Attracting and Retaining Diverse Kaiako in Early Childhood Education in Aotearoa New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

Aotearoa New Zealand is a bicultural nation with a superdiverse society, a feature which presents opportunities and challenges for our early childhood education (ECE) sector (Chan & Ritchie, 2020). A primary challenge within the sector is achieving, in accordance with the partnership, protection and participation principles of te Tiriti o Waitangi and the Treaty of Waitangi, equitable educational outcomes for Māori tamariki (children) as well as for tamariki from the many other minority groups attending ECE services. An important over-arching policy initiative in this regard is growing and sustaining a quality ECE teacher workforce that reflects and represents Aotearoa New Zealand's increasingly diverse society (Ministry of Education, 2019). Research evidence suggests that such a workforce can make a positive contribution to ensuring more equitable educational environments for diverse tamariki, their whānau (family and extended family) and their communities. Our study investigated barriers to and facilitators of attracting diverse kaiako (teacher) to ECE in Aotearoa New Zealand and retaining them once there. Although our research showed some positive developments in this regard, it also indicates much work is still needed to ensure our ECE teacher workforce and workplaces are representative of and inclusive towards diversity. We hope this research and its recommendations will create further discussion and reflection around the opportunities and challenges still ahead of us in working towards a world-class inclusive ECE education system for all (New Zealand Government, 2019).

INTRODUCTION

The Aotearoa New Zealand Labour-led Government considers investment in a well-qualified ECE workforce that mirrors the diverse communities constituting Aotearoa New Zealand's population a vital step in improving educational outcomes for tamariki attending ECE settings (Ministry of Education, 2019; New Zealand Government, 2019). An inclusive workforce is one that effectively reflects the diverse identities, languages, cultures, and backgrounds of tamariki, their whānau and their communities that ECE kaiako serve (Ministry of Education, 2017). As researchers (Chan & Ritchie, 2020; Cherrington & Shuker, 2012; Nuttall et al., 2021) point out, a culturally responsive teacher workforce brings the advantage of more equitable education environments for teacher and learner alike.

ECE statistical data (New Zealand Government, 2021) show 97 percent of the teaching workforce in ECE are female, with less than 3 percent male. Of the full ECE teaching workforce, 65 percent identify as European/Pākehā, 16 percent as Asian, 8 percent as Māori, 7 percent as Pacific, and 4 percent as Other. To ensure Aotearoa New Zealand's ECE teaching workforce represents the diversities in our society, initial teacher education (ITE) providers must find ways to ensure pathways into the profession are sufficiently flexible and robust to attract diverse individuals to it while safeguarding teaching quality (Ministry of Education, 2019). It is likewise important that leaders of early learning services consider the diversities represented in their teaching teams to determine if they genuinely reflect the communities in which they serve and to ensure that they provide diverse kaiako with culturally safe, equitable and fair workplaces to support retention in the profession (Griffiths et al., 2021).

At present, attracting sufficient numbers of people to Aotearoa New Zealand's ECE workforce is proving difficult, let alone ensuring that the workforce is sufficiently diverse. In 2020, the total number of students enrolling in ECE ITE was 1335, a number that represented a 5.9 percent decrease in such enrolments from the previous year (Education Counts, 2021). In 2019, the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) added "early childhood (pre-primary school) teacher" to its list of regional skills shortages (MBIE, 2021). (That list already included primary and secondary school teachers.) The Covid-19 pandemic has added to kaiako staffing issues (Education Review Office, 2021; Mitchell, 2020).

During 2021, the government implemented border exemptions that enabled 300 overseas teachers to enter/return to Aotearoa New Zealand to work in ECE settings, schools, and kura (Ministry of Education, 2021). Education Minister Chris Hipkins claimed at the time that this influx would "give principals and services additional support, especially for 2022 recruitment, and complement existing teacher supply initiatives" (Ministry of Education, 2021). However, while the border change would certainly help, it is important that we continue to investigate the reasons why we're unable to get enough New Zealand trained teachers. Our research study responds to this concern within the contexts of ECE and ECE teacher workforce diversity because it investigated the barriers to and facilitators of attracting and retaining diverse kaiako in early years education in Aotearoa New Zealand.

DIVERSITY ISSUES WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

To understand diversity issues for early childhood kaiako, it is helpful to consider how perceptions of diversity develop and how contextual factors contribute to the makeup of the ECE workforce. Diversity in society relates to how difference or otherness is perceived. According to Pagani (2019), perceptions of diversity are formed as people construct meanings about their own identity relative to their perceptions of others. Commonly recognised forms of diversity include age, gender, culture, ethnicity, religion, ability, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation. Perceptions of sameness or difference are not, however, limited to these domains and are constantly being interpreted in different social contexts (Pagani, 2019). From a social-constructionist perspective, perceptions of otherness are shaped by dominant discourses that serve to normalise and favour certain groups and traits while at the same time rendering others lesser or invisible (Gunn et al., 2020). Perceptions of diversity therefore contribute to whether diverse individuals and groups feel included or excluded in different societal contexts.

For individuals considering ECE teaching, perceptions about their own identity and diversity can impact on whether they decide to enter the profession or complete a teaching qualification. Once in the profession, perceptions can influence how they experience and practice teaching, their motivation and agency, their attitudes towards learners, their own wellbeing and resilience, and their willingness to stay in the profession (Olsen, 2016). In addition, when dominant discourses shape the assumptions and practices of early childhood kaiako, these discourses continue to be reinforced and simultaneously render alternative perspectives lesser or invisible (Gunn et al., 2020).

The social and political history of Aotearoa New Zealand has shaped perceptions about ECE and the makeup of its teaching workforce. Of particular importance in this regard is the history of colonisation in Aotearoa New Zealand, which has had a profound impact on indigenous Māori identities and their positioning as other within the mainstream education system. While contemporary ECE contexts may embrace their commitments under the principles of te Tiriti o Waitangi and the Treaty of Waitangi, Māori early childhood kaiako still face challenges in defining what "being Māori" means for them as a minority in mainstream ECE settings (Rameka, 2016). Another important narrative features discourses on maternal caregiving and the need for women to access quality childcare in order to participate equally in the wider workforce (May, 2019). Early childhood education has long been viewed as primarily the domain of women, and access to it a woman's issue. The growth of privatised ECE facilitated by a market-driven approach to ECE provision since the 1990s has had a generally adverse influence on the pay, conditions and management structures that affect the work of early childhood kaiako (Mitchell, 2019).

As recognition of and participation in ECE has grown, and as Aotearoa New Zealand has become more socially, culturally and linguistically diverse, discourses on and perceptions of the need for kaiako diversity within ECE settings do appear to be changing for the better. However, the legacy of the past continues to position the early childhood workforce in reality as predominantly female, identifying as European/Pākehā, and with low status and work/pay conditions compared to other parts of the education sector (Howard, 2010; Koch

& Farquhar, 2015; New Zealand Government, 2021; Scurfield, 2017; Thorpe et al., 2018). There thus appear to be close interrelated links between, for example, perceptions of the ECE teaching profession as the province of women, the low status accorded to it as a career choice, commensurate low pay rates and the difficulty of attracting sufficient numbers of people, let alone diverse people, to it.

A growing body of research confirms that teacher working conditions indeed affect attraction to the ECE sector and retention of its workforce (Bates, 2018; Ellis & Epstein 2015; Jones et al., 2017). As Gibbons et al. (2016) concluded in their briefing paper, "the quality of early childhood care and education is critically influenced by the quality of teacher working conditions" (p. 3). Adverse conditions include, amongst others, inflexible policy, low wages and pay inequities, heavy and demanding workloads, unsupportive and under-resourced workplace environments, discrimination, bias, the overall low status of ECE as a profession, and ECE seen as a gender-specific profession (Bates, 2018, Cumming et al., 2020; Ellis & Epstein 2015; Gibbons et al., 2016; Griffiths et al., 2021; Heffernan, 2019; Jones et al., 2017; May, 2019; New Zealand Educational Institute [NZEI], 2021; New Zealand Government, 2021; Nuttall et al., 2021; OECD, 2020; Pratt & Alexander, 2018).

An online survey of ECE teachers' wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2017 (Bates, 2018) found that while these teachers were highly motivated, relationship focused and believed in the value of their work as a key contribution to society, "high levels of stress, inadequate administrative support, poor monetary compensation, lack of self-efficacy and professional competence, [and] feelings of low self-efficacy" (p. 10) were having negative impacts on job satisfaction, overall wellbeing and, importantly, retention in the sector. As educators of ECE teachers, we continue to see alarmingly high numbers of kaiako leaving the sector for these same reasons. It is not surprising, then, to witness the sector's frequent calls on the government to address these issues (Bates, 2018, 2021; Griffiths, 2021; Neuwelt-Kearns & Ritchie, 2020; NZEI, 2021), not only because of the need to retain the existing ECE teacher workforce but also to attract a greater diversity of people to it. Improving access to ECE ITE is also another important factor in attracting and retaining a diverse ECE workforce that includes, especially, Māori, Pacific peoples, people with disabilities, and men. This involves reducing and removing barriers associated with attitudes, costs, accessibility, learning and participation (New Zealand Government, 2019).

METHOD

Because we wanted kaiako to tell us about their experiences in relation to the barriers and facilitators of inclusion in their workplace contexts, we brought a qualitative story-telling methodology to our research approach (Clandinin, 2015, Edwards, 2010, Hughes, 2010). Our tertiary institution's ethics committee reviewed and approved our research project. Approval included consideration of whether our project met the principles of partnership, participation and protection embedded in te Tiriti of Waitangi and the Treaty of Waitangi.

We developed a questionnaire containing four open-ended questions and placed it on the SurveyMonkey online platform. We considered online distribution to be an effective way of gathering respondents' views for two reasons. First, it

meant respondents could complete the questionnaire in their own time, in their own words, and in a safe context (Mukherji & Albon, 2018). Second, it allowed us to conduct our research amidst the challenging circumstances of Covid-19.

We alerted ECE kaiako to the presence of the questionnaire by sending an invitation and accompanying information sheet to the publicly available email addresses of managers and administrators of ECE services nationwide. We relied on these services to pass this information and the SurveyMonkey link to their kaiako, an approach that may have influenced the number of respondents. We also emailed the information sheet and participation invitation to student kaiako from our ITE organisation. We furthermore invited all recipients of this information to share it and the link to the questionnaire through their own networks.

Access to the questionnaire remained open for two months, by the end of which we had received 233 responses from ECE kaiako working in the following services: Pacific language centres, home-based ECE, te kōhanga reo, hospital-based ECE, childcare, kindergarten, and playcentre. The questionnaire asked respondents to identify, from a supplied list, any diversity or diversities that applied to them. The listed diversities included age, gender, ethnicity, culture, religion and spirituality, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, ability, disability, physical health conditions, mental health, and appearance and body size. The list also included an "other" option.

The four questions that we asked kaiako to respond to focused on their experiences of diversity while teaching and working in ECE settings; their perspectives on and opinions about workplace issues and challenges relating to diversity; and their feelings about, attitudes towards and understandings of such issues and challenges. The findings presented in this article focus on the teachers' responses to two of the four questions:

1. What they thought were the barriers to and facilitators of attracting and retaining a diverse range of kaiako in early childhood education.
2. Anything else they wanted to tell us about teacher diversity in the ECE context.

Our analysis and interpretations of the data were collaborative and included all members of the research team, thus allowing for consideration of different viewpoints. Data relating to Māori perspectives were considered within this approach. Iterative readings and codings of the data allowed us to identify patterns, discourses and themes (Edwards, 2010; Mukherji & Albon, 2018).

FINDINGS

We identified from the respondents' answers three key issues that they considered affected diverse kaiako decisions to enter, stay in or leave the profession.

Bias, discrimination and stigma
Respondents' comments highlighted a strong link between attracting and retaining a diverse range of kaiako and attitudes (both implicit and explicit)

towards difference and diversity in the culture of early learning services and society. For example:

> Male teachers [are] very much needed, but unfortunately not a career many choose due to the perception and stigma around males being in our environments, which is sad. (Respondent 116)

> [T]he stereotype around ECE teachers … that they must be females, white, etc (in my experience anyway) … would be off-putting for those who don't fit the stereotype. (Respondent 32)

Another respondent (No. 6) said that attitudes denoting "systemic racism are huge barriers that stand in the way of having diverse teaching teams". Respondent 212 experienced "Teaching teams' unwillingness to learn about their unique Māori culture relevant to their community." This respondent also said "… racism is prevalent in mainstream teaching culture."

Respondent 4 stated that, in her experience, "diversity is sometimes seen as a weakness or incapability rather than a strength". In similar vein, Respondent 109 claimed that "because of cultural background differences sometimes people are not given equal opportunities". The comments of the following two teachers reflect how our own biases can influence who is deemed suitable for teaching and who is not.

> Would love to have teachers part of my team that have different diversities … but struggle with how this would work (deaf person or person in wheelchair), doing the same roles and responsibilities as other teachers. (Respondent 36)

> A person's diversity that was to be heavily obese or physically disabled would be detrimental to the service. All other forms of diversity are not a problem. (Respondent 117)

When difference is seen in terms of "the other", it can prevent kaiako from sharing their diversities and feeling part of the early learning environment. As Respondent 70 pointed out, diverse kaiako can be silenced by negative attitudes: "[There is] fear of judgement from other kaiako and whānau. That sharing our diversity will threaten the security of our job." Conversely, as evident from a number of responses, if kaiako feel, hear and see that their cultures and diversities are valued, they are more likely to join the profession and stay in it:

> In order to grow and retain a diverse workforce, I think we need to keep encouraging people to be open minded and accepting [of] those with diverse backgrounds into our services.… Attitude is everything. (Respondent 210)

> One way to create improvement is to train teachers to be more open and accepting of the diversity of others. Challenging mindsets that are considered "normal". (Respondent 185)

Pay and working conditions

A large majority of respondents were dissatisfied with their pay and working conditions and saw these as a strong barrier to attracting and retaining diverse kaiako. Respondents felt that it was important that qualified ECE kaiako were recognised and valued as professionals just like their primary and secondary counterparts. Addressing pay equity issues was viewed as an important step in changing the negative perception of ECE teachers as "glorified babysitters" (Respondent 120) and in encouraging people to join the profession and stay in it.

> I believe it is the ongoing issues with pay parity, and how early childhood is not a respected career pathway in terms of pay parity[;] this seems to turn a lot of people I personally know away from the sector. (Respondent 188)

> Experience is lost due to a lack of pay, career path and promotion of ECE as a sector. (Respondent 43)

> I'm due to graduate in a few months and will likely have to leave teaching for a better paid job to pay back my debt to my student loan. Go figure. (Respondent 23)

> Not enough sick days for those who may need it … and … not enough support for those who need extra support to do the job e.g., support for mental health. (Respondent 10)

> Long hours, overworked, underpaid. (Respondent 48)

For Respondent 49, a key facilitator of diverse kaiako staying in the profession is "Employers who genuinely want to treat their staff well [which results in] stable, long-serving teams." A few respondents suggested that measures need to be taken to continue improving the image of ECE:

> If the sector is more sought after a more diverse range of people will be inclined to get involved in it. (Respondent 15)

> Raising our profile and emphasising the mahi [hard work] that takes place to maintain our teacher registration [will help]. (Respondent 158)

Initial teacher education (ITE)

Respondents were prolific in their claims that the cost and accessibility of ITE formed a barrier to attracting diverse kaiako—especially Māori and Pacific peoples—to the sector and then retaining them.

> More kaiako from different cultures need to be given opportunities to study. There needs to be more Pasifika scholarships available. (Respondent 54)

> We need to make the process of becoming an ECE teacher more available for all those that want to do it. (Respondent 58)

More opportunities for diverse teachers to become qualified.… We need to remove the barriers to Pasifika/Māori teachers. (Respondent 62)

The cost and entry requirements to complete the Bachelor's degree is too much for many people and so excludes a proportion of people, therefore reducing the diversity of graduating teachers. More scholarships or having teaching qualifications subsidised by the government would mean that the qualification was accessible to more people. (Respondent 74)

I believe we need to ensure we recruit a diverse range of people into teachers' college and offer them the support they may need to be successful in their training. (Respondent 102)

Providing fees-free study will go a long way towards attracting a diverse range of teachers. (Respondent 104)

I'd love to see more targeted explicit scholarships for diverse teachers to enter the profession and also access mentoring/pastoral care once they're practising. (Respondent 230)

DISCUSSION

The findings support both research and anecdotal evidence that bias, discrimination and stigma, inadequate remuneration, adverse employment conditions, and the cost of ITE limit the extent to which diverse people are attracted to teaching in the ECE sector and are retained once there. Responses also indicated that ECE settings with a culture underpinned by attitudes of acceptance, accommodation and valuing of diversity facilitated the retention of diverse kaiako.

One of the aspirations espoused in *He taonga te tamaiti/Every child a taonga early learning action plan 2019–2029* (Ministry of Education, 2019) is for tamariki and whānau in ECE settings to have access to a diverse teaching workforce that is consistent with the diversity found in their communities and society. However, we consider that the rhetoric of the plan with regard to the workforce has yet to align with reality. To meet our obligations in relation to te Tiriti o Waitangi and the Treaty of Waitangi and progress actions that will help to build a more diverse teacher workforce, it is important that we create spaces for Māori to feel like they belong within the profession (Chan & Ritchie, 2020). Because the wellbeing of tamariki in ECE settings is linked to the wellbeing of their teachers, these settings must be places where all diverse kaiako feel that their culture, genders and diversity is accepted and supported and their work valued in terms of remuneration and working conditions (Cherrington & Shuker, 2012; Nuttall et al., 2021).

The responses to our survey indicate that we have yet to achieve full equity for diverse kaiako and that we can learn from those who have had positive experiences as to how we can do better. We know that positive attitudes of ECE management, kaiako and whānau can have a good impact on workplace

satisfaction. Alternatively, negative attitudes can lead to feelings of exclusion, of being "other", a process associated with being discursively categorised as normal or not normal, and with exclusivity and exclusion (Peters & Beasley, 2014).

Moss (2006) argues that because early childhood spaces are places where ethical and political practices occur, possibilities exist for "creating knowledge, identity and values by challenging dominant discourses" about diversity (p. 129), and for establishing a milieu where everyone can achieve their potential. Clarkin-Phillips (2018) uses Bourdieu's ideas of "habitus" and "fields" to explain why sites such as ECE centres can predispose people to act in certain ways. Habitus refers to the social, political, and economic environment we occupy and to the institutions, beliefs, and socially transmitted ideas associated with that environment. The habitus each of us occupies tends toward social and cultural reproduction. However, argues Clarkin-Phillips (2018), we can develop secondary habitus—places of possibility and practice where we can challenge prevailing ways of thinking and doing, including those relating to diversity.

While early childhood settings may indeed offer opportunity for challenging the structures and practices that limit diversity and thus the recruitment and retention of diverse kaiako, these possibilities are unlikely in a habitus where kaiako experience what Jena-Crottet (2017) describes as the emotional labour associated with trying to act professionally while dealing with non-inclusive attitudes and practices and poor working conditions. Such emotional labour is associated with stress and burnout.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We consider, as have others before us, that offering a quality, inclusive curriculum to diverse tamariki and whānau and achieving the equitable educational outcomes that come with it will only be achieved if diverse kaiako feel included and valued too. The results of our study confirm the need to continue to identify and report on the values, attitudes, policies, conditions, and practices that either encourage and promote or inhibit diversity and inclusion in the ECE workplace. We also need to advocate for change and proactively address barriers associated with attracting diverse individuals to the profession and retaining them in it. We accordingly conclude this paper by offering three key recommendations for building a diverse kaiako workforce both now and in the future.

Continue to build inclusive workplace cultures
Building a positive workplace culture that supports inclusive relationships and diversity (Bendl et al., 2019; Education Council, 2017) involves breaking down barriers such as bias and discrimination, challenging the status quo and improving cultures, policies and practices (Douglass, 2019). Kaiako need to feel valued and comfortable about who they are in their workplaces. This comes about through centre leaders creating opportunities for collaboration, where kaiako are able to share ideas, challenge current attitudes and practices, and generally work towards ensuring the environment supports diverse kaiako (Douglass, 2019).

Address key issues limiting recruitment and retention
Improving the status of the ECE teaching profession requires the government to address pay equity and funding issues so that ECE rates of pay align with ECE

teachers' qualifications and responsibilities (New Zealand Government, 2019; OECD, 2020). Discussing and finding solutions to current adverse working conditions will not only improve kaiako wellbeing and motivation to remain in the ECE teaching profession but also (and importantly) benefit their interactions with children (OECD, 2020). For example, policies that support career progression demonstrate recognition and value of diverse skills. Measures such as these will help raise the status of the ECE profession and thereby provide another incentive for diverse people to enter and stay in early childhood teaching.

Establish barrier-free access to initial teacher education
The New Zealand Government (2019) has itself stressed the importance of barrier-free access to ITE. Providing scholarships is likely to encourage, attract and retain a diverse range of passionate applicants to ECE teaching who may have previously been deterred by the high cost of ITE. MacDonald et al. (2019) suggest taking a robust approach that includes advertising a wider range of scholarships. They also recommend prioritising a whanaungatanga approach in which scholarship applicants receive personal support during the application process. MacDonald and colleagues (2019) also see, as a useful way forward, encouraging ITE providers to work collaboratively with agencies such as the TeachNZ initiative by offering scholarships to those already enrolled in an ITE programme. They furthermore recommend extending support beyond completion of training to help graduates find suitable jobs and complete certification requirements. Finally, providing incentives such as paid practicums may further lessen the financial burden and encourage preservice kaiako to complete their programme of study.

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The authors are Academic Staff members in the early childhood education programmes at Te Pūkenga | New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology. We are interested in issues of equity and inclusion and have published in the areas of diversity, inclusion and exclusion in early childhood education. Recently, we have been working on a project which explores the importance of teacher diversity in early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand. The aim of this project is to provide the sector with more information on what needs to be done to ensure early learning services are safe, fair and equitable places for all kaiako.
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