cultures which might create environmental dissonance but also opportunities for inter-country transfer of culturally oriented environmental educational ideas/approaches ([Eames & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2017](#)).

As the Aotearoa New Zealand ECE sector faces a simultaneous increase in Asian teachers as well as a growing need for environmentally-conscious practices and philosophies ([Rathore et. al., 2020](#)), what does this mean for migrant Indian teachers? In Aotearoa New Zealand ECE, it is clear that local culture and policy demand that migrant Indian teachers become aware of their current environmental context and environmental identities such that they can in turn facilitate the development of children's environmental identities and sense of place. Hence, an understanding of migrant teachers' evolving and transitioning sense of place and environmental identity will facilitate an understanding of their environmental teaching philosophies and practices in Aotearoa New Zealand ECE.

Reflections from my doctoral study

Given the context described above, my research explores migrant Indian teachers' understandings of their culturally embedded and negotiated environmental identities where the environment may hold different meanings and places in their home (Indian) and host (Aotearoa New Zealand) cultural systems. For the study, I collected data in the form of in-depth interviews with Indian teacher participants; interviews with their centre managers as well as observations of environmental features of their centres and programmes to build a context for the Indian teacher participants; and analysis of learning assessments by the teachers to identify references to the environment.

The environmental identity of a migrant teacher from a different cultural orientation teaching within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand ECE is a dynamic and evolving concept. Some preliminary findings presented here reflect their understandings, perspectives and interpretations of environmental identity and sense of place.

The Indian teacher participants indicated that the kind of environmental experiences in their home as well as host culture determined their outlook towards ECE and the importance of the natural environment within it, in turn shaping their transitioning environmental identity. They shared diverse perspectives on their sense of place in their home cultural context. For some teachers, having access to natural spaces and environmental opportunities as children in their home country enabled them to realise the importance of environmental experiences in ECE. At the same time, the lack of environmental experiences and natural spaces in childhood also became the catalyst for some teachers to encourage children's connections with nature as a teacher, something they did not have as children.

Although most teachers had been practicing in Aotearoa New Zealand ECE for several years, even today, some of their environmental beliefs and teaching practices were influenced by the environmental experiences in their early years. Initially, some teachers often faced challenges and made adjustments in their ECE beliefs and philosophies to suit the new cultural context. Their personal and professional experiences from their home culture, their centre contexts, as well as professional development opportunities appear to have been instrumental in this acculturation process.

As practicing ECE teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand, the ECE context and type of centre determined whether the teachers had the opportunity to explore and indulge in their environmental identities. The teachers based their environmental identity and sense of place on the environmental philosophies and practices of their respective centre, or the lack thereof. For instance, centres/kindergartens where environmental aspects were included in the daily curriculum as well as practices, and professional development was encouraged in this area, the teachers seemed to have experienced more positive environmental identity transitions reflected through their growing interest, understanding, knowledge and inclination towards environmental practices within their early learning centres. In turn, these teachers were able to do the same for children by encouraging their exploration of the natural environment and developing a sense of place within the centre context.

For instance, one teacher participant stated how a park next door provided many opportunities for the teachers and children to explore the environment around the centre and develop a sense of place and responsibility stating,

“We take them through the park over there. So we just go quietly into the bush and talk to them about the birds and what kind of sound they make, how they eat, how we look after them.”

For a participant at a farm-based centre, they were fortunate to *“have farm animals in this space where children look after them, care for them. Or use the eggs, use them in their own cooking. So they understand where things come from or growing plants and growing things together. That kind of aspect is for children to see actually what nature does for us.”*

On the other hand, some teachers were part of centres that did not feature or prioritise environmental practices in their daily curriculum. This meant fewer opportunities for teachers to explore their environmental identities and sense of place within the Aotearoa New Zealand ECE context, and facilitate the same among the children. This was evident in their relatively measured awareness of and experiences with environmental aspects of ECE within and beyond their centres. However, it is important to note that in most cases, it was funding concerns, staff ratios, space limitations or the centre type and philosophy (privately owned/not-for-profit/farm-based/faith-based/Montessori/Kindergartens) that governed the curricular priorities in the early learning centres. In the case of monetary concerns, limited funds meant environmental activities and practices often took a backseat.

As one teacher participant explained,

“There are several such things (music sessions for example) that the centre pays for. It’s your choice, what you begin first, and if you want to start something new then you have to arrange for that expense by cutting down or reducing expense on something else.”

Another teacher participant from a relatively smaller centre shared that the centre faced certain challenges and limitations in terms of natural spaces that children could explore and spend time in, especially since there was limited outdoor space within the gates of the centre. In her words,

“I think one of the other reasons to take them out is, we don’t have a big playground, we don’t have many trees and greenery. We’ve got some grass, but most of the year it’s cordoned off because it’s raining, it’s too wet, then summer it gets too dry, the kids can’t walk on it because it has to be watered everyday...they actually need some place where they can run.”

Irrespective of the extent to which the teacher participants had been afforded opportunities to explore their own environmental identities and sense of place within their ECE centre contexts, as well as participate in environmental programmes or practices, all teachers agreed on the importance of environmental experiences in ECE. They considered experiential learning critical in order to build knowledge, appreciation and respect for the natural environment. According to one teacher participant, this could be seen through children’s interest and participation in gardening activities:

“If children are more connected with the environment, they actually know what’s happening, then they care for it. Once they see...when we do planting with our children, so they understand the concept of putting the seed in the ground, we water them, look after them every single day, and they see that progression of that plant or seedling, they want to look after it. They don’t want to pull it out. They understand the whole concept of the growth of that plant.”

Another teacher participant interpreted children’s connections with the natural environment as reinforcement of respect and reciprocity between the children and the environment, which is crucial for the sustainability of the planet. According to her,

“They need to have that association with nature to respect it, to actually understand. Because nature gives us everything. This whole planet is nature and if we can generate that respect for nature from the early years our planet is more safe for the future.”

All teacher participants were in agreement that outdoor environmental experiences and excursions enable children to develop confidence, independence, and resilience while taking risks and challenging themselves. According to them, a sense or awareness of place facilitates a sense or awareness of self for themselves and for children, thus highlighting the intricate connections between the self/individual identity and environmental identity. Children develop a sense of place through exploration of their immediate spaces. This encourages familiarity with the local spaces and strengthens the bond with the natural environment around them.

Overall, the analysis so far reiterates the critical need for teachers to understand how they view the links between the environment and education (Sauvé, 2009), and then translate this understanding into their teaching practices. These and other preliminary findings from my study indicate that an awareness of how migrant Indian teachers transition from one socio-cultural context to another with reference to their environmental identity and sense of place, provides an insight into the environmental identities and philosophies of culturally diverse teachers implementing a bicultural curriculum in a multicultural ECE context. This reiterates the need to examine connections between the significance of the natural environment in ECE, teachers' environmental identities and the role of culture.

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