“They are individuals, they can make choices”: ECE teachers from migrant backgrounds understandings of children’s rights in Aotearoa New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how beginner early childhood education (ECE) teachers from migrant backgrounds in Aotearoa New Zealand understand and enact children’s rights. Drawing on narrative inquiry with twelve newly qualified teachers, the study examines how participants’ culturally shaped “images of the child” influence their pedagogical choices and professional identities. Findings highlight the tensions between culturally familiar models of childhood, often grounded in authoritarian or protectionist traditions, and the participatory rights-based ethos embedded in Te Whāriki and the United National Convention on the Rights of the Child. Three themes emerged: the impact of cultural and political contexts on teachers’ understandings of children’s rights, shifts from control-oriented to agency-focused disciplinary practices, and recognition of children as individual rights holders. By foregrounding the voices of migrant teachers, the article contributes to wider conversations about diversity and the enactment of children’s rights in ECE.

INTRODUCTION

Aotearoa New Zealand is now recognised as a superdiverse nation (Chan & Ritchie, 2020), a demographic shift reflected in initial teacher education (ITE) programmes where increasing numbers of student teachers come from migrant backgrounds (Burke, 2024a, Rana, 2020). Early childhood centres function as key cultural contact zones where the traditions and practices of children’s home communities meet those of the host society (Tobin et al., 2013) while also providing spaces to question and address the structures and practices that restrict diversity, and consequently, the recruitment and retention of diverse teachers (Griffiths et al., 2022). Research has explored the experiences of international students in Aotearoa New Zealand (Cui & Song, 2024; Loveridge et al., 2018; Phan, 2024) and of migrant children and their families in early childhood education (ECE) (Lees & Ng, 2020; Mitchell & Kamenarac, 2022; Woodhouse & Peters, 2025). However, far less attention has been given to how ECE teachers from migrant backgrounds negotiate the cultural and professional expectations of their new environment (Burke, 2024b), particularly in relation to children’s rights.

This research focuses on the "image of the child' (Malaguzzi, 1994) held by beginner ECE teachers from migrant backgrounds, and how these culturally shaped perspectives influence their practice and interactions with children. The concept of the image of the child is both personal and contextual as it is shaped by historical, cultural, political and social forces (Araujo, 2022). In Aotearoa New Zealand, this conception has shifted considerably over time and in recent decades, has been reflected in national and international frameworks, most notably the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations [UN], 1989) and the early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017). These have repositioned children as active rights-holders, capable and confident in influencing matters that affect them (Smith, 2016; Te One, 2011).

For many beginner teachers from migrant backgrounds, this approach requires re-evaluating long-held cultural understandings of childhood. In contexts where children are typically positioned as dependent on adult authority, the Aotearoa New Zealand ECE sector's rights-based, participatory ethos can represent a significant shift. The principles of *Te Whāriki* align strongly with the articles of UNCRC through its child-centred approach and its emphasis on participation, identity and belonging. *Our Code, Our Standards* (Education Council, 2017) sets out ethical and professional obligations to uphold dignity, equity and inclusion. As key components of ITE programmes, together these frameworks create a robust foundation for ECE practice that is rights-based and ethically grounded. This study found that participants often had to reconcile differences between their culturally constructed images of the child and the professional responsibility to uphold children's rights.

This paper examines three themes that emerged from participants' narratives: contextual influences on how rights are enacted, cultural perspectives on agency and well-being, and recognising children as individuals with rights. In doing so, it explores how beginner teachers from migrant backgrounds navigate the intersection of cultural beliefs and professional obligations in their work with young children in Aotearoa New Zealand.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted with a qualitative research framework and employed narrative inquiry to examine the stories and experiences of twelve beginner teachers from migrant backgrounds. All participants had recently completed their ITE at a New Zealand tertiary institution, graduating with either a Master of Teaching (ECE) or a Bachelor of Teaching (ECE). At the time of interviews, they had been working as fully qualified ECE teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand for between four and nine months. Eight participants identified as Chinese, with two participants from India, and one each from Hong Kong and Malaysia.

Consistent with the narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin, 2023), data was collected through semi-structured interviews lasting approximately one hour. Clandinin highlights the relational, continuous and social dimensions of lived experience as central to narrative inquiry, making this methodology well suited to capturing participants' professional journeys.

Ethical approval was granted by the researcher's institutional Ethics Committee. An interview guide containing open-ended prompts was used to

encourage discussion while allowing flexibility for participants to share their experiences in their own words. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Participants were invited to review their transcripts to verify accuracy and make amendments if desired. Pseudonyms were assigned to maintain confidentiality.

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021), was employed to interpret the data. This widely used method involves "systematically identifying, organising, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2021 p. 27). By identifying recurring themes that hold significance across participants' accounts, thematic analysis enables the researcher to interpret shared meanings and experiences, rather than focusing solely on exceptional or isolated cases.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Sociocultural theory forms the theoretical foundation for this study. From a sociocultural perspective, children are seen as capable, competent participants in their own learning, with development occurring through engagement in socially and culturally situated relationships and activities (MoE, 2017). Central to this view is the recognition that human development is shaped by the cultural values, understandings, and practices present in children's everyday environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Vygotsky, 1978).

In the Aotearoa New Zealand ECE context, sociocultural theory is closely aligned with rights-based frameworks such as UNCRC, which affirms children's entitlement to participation, protection and provision. *Te Whāriki* reflects these orientations by emphasising children's agency, voice, and right to influence their learning and environment. Professional expectations, as outlined in *Our Code, Our Standards* (Education Council, 2017), require teachers to embed these rights in daily practice, ensuring that children are treated with dignity, their perspectives are valued, and their autonomy is respected.

For beginner teachers from migrant backgrounds, the participatory and rights-based ethos of the Aotearoa New Zealand ECE sector can contrast with cultural models in which children are positioned primarily as dependent on adult authority. This study applies a sociocultural lens to explore how these teachers' culturally informed "images of the child" influence their pedagogical choices and the ways in which they enact children's rights in practice. By acknowledging that both teaching practices and constructions of childhood are culturally, socially and politically situated, the study highlights the complexities of becoming a rights-respecting ECE teacher in Aotearoa New Zealand.

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS AND TEACHER PEDAGOGY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

UNCRC is the foundational international agreement protecting children' rights within a child-centred framework (UN, 1989). It outlines three overlapping groups of rights: provision (care, health, education), protection (from neglect, abuse, violence), and participation (expressing views, decision-making, freedom

of expression). It also emphasises the best interests of the child and the principle of non-discrimination.

However, studies show inconsistency between ECE teachers' positive attitudes towards children's rights and their classroom practices, particularly regarding development, growth and participation (Banko-Bal, 2021; Etchebehere & De León, 2020). Teachers tend to be more responsive to protection rights yet often lack knowledge about how to act in cases of abuse or neglect (Correia et al., 2019). Cultural factors also play a role, as collectivist contexts may encourage teachers to present positive attitudes without fully applying them in practice (Banko-Bal, 2021). A lack of practical guidance for implementing children's rights in everyday teaching contributes to these challenges (Church & Bateman, 2019).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, interpretations of children's rights strongly influence pedagogy, shaped by UNCRC and *Te Whāriki* (Smith, 2016). UNCRC affirms provision, protection, and participation rights, highlighting children's entitlement to express opinions and be heard (Te One, 2011). Through its principles and strands, *Te Whāriki* reinforces learning as culturally embedded, strengths-based and participatory (Mitchell, 2015). The curriculum deliberately moves away from subject-based approaches, focusing instead ondiverse pathways and valuing children's and families' voices (Smith, 2016).

Although *Te Whāriki* embeds active citizenship (MoE, 2017), participation rights are not always consistently translated into practice and implementation may be limited by training gaps and systemic constraints (Mitchell, 2015; Te One, 2011). Teachers may prioritise protection and safety over autonomy (Quennerstedt, 2025), rely on traditional teacher-centred methods (Banko-Bal, 2021), or embody adult-child power imbalances which can inhibit authentic participation (Dalli & Te One, 2012). Structured activities can restrict free play, limiting agency and participation, despite *Te Whāriki's* emphasis on play (Church & Bateman, 2019; Terreni, 2013).

There is a clear need for deeper understanding of children's rights and how to integrate them into teaching. Genuine rights-based pedagogy requires listening to children, respecting their dignity and adapting practice to their interests and modes of communication (Clark, 2023; Smith, 2016). This includes extending child-initiated learning, fostering inquiry, critical thinking and cooperative learning (Probine et al., 2025). High-quality ECE, as envisioned by *Te Whāriki*, positions children as competent co-constructors of knowledge with unique perspectives and agency (MoE, 2017; Smith, 2016).

Despite challenges to effectively upholding and enacting children's rights in practice, the literature highlights many examples of responsive teaching, child-centred pedagogy, and teacher advocacy that promote participation, autonomy, protection, and well-being (Gibbs, 2020; Gyurova, 2023; Peters et al., 2015). These instances illustrate and contribute to a more rights-respecting early childhood education (Banko-Bal, 2021; Church & Bateman, 2019; Etchebehere & De León, 2020; Giamminuti & See, 2017). However, limited research has been conducted into the role that cultural identities play in the way that teachers enact and support children's rights in the ECE context in Aotearoa New Zealand. This paper seeks to fill that gap by examining how the image of the child held by beginner teachers from migrant backgrounds contributes to their understanding and application of rights-based frameworks.

FINDINGS

Arndt (2018) has argued that early childhood teachers' identity and sense of belonging are central to supporting children's wellbeing in early childhood education, yet these aspects are often overlooked in both research and wider conversations about diversity. She contends that more attention should be directed towards enabling teachers to critically consider their own experiences to continue developing as professionals. Duringthe narrative inquiry process (Clandinin, 2023), participants in this study reflected on their own practice through the lens of the image of the child, with this paper specifically focussing on their understanding of rights frameworks.

Contextual influences on conceptions of children's rights

Wider cultural, social and political systems deeply impact how children's rights are perceived and enacted. Tang (2019) argues that in China the image of the child has historically been largely instrumentalist and protective, rooted in Confucious concepts of care, love and protection. This positions children primarily as recipients of adult care and education rather than as autonomous rights holders. The foundations of UNCRC, although globally endorsed, have been critiqued for reflecting Western and Northern constructions of childhood that emphasise a carefree existence free from work or political participation (Bentley, 2005). Such ideas can be problematic when applied universally, particularly in contexts where children face poverty, disability, or conflict in the Global South. The ideals of UNCRC may also contrast with the lived realities of children in countries where political structures exercise clear control.

Participants in this study contrasted the democratic context of Aotearoa New Zealand, where children's rights are actively promoted and protected, with the more constrained rights frameworks in some of their countries of origin, particularly those with Communist governance structures. Rong from China, reflected on the connection between responsibility in early childhood and democratic participation:

> Most of our [NZ] colleagues pay a lot of attention to responsibilities. After children make a mess or pour out the toys, they normally ask them to tidy up. I still think that two-year-old children are too young. I can help them. But my colleagues' [say] that they need to take responsibility. I [realise] that's a good idea because in a democratic country our vote is not only responsible for us, but also for everyone here… I think my colleagues' idea is right: children are also participants in our life, in our society.

His reflection highlights how participation in a new professional community facilitates the internalisation of cultural values (Vygotsky, 1978). Rong observes that democratic principles underpin early childhood education in New Zealand, influencing teachers' image of the child as a participant in social life. Xu and Ritchie (2024) similarly note that citizenship in New Zealand ECE is framed through a bi-cultural lens, emphasising Māori rights, children's agency, and cultural diversity, whereas in China it is more strongly shaped by collectivism, Confucian values, and state-driven goals of social harmony and national identity.

China's instrumental view of children as future contributors to national development, often through academic achievement, limits the scope of children's broader participation rights (Goh, 2014). Feng contrasted this orientation with her observations in Aotearoa New Zealand: "In China, there is no free play. Children sit together and learn maths and literacy. In New Zealand, at even under two years old, they can pick up their lunch box, they can feed themselves. Parents think their children are very independent, they can choose themselves or let them solve the problem themselves". Other participants also commented on the stark contrast. Diu explained that "In China, it's mostly teacher-led. In New Zealand, I don't think we teach academically." Xiang described feeling ambivalent aboutthe academic pressures she grew up with and the play-based philosophy in Aotearoa New Zealand: "I've got high expectations for my children… New Zealand has play-based education, so I'm quite conflicted". Rather than abandoning their previous understandings, participants negotiate cultural discourses about learning and make meaning by observing and engaging in culturally distinct pedagogical routines. Through this process, participants appear to work in spaces of cultural and pedagogical hybridity as they conceptualise conceptions of children's rights (Bhabha, 1994).

For Mayang, from Malaysia, the bi-cultural framework of the curriculum was especially significant: "I think *Te Whariki* has included a lot of the child's rights, so they look into the rights of a child and then they expanded through bicultural practice by including Māori mana into it. I think that was really important". Similarly, Ling from Hong Kong described how Aotearoa New Zealand's approach positions children as capable learners:

> I think here in New Zealand the children have the right to explore the things they want, and teachers allow children to explore and experience things. Here they think the children are capable to do things, they are confident. When I was young, teachers believed we need to help children because they don't know how to do things themselves. But here it's more like we let them try and they make mistakes, and they learn from it, which is awesome.

These narratives demonstrate the role of societal values and political systems in shaping teachers' understandings of children's rights and the extent to which children's rights can be exercised in everyday life. As Church and Bateman (2019) argue, adult-child power dynamics continue to influence how children's voices are recognised, with adults often managing or limiting children's participation. Policies that focus primarily on protection can risk reinforcing hierarchies, rather than recognising children's agency (Giamminuti & See, 2017). Mayang compared her upbringing with her current experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand, emphasising this change:

> I feel that New Zealand children's well-being is assessed more holistically compared to children where I grew up in Malaysia. They have a bigger voice than in Asia. In Asia, I don't think we have that voice. If we don't meet the stages, we'll get sent back with a report and parents will need to work with it.

These reflections on democratic participation show how political socialisation in collectivist contexts can shape conceptions of agency. From a sociocultural perspective, this demonstrates the way teachers' professional learning in Aotearoa New Zealand acts as a site of cultural negotiation rather than assimilation (Vygotsky, 1978). Together, these accounts call attention to the ways in which the participants' cultural backgrounds and lived experiences shape their interpretations of rights and the need for rights to be widely known.

Cultural perspectives on discipline, agency and emotional well-being

UNCRC explicitly outlines the importance of protection from physical and mental violence (UN, 1989). Participants from countries such as India and China described growing up with disciplinary approaches, such as fear or physical punishment, which, while common in their home contexts, may beunacceptable elsewhere. They recognised that rights-respecting approaches in Aotearoa New Zealand prioritise positive discipline, communication and understanding which stand in contrast to authoritarian methods. Ayria, from India, described this difference vividly:

> So, in our countries, we don't use lots of words …. children have such fear of teachers that they don't show any kind of [challenging] behaviour. That's common in Asian cultures, especially India and China. But in New Zealand teachers need to use words to convince the child to stop that behaviour. I think that is really good".

Ayria further acknowledged how engaging with UNCRC during her classes reshaped her thinking:

> I had this [idea] from my culture of frightening the child, you can do anything. It works in India. But not in New Zealand. …Children have more rights. You can't touch the child. You can't slap the child. So, children have lots of [rights]. They are very lucky that they are enjoying good rights, but not in India.

Shui, from China, also reflected on how these disciplinary practices can harm children's well-being: "Children know what happens if you punish or abuse them. I won't do that again … it will harm them maybe for their whole life. Children said we should hide from bad teachers. I think we need to be careful what we say and do in front of children." His reflections reveal a significant shift in his understanding:

> [In the] beginning, I thought children understand nothing because they are too young to understand or remember things. So, we can do anything in front of them, we can abuse and punish them. But now, I know that they have feelings and they do they understand a lot and they know what happens if you punish or abuse them. I won't do that again because I know it will hurt them, maybe for their whole life. So, I won't do that. Yes, that is the thing that changed the most for me.

These examples illustrate the persistence of authoritarian cultural models of discipline and the way teachers' professional learning in Aotearoa New Zealand

can encourage alternative, rights-based approaches. Transformations in disciplinary beliefs show how professional learning environments can reshape participants' understanding of power and agency, and the way tools like language are central to changing thinking (Vygotsky, 1978)

According to Durrant and Stewart-Tufescu (2017) the concept of discipline has not been abandoned under the URCRC but rather reframed through its lens as a process of guidance, understanding and scaffolding rather than punishment or control. Practices such as hitting, isolation or the use of fear-based tactics are considered clear violations of children's rights. Reflecting their growing understanding of UNCRC, these participants' evolving perspectives signal identity reconstruction within a sociocultural frame as they engage with discourses of rights and the relational practices of ECE in Aotearoa New Zealand. Rights based discourse becomes a cultural tool that allows teachers to reconceptualise their authority and relationships with children.

Recognising children as individual rights-holders

The "image of the child" that teachers hold fundamentally shapes thinking and pedagogical practice (Malaguzzi, 1994). If children are viewed primarily through a 'needs' lens, they might be seen as dependent and incapable, leading to an education model focused on perceived deficits rather than strengths. In China, this deficit view remains prevalent, and children are often conceptualised as dependent, immature, and in need of protection. This leads adults to define what is in their best interests and make decisions on their behalf, often overriding children's own preferences (Qin, 2017). This directly undermines their right to express views and be heard (Tang, 2019).

Drawing on their learnings from their teacher training courses and their experiences of working in the Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood sector, participants emphasised the importance of seeing each child as an individual with their own identity, voice and rights, rather than as extensions of parental expectations. Diu, from China, described how her perspective shifted: "I changed my image to be consistent with the image in this country that children are more independent and more confident … Sometimes I ask the children, 'Do you need help?' They'll answer me, 'No, I can do it by myself." Feng similarly described the impact of her postgraduate study, "After I started the Masters, I think much of my image changed. The children can meet more challenges, they can be more independent, they can take risks to try what they want to do". Through sustained engagement in rights-based practices, Diu and Feng internalised new cultural meanings of childhood and competence (Vygotsky, 1978).

Rong also reflected on the importance of respecting children's participation in everyday life:

> Children are also participants in our life, in our society, they can make choices… Today I planned to do a colouring activity, but I had some difficulties in choosing the pictures, so I just passed my computer to the children…Now I think, of course, they can make choices by themselves, they are individuals, they can make choices through our curriculum.

Shui contrasted Aotearoa New Zealand practices with those in China, highlighting parents' respect for children's autonomy: "In New Zealand, children

can choose their own life instead of being an extension of parents' life. Parents do not need to force children, and they treat children as a person instead of their own products here".

Curriculum also played a pivotal role in shaping participants' views. Diu explicitly linked her understanding of children's competence to *Te Whāriki*: "My image mainly comes from *Te Whāriki*. Yeah, I agree with that, the children are competent and confident." Xiang and Feng noted how its emphasis on autonomy contrasted with academic pressures and uniformity in China. This demonstrates the ways that curriculum frameworks can operationalise children's rights in daily practice. *Te Whāriki's* (MoE, 2017) competent child becomes a concept through which participants reinterpret their own cultural models of learning.

Participants also described how rights-based approaches informed their responses to children's diverse needs. Diu, for instance, noted: "Children come to the center… with different characteristics, personalities and different family education." Similarly, Mayang reflected on how her image of the child had evolved over time: "The three-year studies have changed my perception I had about a child as being weak [and] incompetent to handle themselves. I thought children needed a lot of help, but no, they are quite competent, and they have shown me a lot of things that I didn't know." In a sociocultural sense, these accounts reflect identity as a relational and situated process (Bronfenbrenner, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978). Participants' developing recognition of children as rights holders, as articulated in UNCRC, reflects their participation in practices that reshape what it means to be a "teacher" and a "child" within the Aotearoa New Zealand ECE context. These changes reflect processes of hybridisation and meaning making as participants negotiated their understandings of children as competent individuals with rights to autonomy, participation and dignity (Bhabha, 1994).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

As the participants' narratives show the image the child that they hold influences their views around multiple aspects of their practice, including conceptions of children's rights and how these are enacted in the Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood context. Their reflections collectively reinforce the importance of acknowledging the impact of culture and applying rights-based approaches to curriculum and pedagogy.

Rights in context

Childhood experiences and socio-political contexts work to shape participants' image of the child and their pedagogical approaches (Burke, 2024c) However, culture is not homogeneous and within this participant group different cultural and political influences were evident. It is important to remember that teachers from migrant backgrounds bring with them multiple perspectives and experiences (Shuker & Cherrington, 2016; Gould et al., 2023) and understandings of children's rights are inseparable from the political and cultural systems within which teachers are socialised. These systems form the macro contexts that shape professional identity and pedagogy (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, participants from China, India, Malaysia and Hong Kong described coming from educational environments that value obedience, academic

excellence and adult authority. While these discourses vary, they all construct children's well-being as dependence rather than participation. When these teachers entered the ECE landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand, they encountered rights-based frameworks which emphasise children's voice and autonomy, such as UNCRC (United Nations, 1989), *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) and *Our Code, Our Standards* (Education Council, 2017). Rather than replacing one model with another, this engagement has resulted in a process of negotiating rights across cultural borders.

Curriculum design should respect children's prior knowledge and theories, creating meaningful and engaging experiences (Giamminuti & See, 2017; Hedges, 2021). Creative and arts-based approaches also provide inclusive avenues for self-expression, broadening traditional forms of communication (Bernardi, 2023). In Aotearoa New Zealand, *Te Whāriki* encourages opportunities for children to experience community arts and heritage (Terreni, 2013). However, these kinds of experiences can be new for teachers from migrant cultures who may be used to more classroom-based, teacher-directed early childhood contexts where children's rights to participate are not privileged. It is important to create time and space for teachers from migrant backgrounds to critically reflect on their own culturally informed pedagogies in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand. Children's rights are not universal ideas that can be uncritically applied, but socially and culturally constructed through lived experiences.

Moving from control to respect

A strength-based approach views children as capable and independent thinkers (Smith, 2016). Teachers, drawing on frameworks like UNCRC, act as advocates, promoting equality and protection from harm (Gibbs, 2020). As participants evolved in their understandings of the child, they came to see children as capable individuals with their own thoughts, preferences and rights. They emphasised the importance of children having the freedom to make choices, express themselves and participate in decision-making processes. This change in the image of the child aligns with an evolving recognition of their rights and agency. While safeguarding from violence and neglect remains essential, teachers also need clear reporting procedures and intervention strategies (Banko-Bal, 2021). They can further challenge narrow definitions of well-being by questioning restrictive policies and advocating for environments centred on children (Peters et al., 2015).

Participants' changing image of the child included an increased awareness of children's emotions and how they can be potentially harmed by negative experiences. From a sociocultural perspective, this gradual move from control-oriented pedagogies towards practices grounded in respect can be understood as a process of cultural negotiation within a new professional context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Their changing view reflects how learning and identity are co-constructed through communities of practice. It is essential that ITE programmes include child protection modules and offer courses that explain how legislation and policies in Aotearoa New Zealand uphold children's safety and well-being. For students from migrant backgrounds, placements in high-quality centres are also crucial, as practicum experiences not only support professional learning but also challenge cultural assumptions by fostering respect for children's rights and encouraging positive approaches to managing challenging behaviour.

Recognising individual identities and rights

Supporting children's progressive autonomy is widely recognised as a crucial role (Ryan, 2025) and by building relationships that provide emotional security, attention, and care, teachers can strengthen children's independence and self-esteem. As participants moved from collectivist to a bi-cultural setting, they described learning to view children not as dependent, but as relational citizens. This realisation aligns with *Te Whāriki's* aspiration for children to be competent and confident (MoE, 2017) and with sociocultural concepts of the child as a co-constructor of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). Opportunities to make choices, solve problems, and act with initiative foster citizenship and participation (Etchebehere & De León, 2020). In play, teachers who act as co-narrators, rather than directors, enhance children's agency and contributions (Davis & Peter, 2011; Lagerlöf et al., 2023). Involving children in negotiating rules helps create living and dynamic documents reflecting collective understanding rather than imposed authority (Giamminuti & See, 2017).

Teachers are central to advancing children's rights in education. Effective strategies include listening to and extending child-initiated learning, responding with patience and creativity and adapting to children's interests and communication styles (Church & Bateman, 2019). By fostering a communicative space where children's views are respected, teachers support decision-making, reflection, and agency (Lagerlöf et al., 2023; Etchebehere & De León, 2020). Participants' evolving image of the child reflects a re-evaluation of how individuality and agency are understood within ECE practice in Aotearoa New Zealand. Their narratives show a process of hybridisation as they integrate elements from their home cultures, such as empathy and community responsibility, into a rights-based pedagogy (Bhabha, 1994). Within this space, children's autonomy is balanced with collective well-being, reflecting concepts like whanaungatanga from te ao Māori. This kind of interweaving of ideas illustrates how diverse perspectives can enrich, rather than simply align with, dominant constructions of children's rights.

CONCLUSION

The image of the child held plays a crucial role in shaping views around children's rights. As participants' understanding evolved through initial teacher training and professional practice, they began to explore their beliefs about children's agency, decision-making and individuality. These teachers' reflections collectively reinforce the importance of acknowledging cultural influences, promoting equitable and inclusive practices, and applying rights-based approaches to curriculum and pedagogy. They offer practice-based examples of how migrant teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand are enacting, and at times struggling with, the realisation of children's rights in complex and diverse educational settings. Their stories emphasise the need for professional learning that supports critical reflection on cultural assumptions, equity, and the rights of all children to autonomy, participation and dignity as articulated in UNCRC. This study extends understandings of children's rights in ECE by illustrating how migrant teachers reinterpret rights frameworks through culturally situated lenses. Rather than viewing acculturation as linear adaptation, their narratives

reveal complex negotiations of identity and pedagogy that enrich Aotearoa New Zealand's diverse ECE context.

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