

## Strengthening belonging and identity for refugee and immigrant families through early childhood education

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**Project dates:** 2019–2020

### Intro / Project description

This project explored the role of early childhood education (ECE) and pedagogical strategies in supporting a sense of belonging and identity for refugee and immigrant children and families in Aotearoa New Zealand. A package of professional resources and tools was developed for use in multicultural ECE settings.

### Aims

The project addressed three research questions. For children from refugee and immigrant backgrounds, the overarching question was:

1. How can the people, places and practices in early childhood settings support a sense of bicultural belonging to Aotearoa New Zealand, and sustain children's connections to homelands and people?

This question was explored through the following questions and associated sub-questions:

2. How do drawing, story-telling, and play provide opportunities for:
  - i. children to sustain connections with people and experiences from their home country?
  - ii. children to develop new connections in and sense of belonging with Aotearoa New Zealand?
3. How do teachers engage with children, parents, and whānau to:
  - i. enable a two-way exchange and mutual learning about culture?
  - ii. find out more about the knowledge and skills of children themselves?

From a framework of ecological and sociocultural theory, the project investigated pedagogical practices and processes for constructing pathways to bicultural belonging in Aotearoa New Zealand with teacher partners in four culturally diverse ECE centres.

### Why is this research important?

In 2016, UNICEF warned of the growing global crisis for refugee and immigrant children and of the international evidence that circumstances for a significant number are highly disadvantageous. Refugees are from countries where there has been war, ethnic, political or religious persecution, famine and poverty. Recent immigrants to a country may lack social networks and support from family members. This project recognises the pedagogical role of ECE for refugee and immigrant belonging and participation in Aotearoa New Zealand, and the mutual benefits for all ECE participants in learning from each other. The research has a social justice agenda; findings will contribute to understanding about how ECE can support family resettlement.

### Key findings

Our findings highlighted that:

1. Drawing and story-telling can foster discussion about events, places and people that are significant to the child, and offer a way to open the teachers' worlds to the worlds of families.
2. Digital story-telling can be a powerful means for teachers to reflect on their own lives and

foster pedagogical awareness on notions of belonging.

3. Orchestration of a constellation of smell, sound, sight, touch and taste experiences that echo aspects of children's home countries and cultures assists children to feel they belong.
4. Cultural artefacts and artworks can facilitate cultural discussions and understandings.
5. Walking and storying the land enables children to position themselves within the cultural and natural stories of a place, know the land and come to belong.

Two theoretical framings were developed from the study:

- *Whanaungatanga* as an aspect of being and belonging from a Māori perspective that has relevance for migrant and refugee children and families
- *Participatory democracy* as a practice and value in education is linked to the idea of a democratic ECE community as a place where all participants are able to belong and contribute to making a difference for learning, wellbeing and belonging, and where they collectively create a world.

### Implications for practice

- All settings had a permeable curriculum, open to contribution from children, families and community. Teachers acted as facilitators of participatory democracy through recognising and inviting families and children to contribute their "funds of knowledge" within curriculum.
- Pedagogical strategies that facilitated participatory democracy and enabled contribution of funds of knowledge were trialled in this study.
- One of the most significant aspects of teachers' work in this project was their willingness to learn and to try out new things.
- Policy challenge: Recognition that teachers need to be supported through teacher education, professional development, and research partnerships to think and act critically with reference to family funds of knowledge, children and society, and to experiment with teaching and learning practices in creating their local curriculum.

### Our partners:

This study was a partnership between University of Waikato researchers and staff from:

Crawshaw Kindergarten: Gail Megaffin (head teacher).

Hillcrest Kindergarten: Amanda Cloke (head teacher), Christine McKean, Rajam Walter, Louise Treweek (teachers) and Vicky Huang (teaching assistant).

Iqra Educare: Sophia Ali (head teacher), Maria Sammons, Leena Noorzai and Melanie Glover (teachers)

Pakuranga Baptist Kindergarten: Jacqui Lees (head teacher), Olivia Ng, Nilma Abeyratne, Andrea Du, Terina Johns (teachers).

Waikato Kindergarten Association.

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