

Reflections of cultural and pedagogical adaptation to bicultural practice from four migrant teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand



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ABSTRACT

In Aotearoa New Zealand, teaching is underpinned by a commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the implementation of bicultural practice is recognised as a professional responsibility for all teachers. For migrant teachers, this commitment often involves navigating significant shifts not only in curriculum and pedagogy but also in cultural identity and belonging. Teaching in a new land is like planting a familiar seed in unfamiliar soil. This metaphor is crafted specifically to reflect the journey of four migrant teachers navigating cultural and pedagogical adaptation in Aotearoa New Zealand. This article draws on the reflective narratives of four migrant teachers working in early childhood and primary settings to explore how they understood and adapted to bicultural practice in Aotearoa New Zealand. Their reflections highlighted both challenges and growth, including cultural adjustment, language barriers, shifts in professional identity, and the role of mentorship. Despite these challenges, the teachers' narratives highlight how engaging with bicultural practice can be professionally enriching and personally transformative. The findings further emphasise that their teaching approaches are shaped by a dynamic process of cultural and pedagogical adaptation within the Aotearoa New Zealand context.

KEYWORDS

Migrant, bicultural, education, New Zealand

Introduction

In an increasingly globalised world, the movement of people across countries has greatly changed the cultural landscape of New Zealand's educational settings. National initiatives such as the overseas relocation grant and tailored induction programmes were introduced to support the integration of overseas-trained teachers to teach in the local context (Education Workforce, 2024). These initiatives highlight New Zealand's commitment to cultivating an inclusive and culturally

responsive education system that values diverse perspectives and experiences of migrant teachers. Alongside these efforts, the number of international student enrolments increased rapidly in 2023 (Education New Zealand, 2024; ICEF, 2024). This influx has influenced pedagogical approaches and institutional practices, shaping how education is delivered and experienced in culturally diverse countries such as Aotearoa New Zealand. Education New Zealand (2024) reported 82% of New Zealanders agree that international students contribute positively to cultural diversity and bring benefits to the education system. However, while such structural supports exist, there appears to be a gap in our understanding of how migrant teachers, particularly those from a non-Western background, experience and enact this integration and especially in relation to bicultural expectations. While migrant teachers are expected to engage with bicultural principles, it is also important to acknowledge that many institutions across Aotearoa New Zealand are still in the process of embedding bicultural frameworks themselves (Chan & Ritchie, 2020; Jenkin, 2016). This raises questions about how well structural supports align with the day-to-day realities that migrant teachers face. The challenges they face may in part, reflect wider systemic gaps in the consistent application and understanding of Te Tiriti-based practice across the sector (Macfarlane & Macfarlane, 2018).

Teaching in Aotearoa New Zealand requires meaningful engagement with biculturalism and the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Treaty of Waitangi). All teachers, including those who are migrants, are expected to develop an understanding of Māori culture (Māori are the Indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand) tikanga values (customs and values) and te reo Māori (the Māori language), and to embed these within their teaching practices (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017; Ristow, 2022). This expectation is operationalised in the Teaching Council's *Our Code, Our Standards* (2017). While The Code's commitments to learners, to families and whānau (extended families) require respect for Māori learners and genuine partnership with whānau, the Standards emphasise the Te Tiriti o Waitangi partnership, professional relationships, and design for learning that supports teachers to work with iwi (tribes/tribal nations) hapū (sub-tribes), use te reo appropriately and design learning that reflects tikanga. Teachers in New Zealand are therefore required to demonstrate respect for Māori learners, their families, communities, and to actively uphold the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi in their practice. As Macfarlane and Macfarlane (2018) argue, bicultural competency is not an optional add-on, but it is foundational to professional practice in Aotearoa New Zealand, and it is directly embedded in the Code and Standards.

This expectation, however, can pose significant challenges for those unfamiliar not only with Māori worldviews but also with the foundational principles of Māori kaupapa (values, principles, and purpose) (Macfarlane & Macfarlane, 2018). For migrant teachers, this may involve not only engaging in professional development but also a broader shift in worldview, one that recognises Māori perspectives as central rather than secondary (Chan & Ritchie, 2020; Williams et al., 2024). Building on this foundation, this article explores how migrant teachers navigate cultural adjustment, language barriers, shifts in professional identity, and the role of mentorship. Notably, the findings highlight how support from mentors and professional communities enabled migrant teachers to not only adapt but also contribute meaningfully to bicultural practices in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The article first outlines the background of migrant teachers and the teaching context in Aotearoa New Zealand, then explains the methodology employed, and finally presents the key themes emerging from the study, concluding with the implications for a shift in professional identity bicultural practice.

Literature review

Navigating new horizons

Research on the lived experiences of migrant teachers in New Zealand, particularly those from non-Western cultural backgrounds, remains relatively scarce, especially regarding how they adapt to and integrate bicultural frameworks in practice. Although identity formation and professional acculturation among Indian student teachers in early childhood settings have been examined (Loveridge et al., 2020), the overall literature remains limited, because much of the research has been focussed on broader identity shifts rather than specific bicultural competencies. This gap signals the need for deeper inquiry into how migrant teachers understand biculturalism and how they interpret and implement it in everyday practice. Such understanding of these dynamics is especially important in a country where biculturalism is the foundational principle of education.

Broader migration and teacher-mobility research identify barriers that intersect with these concerns. Separa (2024) highlights, “communication problems, environmental differences, isolation and different customs, attitudes and beliefs” (p.3), factors that can contribute to psychological stress and isolation. The researcher noted that cultural differences may also lead to misunderstandings, particularly within social contexts. However, despite these challenges, factors such as education and better job opportunities motivate migrants and serve as significant reasons for their relocation. Expanding on these insights, several studies have examined factors that contribute to similar experiences, particularly for overseas-trained teachers, and for those who pursue their education to become registered teachers in a new country.

Guo and Maitra (2017) document both the benefits and challenges that migrant teachers face when relocating and settling in a new country by noting that they encounter a range of outcomes as they navigate unfamiliar educational and cultural landscapes. These journeys have also been explored through academic research, personal narratives, and practitioner reflections (Santoro, 2014; Sharma & Shrestha, 2019). Further research undertaken by Appel and Lee (2023) examined opportunities available for students who studied abroad with the intention of becoming teachers. Their research highlighted that studying abroad can provide opportunities to develop intercultural understanding and gain diverse perspectives on life and teaching. Similarly, Costa et al. (2023) explored the experiences of pre-service teachers abroad and found that their cultural beliefs are shaped by exposure to new teaching approaches and learning environments. Okken et al. (2022) emphasised that integrating one’s own cultural experiences into teaching can enhance personal pedagogical practice and support critical reflection on cultural assumptions within new educational environments.

Migrant teachers often find that their professional skills are undervalued and their cultural knowledge is not fully recognised or respected (Santoro, 2014; Sharma & Shrestha, 2019). These include the non-recognition of overseas qualifications (Guo & Maitra, 2017), limited access to culturally responsive induction (Sharma & Shrestha, 2019), and insufficient training in bicultural competencies such as te reo Māori and tikanga practices (Ristow, 2022; Williams, et al., 2024). Such barriers are not simply logistical but go beyond the practical issues and point to deeper systemic inequalities (Guo & Maitra, 2017).

Professional transition and requalification

Moving from a familiar teaching environment to a new national context requires migrant teachers, including both overseas-trained teachers and migrant student teachers, to navigate unfamiliar regulatory systems, pedagogical expectations, and cultural frameworks (Koukoulidis et al., 2024). It is important to distinguish between overseas-trained teachers and migrant student teachers as their pathways into the profession may differ significantly (Basit & Santoro, 2011). Overseas-trained teachers complete their teaching qualifications and gain professional experience abroad before migrating (Basit & Santoro, 2011), whereas migrant student teachers migrate and then undertake Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in the host country (Santoro, 2014). Therefore, the term migrant teachers is a broad category that includes both overseas-trained teachers and migrant student teachers (Basit & Santoro, 2011).

While both overseas-trained teachers and migrant students' teachers face challenges related to the recognition of prior learning, language proficiency and cultural adaptation (Santoro, 2014), their entry points into the education system and the types of institutional support they require often differ (Guo & Maitra, 2017). A key area of divergence is the demonstration of English language competency. According to the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, all applicants must provide evidence (certification) of proficiency in English (or te reo Māori), regardless of their country of origin. However, those from approved English-speaking countries may be exempt from providing the evidence of formal language test such as IELTS (International English Language Testing System) or PTE (Pearson Test of English Academic) if they can demonstrate their education was conducted in English. This includes completion of all primary education and at least three years of secondary education in English or by meeting the literacy requirements for New Zealand University Entrance (Teaching Council, 2017).

Those who do not meet these criteria are required to undertake approved English language tests and achieve the specified scores to be eligible for teacher registration in Aotearoa New Zealand (Teaching Council, 2017). While intended to uphold professional standards, these requirements may disproportionately impact teachers from non-English speaking backgrounds, even those with significant teaching experiences (Chan & Ritchie, 2020). In Aotearoa New Zealand, while migrant teachers who trained overseas may not be required to undergo formal requalification, they must still engage with a new curriculum, a different language, and different cultural values, particularly the expectation to embrace bicultural practice and integrate te reo Māori and Māori Kaupapa into their teaching (Ristow, 2022). This raises questions about recognition of prior learning and the adaptation of cultural and educational identities (Afrin, 2023).

The transition for migrant teachers therefore involves ongoing negotiation between existing knowledge and new learning. They are required to navigate different regulatory standards, ethical expectations, and pedagogical philosophies (Afrin, 2023). In Aotearoa New Zealand, not only do migrant teachers need to meet new pedagogical standards, but they must also adapt their teaching to align with bicultural education policies and practices (Jenkin, 2016).

Curriculum adaptation and pedagogical shifts

Adapting to a new curriculum can require substantial shifts in pedagogical values and practices. In Aotearoa New Zealand, *Te Whāriki* promotes principles such as holistic development, biculturalism, and child-led learning (MoE, 2017). For many migrant teachers, these approaches may differ significantly from the teacher-directed models that they may be more familiar with (MoE, 2017). The contrast in educational philosophies between their home and host countries can deeply influence how they understand, interpret, and deliver a curriculum that is initially unfamiliar to them (MoE, 2017). Guo and Maitra (2017) describe curriculum adaptation as a transformative process that reshapes teachers' professional identities. Santoro (2014) notes that while migrant teachers understand the concept and new curricular frameworks, implementing them within unfamiliar cultural settings can provoke tensions and uncertainty. Such tensions often stem from a limited understanding and a limited familiarity with the cultural values embedded in the local curricula which can be daunting for those new to the educational context (Chan, 2019; Guo & Maitra, 2017; Santoro, 2014).

Beyond technical adaptation, migrant teachers' engagement with a new curriculum often involves an emotional and cognitive journey (de Oliveira Andreotti & Fa'afoi, 2014; Nieto Angel, 2018). They are often required to critically reflect on their teaching practice and sometimes they have to unlearn their teaching beliefs to align with the culturally responsive practices (Corlett, 2022; Kumar, 2025). As such, they are not only strengthening their professional growth, but they are also contributing to a more inclusive and adaptive educational setting. This pedagogical shift is essential to foster both a professional practice and a sense of belonging in the Aotearoa New Zealand teaching profession.

Language and cultural integration

For migrant teachers, language proficiency is not only important for communication purposes, but it is also important in forming relationships, particularly in a professional environment (Separa, 2024). As Cummins (2000) argues, linguistic competence enables teachers to practice and engage meaningfully in pedagogical decisions. In the Aotearoa New Zealand context, limited fluency in English or in te reo Māori may lead to communication barriers with colleagues, tamariki (children), whānau (family) and diminish the confidence of migrant teachers (Separa, 2024; Smythe, 2024). Beyond its functional use, language also plays a powerful role in shaping identity. Barkhuizen (2016), used a narrative inquiry approach and illustrated how migrant teachers reframe their professional practices through reflection.

Cultural integration involves more than adopting visible behaviours (Yan, 2020); it also requires elements such as body language, discourse and relational styles when interacting. Therefore, acquiring linguistic and cultural fluency is not just a matter of adaptation, but it is a critical step in

bridging past and present teaching experiences. As Oranje and Smith (2018) note, it is a process in which migrant teachers begin to experience a sense of belonging and connections in their new educational communities. The foundation of cultural fluency becomes more important when migrant teachers are called upon to meaningfully engage with the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and bicultural frameworks¹ embedded in Aotearoa New Zealand's education system.

Motivation, identity, and professional growth

Despite the multifaceted challenges they face, migrant teachers' motivation frequently extends beyond practical concerns such as residency and employment; it is grounded in a strong professional identity and a passion for education (Flores & Day, 2006; Masterson, 2020). This resilience is evident in their willingness to learn, adapt and grow. As Skerrett (2010) highlights, professional identity in transnational contexts is both dynamic and relational. Furthermore, Yan (2020) describes how reflection and mentorship supported his identity shift as a migrant teacher in Aotearoa New Zealand resulting in pedagogical confidence. Migrant teachers who successfully navigate these transitions often describe a renewed sense of purpose and fulfilment. Their diverse experiences enhance the cultural responsiveness and inclusivity of the wider educational environment (Wimalasiri, 2021).

Although the journey of relocation and accepting pedagogical transition can be daunting, it is ultimately transformative for those who migrate to Aotearoa New Zealand (Chan & Ritchie, 2023). They are able to contribute meaningfully to the bicultural educational context of the country and support the broader goals of equity and cultural sustainability (Afrin, 2023; Jenkin, 2016).

While existing research explores migrant teachers' identity and professional adaptation, limited attention has been given to how they engage with Aotearoa New Zealand's bicultural pedagogical expectations, particularly within early childhood and primary settings. This study addresses that gap by examining how migrant teachers reflect on, interpret, and adapt to bicultural practice through their lived experiences. In doing so, it offers a contribution to the literature by highlighting the complex interplay between cultural identity, professional transformation, and bicultural competence within the framework of Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative narrative methodology to explore how four migrant teachers experienced and adapted to bicultural practice in Aotearoa New Zealand. Narrative inquiry was selected for its emphasis on personal storytelling as a way of making sense of lived experience (Creswell, 2013), particularly during cultural and pedagogical transition. The following overarching research question guided the study: *how do migrant teachers understand and adapt to bicultural practice in Aotearoa New Zealand?*

¹ Bicultural frameworks refer to the ability to engage meaningfully with both Māori and non-Māori worldviews through practices, such as cultural responsiveness, cultural humility, whanaungatanga (relationship-building), manaakitanga (care and respect), rangatiratanga (supporting Māori leadership and self-determination), kaitiakitanga (stewardship of people and place), and ako (reciprocal teaching and learning).

Participants and data collection

Four participants were selected through purposive sampling (Cohen et al., 2018). Their countries of origin included South-East Asia, South Asia, North Asia and the Pacific Islands. All of them grew up in their home countries and lived in Aotearoa New Zealand for more than ten years, including their time completing either undergraduate or postgraduate study. All were qualified teachers with international teaching experience and had completed teacher education qualifications in Aotearoa New Zealand. Each was working in early childhood or primary education settings.

Data were collected in two stages:

1. Written reflections

Participants were invited to write a personal reflection with the indicative word limit being 500 words within a three-week time, based on the following three prompts:

- What was my experience like as a new teacher in New Zealand?
- What were my successes and challenges at this time?
- How did I respond as a teacher to bicultural teaching expectations?

These written narratives allowed each participant to express their experiences and thoughts in their own terms, resulting in rich, contextualised accounts of professional and cultural adaptation.

2. Collaborative discussion

After submitting their narratives, participants engaged in an online group discussion forum. These online discussions were held fortnightly for thirty minutes during the data analysis phase and were guided by the questions for the written reflections. The discussions enabled deeper reflection on commonalities, differences, challenges and contributed a second layer of qualitative data through shared dialogue and collective sense-making. This reflective approach aligns with Schön's (1983) view that professional growth stems from thoughtful engagement with one's own practice.

Ethical considerations and anonymity

Ethical protocols were followed to protect participants' identities throughout the research. Participation was voluntary and fully informed. No formal consent forms were used as the participants were fully aware of the research intentions and contributed their reflections willingly. The research design emerged organically, and all participants preferred to participate at a time that was suitable for their workload, rather than losing the opportunity of participation due to a formal process through the ethics committee. Instead, the authors facilitated open conversation during the collaborative discussions to gain consensus of which content could be shared in the publication, and written minutes were used as a confirmation of this agreement. Following completion of this research, participants were asked for consent to include their data anonymously in this publication. All participants provided informed consent for their data to be used in this way, with assurance that no identifying information would be included.

Pseudonyms were assigned (Kieryn, Alex, Jamee, Charlie), and all identifying information was removed to preserve anonymity in the presentation of findings.

Data analysis

A thematic narrative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify patterns across both the written reflections and the group discussions. The data were analysed using an inductive coding approach, in which codes and themes were generated directly from the participants' narratives and the discussion forum instead of from pre-existing frameworks. Recurring themes were colour-coded and collaboratively grouped. This allowed patterns and meanings to emerge organically from the data, ensuring the findings reflected the participants lived experiences.

Through iterative reading and coding, related codes were grouped into broader themes, such as cultural adjustment and impact on professional identity and teaching practice. As Silverman (2013) notes, this process allows for rich interpretation of complex experiences while preserving narrative integrity. Four overarching themes emerged: cultural adjustment, language barriers, professional identity and teaching practice, and support systems. These themes underpin the findings and discussion in this article.

Limitation

Due to the small sample size and the narrative nature of the data—each based on each participant's personal and professional journey— the findings should be interpreted as insights from a small group of migrant teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand. They are not intended to be generalised to the whole population of migrant teachers.

Findings

Cultural adjustment

Adjusting to a new cultural context with different societal norms and expectations was central to the experiences of the four participants. For example, Kieryn reflected:

Adjusting into the new territory, I was faced with a dual struggle; on the one hand, finding a sense of fitting in and belonging within the dominant Pākehā culture and, on the other hand, reconciling with the practices of biculturalism, a discourse that would determine the future direction of my new employment.

They continued "Finding a sense of fitting within the dominant cultural setting was characterised by otherness and pressure to assimilate".

Jamee described their experience as a blending of teaching philosophies:

The concept of 'East meets West' teaching style refers to blending eastern and western teaching philosophies to create a more holistic and adaptive approach to teaching and

learning. ... I was unsure of how my structured schooling background and experiences would fit into a classroom that was built on bicultural values and play-based learning.

Charlie shared a similar challenge, “The approach I saw in Aotearoa was different from the structured, outcome-driven systems I had previously worked in; this shift challenged my existing perspectives on teaching and learning which made me reflect on my own pedagogical beliefs”.

The tension between assimilation and authenticity was evident, as participants navigated two competing demands, as they adapted to the dominant Pākehā culture and bicultural practices while preserving their own cultural identity and pedagogical traditions. Authenticity in this context meant remaining true to their cultural values and prior teaching philosophies rather than fully conforming to local norms. For instance, Kiernyn’s struggle to “find a sense of fitting in” while reconciling bicultural discourse reflects this balancing act.

Likewise, Jamee’s approach of blending “East meets West” philosophies demonstrate an effort to maintain cultural integrity by integrating rather than abandoning their structured schooling background. These moments prompted critical reflection on how their identities and experiences could coexist with bicultural adaptation in practice.

Language barriers

Language proficiency as shown in the findings played a significant role in shaping the participants’ adjustment to their new teaching environments, as they all identified language as a barrier. Alex noted:

Although I studied in a British high school, the local diction and vocabulary were more challenging than I had imagined, and it took time to get used to these differences. Also, I felt the expectation for the ethnic minorities was changing.

Kiernyn also shared a somewhat similar experiences by noting, “I felt embarrassed when some students would laugh at my accent and pronunciation when saying te reo Māori words and phrases”. Jamee acknowledged their struggle “at first was to balance diverse cultural backgrounds of the tamariki, while also incorporating Māori cultural practices and Te Reo Māori into my teaching”. Charlie also shared their insecurities when stating, “I was aware that I was neither fluent in te reo Māori nor deeply versed in Māori traditions”.

Participants described a dual challenge: while integrating into the dominant Pākehā culture, they engaged with the bicultural practices rooted in Te Tiriti o Waitangi. This process required critical reflection on both their communication approaches and their understanding of the Māori language and tikanga by ensuring their teaching aligned with bicultural commitments.

Impact on professional identity and teaching practice

The findings highlighted that migration had an impact on the participant’s professional identity as well as their teaching practice. While cultural adjustment captured participants’ experiences of navigating societal norms and bicultural expectations, this second theme focuses on the professional

dimension: how migration influenced their sense of identity as educators and required changes in teaching practice. These themes were identified through an inductive coding process during thematic analysis, where codes related to “identity”, “career continuity”, and “pedagogical adaptation” were clustered together and formed this distinct theme.

Charlie explained, “Despite having twenty years of experience as an English teacher and teacher trainer in my home country, I was deemed overqualified and repeatedly rejected for not holding a New Zealand teaching registration”.

For Charlie, this meant, “The path to becoming a teacher in a foreign country was far from easy. Although I had spent years in education, I found myself questioning whether I could continue in the same profession”.

Jamee described “some days, I experienced a sense of being an outsider”. Kieryn reflected on their teaching practice and in particular the classroom dynamics, sharing:

Working with students also brought some challenges and shock. I found the students to be very vocal and would interrupt me at any time by asking a lot of questions. This was different from my home country, as the students would listen to the teachers passively as a sign of respect.

In relation to understanding and responding to the needs of diverse student populations, Jamee also shared, “My ability to connect with tamariki from diverse cultural backgrounds was a significant strength”.

However, Jamee added that:

Understanding and adapting to the unique bicultural nature of New Zealand’s education system was a little challenging. I was unsure of how my structured schooling background and experiences would fit into a classroom that was built on bicultural values and play-based learning.

Charlie encountered similar challenges:

It was to bridge the gap between the theoretical understanding and the practical application, particularly in bicultural teaching. When I first stepped into the ECE sector, the approach I saw in Aotearoa was different from the structured, outcome-driven systems I had previously worked in.

These experiences highlight how developing cultural sensitivity—understood as awareness of and responsiveness to cultural differences— enabled participants to adapt their teaching practices and create inclusive classroom environments. In this context, cultural sensitivity was demonstrated through actions, such as Jamee’s ability to connect with tamariki from diverse backgrounds and Charlie’s efforts to integrate bicultural principles into early childhood education.

Support systems and mentorship

Access to support networks, both formal and informal, was a key factor in how the participants adapted to their new teaching contexts. They reflected on how mentorship and peer support influenced their professional growth. For example, Kiernyn noted, “The Kaiako and other staff at my workplace supported me to do some te reo Māori courses and to learn more about the Te Tiriti o Waitangi”.

Jamee added, “Participating in professional development courses or seeking guidance from Māori colleagues and mentors helped me to better integrate these cultural aspects into my teaching”.

Alex shared that once they felt their culture was recognised within the ECE community, they, “Felt safe to actively ask questions and to discuss Māori culture with tangata whenua by bringing my own culture and checking my interpretation from my cultural perspective”.

Support systems that included mentorship and peer collaboration played a crucial role in helping the teachers feel more integrated and confident in their teaching practices.

Discussion

As individuals from various parts of Asia and the Pacific Islands, the participants in this study brought deeply personal lenses to their narratives. Their cultural backgrounds as migrant teachers who navigated Aotearoa New Zealand’s educational landscape informed not only the content of their stories, but also how they interpreted their transitional journeys. Their dual roles as both storytellers and reflective practitioners enabled them to critically examine how their professional identities were reshaped within a new cultural and pedagogical context. By acknowledging their positionality throughout the research process, they contributed to the overall transparency, depth and trustworthiness of the study.

The narratives reveal that adaptation is not simply a process of adjustment, but a journey of reflection, learning, and growth. When they wrote and revisited their own stories, it allowed them to see how their identities as teachers had been transformed by new cultural contexts, pedagogical philosophies, and professional expectations. While many experiences were initially challenging, the participants viewed these shifts not just as challenges, but also as opportunities to rethink what it means to teach and to belong in Aotearoa New Zealand. This dual perspective of challenge and opportunity underscores the transformative nature of their migration experiences.

Finding place as migrant educators

The findings highlight the complex interplay between cultural and pedagogical adaptation. As the participants navigated new teaching environments, they encountered moments that challenged them to reconsider both their professional and cultural identities. They described a dual challenge of integrating into the dominant Pākehā culture while also engaging with bicultural practices rooted in Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Kieryn's reflection on the 'dual struggle' of finding belonging within dominant Pākehā culture while engaging with biculturalism resonated with the others. Charlie's experience moved from a structured, outcomes-based teaching background to a more holistic and relational approach which required reconsideration of long-held assumptions about teaching and learning. The tension between assimilation and authenticity was evident. These experiences echo Santoro's (2014) discussion of how migrant teachers renegotiate professional identity when moving into new systems. For the four participants, these moments of critical reflection were experienced not only as obstacles, but also as stepping stones toward professional growth. They realised their diverse backgrounds and teaching philosophies could complement and enrich bicultural practices that they were learning to embrace.

Reimagining teaching through bicultural pedagogy

Adapting to *Te Whāriki* as a bicultural curriculum required the participants to think about their pedagogical approaches. For Jamee, who blended structured teaching traditions with play-based, child-led learning led to what they described as an "East meets West" approach. Charlie found that by shifting their focus from an outcomes-driven model to a relational approach transformed their teaching practice. By sharing these narratives, they found what initially felt unfamiliar soon became a source of inspiration.

This shift was often the result of sustained critical reflection, where prior teaching philosophies were consciously integrated with the relational and child-led approaches of *Te Whāriki*. As Guo and Maitra (2017) suggested, curriculum adaptation can be a deeply transformative process. For the participants, it allowed for creative synthesis; integrating their existing expertise with new practices that were both culturally responsive and inclusive.

Language also played a key role in this journey for all the participants. Alex recalled the challenge of adapting to Aotearoa New Zealand English and te reo Māori, while Kieryn remembered moments of hesitation when pronouncing te reo Māori words. These language-related challenges were not viewed as deficits; instead, they were embraced as part of a collective learning process which enabled them to build meaningful connections with tamariki, whānau, and colleagues.

Support, reflection and professional growth

Throughout the stories and subsequent discussions, the importance of support and mentorship emerged strongly. When Kieryn's workplace encouraged them to take te reo Māori courses, and Jamee learned from Māori colleagues, these experiences affirmed the role of relational learning in helping them thrive. As they reflected on their own journeys, they realised that their professional growth was not solely individual, but it was fostered through community and collaboration. Chan and Ritchie (2023) argued that bicultural engagement is both relational and transformative. The participants experiences confirm this; when they connected with mentors and colleagues, they felt more confident in their ability to engage authentically with te ao Māori and the bicultural curriculum. These relationships not only helped them to adapt but also strengthened their sense of belonging as educators in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Reflecting on migration, the participants viewed it not as a narrative defined by struggle, but as a catalyst for rethinking, adapting and contributing. As migrant teachers, they were not simply learning to work within a bicultural framework, they were weaving their cultural knowledge and experiences into it. This process reflects a reciprocal form of engagement, where migrant teachers are not only learners within a bicultural framework, but also co-constructors of culturally responsive pedagogy. As Santoro (2014) noted, migrant teachers often reconstruct their teaching identity when entering a new education system. For these participants, this reconstruction was not a challenge to overcome, but a valuable opportunity for growth. It enabled them not only to integrate their prior knowledge, but also to enrich bicultural education by bringing new cultural perspectives, pedagogical values, and teaching approaches into the learning environment.

Conclusion

The narratives of the four migrant teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand reveal that cultural and pedagogical adaptation is less about overcoming challenges and more about a journey of growth, reflection, and meaningful contribution. The participants' reflections suggest that, although challenges were significant, these experiences often served as catalysts for critical self-reflection and professional changes. Coming from non-bicultural countries, they experienced new learning and teaching practices that initially challenged their usual approaches.

While each participants' journey was different, their experiences and critical reflection highlight that migration requires both cultural adaptation and pedagogical shifts. This study positions migrant teachers not only as participants in a bicultural education system but as active contributors who enrich it through their own cultural perspectives.

Recommendation

This research highlights that migrant teachers are better positioned to engage meaningfully with Aotearoa New Zealand's bicultural education system when supported through purposeful and sustained critical reflection. While this study draws on the experiences of a small group of migrant teachers, it offers valuable insights into how critical reflection on personal teaching beliefs and the principles that underpin local bicultural frameworks can support meaningful professional adaptation within the Aotearoa New Zealand education context. Engaging in professional learning that acknowledges their cultural identities and prior teaching experiences can further enhance their participation in, and contribution to, bicultural practice in Aotearoa New Zealand. Furthermore, cultivating collaborative teaching environments that offer mentorship is also essential for supporting migrant teachers as they navigate new pedagogical landscapes. Such support enables them to adapt in ways that are both culturally responsive and aligned with the principles of bicultural education.

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