
Insights into Indian immigrant children's and parents' experiences of New Zealand early childhood education

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Immigrant families face many cultural and adjustment issues, including children's engagement in early childhood education (ECE). Through research-based interviews, nine Indian parents shared their perceptions of their children's experiences in New Zealand ECE. They identified positive experiences and concerns related to curriculum, language development, teacher's attitudes, children's participation, and EC centre operational hours. They offered recommendations including parents inquiring about ECE philosophies and practices prior to admission, and early enrolment. They made recommendations for teachers around timely and meaningful interactions with immigrant children and families, developing active listening skills, communicating with parents around curriculum approaches and health and hygiene practices, understanding each child's diverse cultural and social practices, and promoting multicultural environments and knowledge in ECE.

Immigrant families within multicultural ECE environments

New Zealand's culturally diverse population is reflected in early childhood services. Community is central to the ECE curriculum, with clear focus on wellbeing and learning, and tolerance and respect for cultural values and diversity (Blaiklock, 2017). Early childhood centres are expected to meet the needs of immigrant children in terms of inclusion and settling in, while also respecting their rights to distinctive cultural values and practices (Guo, 2017).

While the importance of children's first thousand days is well documented, globally large numbers of immigrant children experience problems with physical and mental health, education, and assimilation (Tienda & Haskins, 2011). Immigrant populations also face social, psychological, and biological changes related to cultural adaptation, normative development, or learning (Titzmann

& Fuligni, 2015). This may be especially challenging in the COVID-19 era as immigrant families are also socially and geographically isolated from their extended families.

Relationships between immigrant parents and ECE communities

Early education centres can be important places of belonging for immigrant families, as well as places where parents advocate for their children's needs and learn about education systems (Crosnoe & Ansari, 2015). However, these families may be faced with many adaptations, including differing parenting styles and expectations (Sanagarapu, 2010). They may also struggle owing to few social networks, being regarded as deficient, and experiencing segregation and exclusion. Additionally, language difficulties and diverse cultural beliefs likely hindered adaptation to Western child development practices, created barriers to accessing services, and generated adverse perceptions of

care providers (Lastikka & Lipponen, 2016). As such, it is vital for ECE educators to tune into immigrant families' perspectives and understand how to provide support.

With meaningful interactions with parents, teachers can build knowledge and understandings about children (Adair & Barraza, 2014) and model practical strategies that facilitate children's adjustment (Rosier & McDonald, 2011). Recognising how critical parents are in immigrant children's educational success, Tobin et al. (2013) undertook research with more than 100 immigrant parents in the United States. Findings highlighted the importance of strengthening relationships between teachers, early childhood centres, immigrant families, and communities. However, developing joint understandings about ECE can be problematic, as expectations can differ. For example, Finnish research showed that immigrant parents emphasised a more academic and authoritative pedagogy than did teachers (Lastikka & Lipponen, 2016).

The New Zealand early childhood curriculum clearly recognises the value of seeking the "input of children and their parents and whānau when designing the local curriculum" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 18). Given the importance of early education, and roles parents play in advocating for their children, the work of building positive relationships between immigrant families and ECE services should not be happenstance. Surveys that were undertaken with 335 New Zealand ECE services revealed that around 83% of respondents noted they had experienced challenges or opportunities working with families from diverse cultures. However, despite this high response, only 19% of services gathered information about immigrant families (Shuker & Cherrington, 2016).

While gathering information about immigrant families' experiences and views can be difficult, New Zealand-based qualitative research offers some insights. For example, a case study of a young immigrant Sri Lanka child, his parents, and teachers revealed that parents were reluctant to offer critical opinions about their child's learning experiences because of time pressures and lack of cultural understandings (Guo, 2015). In increasingly diverse ECE communities, a focus on how immigrant families experience ECE is important, and this article contributes insights into how Indian parents perceived their young children's participation in New Zealand ECE.

Researching with Indian parents

The research aimed to build a better understanding of how Indian immigrant children experienced ECE in New Zealand, as perceived by their parents. Qualitative methodologies were employed, and information was generated through semistructured interviews with open-ended questions. The research was approved through a human ethics committee and issues such as confidentiality, minimising risk, and informed consent were addressed. Using purposive sampling, Indian immigrant parents of 2–5-year-old children who were at, or had recently attended, an ECE in New Zealand, were invited to participate. Following expressions of interest and signed consent forms, nine participants, from different parts of India, were selected. Selecting parents from geographically diverse backgrounds was done in recognition of India as a large, multicultural, and multilingual country. In this article, all names for participants are pseudonyms.

The interviews were undertaken by the first author at a mutually convenient time and place. As the interviewer was fluent in four languages, provision was made for using participants' native languages, but all opted for English. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and verified by participants for accuracy. Transcripts were then analysed using an inductive approach where themes and findings emerged from the participants' responses. To retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events, these were written as nine brief case studies, and themes were identified across the sample and considered in relation to relevant literature (see Syeda, 2018). Analysis was undertaken with the support of an experienced researcher (the second author). While presenting each case is outside the scope of this article, an overview of the main themes and recommendations follows.

Perceptions and experiences Positive impressions

Four positive impressions emerged. First, seven parents specifically noted that teachers were caring and affectionate towards their children, as evident by smiles, caring behaviour, affectionate words, and timely interactions. This helped their children to adjust to the new learning environment, build secure relationships, and be happier children—at centres and at home. Parents appreciated that experienced ECE staff contributed to their children's development,

and the assurance given by teachers to provide safe environments and support children's well-being made centres trusted places. One parent emphasised the professionalism of staff, and how New Zealand's type of education system helped every child to grow mentally, physically, and spiritually strong. Hence, all parents valued the teachers' positive relationships with children.

While parents expressed strong satisfaction around teachers' interactions with children, teacher–parent interactions were not mentioned. Yet, such interactions support teachers to understand family aspirations for their children's education and the support they might need to adapt and develop skills (Roberts, 2017). Also, educators needed to carefully consider the unique ways families' practices and values could enrich classroom life (Souto-Manning, 2013). Recognising the challenges faced by ethnic minority children, Chan (2009) noted that families will only participate and contribute if policies and practices seem equitable, and families' "cultural ways of being and knowing are being valued and affirmed" (p. 37). Therefore, just being friendly may not

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be sufficient for building genuine relationships between ECE communities and immigrant children and families.

Parents were pleased with their children's social development, agency, and eating behaviours. For instance, six parents commented on children's social development, increasing independence while doing routine tasks, or exhibiting greater agency. They commented that children started to feed themselves, learnt to socialise, had better hygiene habits, and developed a sense of responsibility. For example, Sunita's daughter (3–4 years) "became more independent in her activities and she became very hygienic and sharing mentality". Another parent credited the centre for her child's socialisation with other children, which promoted her positive development and self-reliance. One father commented that, when compared to the learning at home, ECE centres were the best place for children's development because experienced, trained, and professional ECE staff cared for and guided children.

Practices associated with food and feeding were mentioned by several parents. While New Zealanders might expect that children are provided with healthy food and encouraged to feed themselves, this is not necessarily the cultural norm for Indian families. Indeed, practices around child nutrition may have heightened significance for Indian parents, when child malnutrition "continues to remain the predominant risk factor for death in children in [the] majority of states in India" (Priyanka et al., 2020, p. 2). One parent commented that she had "no worries" about her son's food intake, because of the food provided. Another mentioned that the centre's food encouraged his children to try and like new dishes. Therefore, he recommended that other Indian families opted for the provided food, which was prepared by a dietician, was tasty, and cooked with care and cleanliness.

Lisha, who felt anxious when her son starting ECE, recognised the important socialising that occurred around children eating together. This was when her son initially learnt to share and socialise and led to his fuller involvement in other activities. Similarly, Sania chose a centre that provided lunch so her daughter could develop healthy eating habits and, by watching others, learn to feed herself.

The third positive aspect noticed by parents was children's language development, including talking in English and te reo Māori. Ishita

expressed excitement over her daughter's (2–3 years) use of New Zealand English and te reo Māori when playing at home. Two other mothers commented positively on their children's spoken English. Research suggests there are clear links between young children's developing speech and language skills and secure attachment with caring teachers, particularly for bilingual children and those who may experience social disadvantages (Jovanovic et al., 2016).

Lastly, four parents positively commented on their children's rapid adjustments and participation in activities. Sunita commented that her daughter woke herself to go to ECE because she liked to play. Others were pleased with their children's involvement in indoor and outdoor activities. Several commented that the outdoor activities encouraged their child's fuller engagement with learning experiences. For example, within 2 days of starting, Lisha's son (4–5 years) was self-managing and "was very active ... I noticed the pumpkin research, like they are measuring the pumpkin in the garden, participating in gardening, pouring water for the plants." Manoj referred to his children's involvement in outdoor activities, and how teachers "take sport and all types of cultural programmes".

How children adapted to the changes of teaching styles towards co-construction with others was influenced by their levels of stress, and children in secure environments adapted more quickly (Ebbeck & Chan, 2011). So, supporting immigrant children's transitions to New Zealand ECE and their involvement in social play-based learning was important for children's emotional and social adjustments. In addition, helping children and their families to adjust to New Zealand's predominantly learner-centred education may support positive educational outcomes in the longer term.

Concerns

The operational hours of ECE caused some concerns. While parents' preferences varied, most commented on the economic necessity of both parents working, and how working hours and centres' hours misaligned. For example, immigrant workers may find that work was more readily available if they did shift work. As such, these parents wanted ECE centres to open early mornings, and also be available until late evenings. One family noted that the limited hours of operation meant that only one parent took evening shifts, which put the burden

of long hours on one person. For immigrant families, the support provided by ECE may be crucial in the absence of extended family networks that may provide afterhours childcare.

Parents appreciated the government subsidised 20 hours per week attendance for all children aged 3–5 years. However, paying extra for the extended hours was not always affordable and some wished there were more free hours. As noted, for some parents, there were also financial impacts when ECE services were not available when work opportunities were.

Parents expressed some concerns related to New Zealand's play-based pedagogy, and the development of children's academic skills. Some parents recognised activities as learning experiences, such as researching plant growth and sport activities, but in comparing New Zealand to India, three parents noted that New Zealand's early childhood curriculum promoted play-based learning, while in India, from the age of 2 years, children were taught alphabets, shapes, colours, and numbers. Two parents, with children aged 3–4 years, commented:

She just started learning the letters and some words [in India] but here they are more concentrated in the activities; only the play activities, nothing to study—going to ECE centre, coming back home and there is nothing to study. (Sunita)

In New Zealand, up to the age of five, they are not taught all these 1, 2, 3 and a, b, c things. Here they are much more playful, play in the sand or play outside, whereas we Indian parents feel that outside it's dirty—don't go out [because] you will get sunburns and all. (Sheetal)

These views add Indian parents to other research findings from Chan (2011), which revealed immigrant parents from Africa, Mexico, Cambodia, and China expected their children to have less play and more structured academic learning in ECE.

Outside play caused some uneasiness. For example, three parents expressed concerns with Ishita saying her young daughter (2–3 years) "used to eat sand when playing in a sandpit". Sania, like Sheetal, also had some difficulty coming to terms with her child's outside play and noted that Indian parents felt that outdoor activities were "not safe for the children" due to dirt and sunburn. So, while outside play, in almost all weather, is normal practice in New Zealand, this was a cultural practice that generated unease.

Two parents, each with one child, were concerned by their children's imitation of others' behaviour. For instance, Ishita attributed her daughter's behaviour of throwing and breaking toys to behaviour learnt from other children. Sabina's son, aged 3–4 years, picked up "foul language" from his friends "from different cultural backgrounds". As parents of an only child, they believed that their children learnt negative behaviours at ECE, and these different behaviours may relate to various cultural practices or norms. Both had discussed this with the teachers, and while the teachers had responded to their concerns, the parents were still anxious about these aspects of their children's social development and behaviour.

Sania reported that her daughter (3–4 years) had experienced racism. When she started at ECE, she often cried as "there was a classmate who used to say that he hates Indians and used to bully her". However, Sania told the teacher and this distressing situation was dealt with constructively and to Sania's satisfaction. The teacher met with both children and their parents and facilitated play between the children—which led to the children becoming "good friends and they were noticed playing and moving comfortably with each other". The teacher also expressed appreciation for this being brought to her attention, and Sania regarded this particular experience as one of the most positive she had.

Recommendations

This research provided an opportunity for nine parents, who might otherwise be reluctant to express concerns and satisfactions about their children's adjustments to ECE, to offer advice for other immigrant Indian parents. They also had suggestions for educators in terms of supporting young Indian children.

Suggestions for other immigrant parents

The recommendations for other parents included being informed and involved and valuing how ECE benefited children. Several participants urged immigrant parents to research ECE centres' philosophies and practices before enrolment. This included gaining knowledge about the curriculum, education system, the standards, and responsibilities of teachers and parents. Such information, parents said, saved time and money, and helped them to decide on the most suitable environment for their child. One mother noted the importance of being

"realistic and informed" about the New Zealand early childhood curriculum.

One mother commented that every parent has certain guidelines and expectations, and it was essential they expressed their views and had timely conversations with teachers. One father commented that teachers "maintain records and keep a record from early stage until last stage", which suggested that being informed and involved with teachers should be ongoing and regular.

Three parents recommended that parents enrolled their children in ECE at a young age as this promoted children's overall development and socialisation. This recommendation was based on observations of their own children's growth and development, such as being more physically active at the ECE centre, learning from others, and cultivating socialising behaviour.

Suggestions from parents for educators

Providing multicultural environments in early learning centres, and teachers being well informed about children's ethnicities, was recommended by five parents. This was important, as disagreements between teachers and parents, related to values and beliefs, discouraged parental involvement in children's education (Chan, 2011). Also, while teachers may advocate for multicultural education, at times teachers engaged in monocultural practices (Guo, 2017) and dialogue between teachers and parents was vital.

Participants commented that teachers needed to be patient and understanding, especially when dealing with children from different countries, cultures, and academic backgrounds; moreover, teachers needed to be aware that they "mean a lot to the children". Teachers must foster positive and healthy relationships among children with different ethnicities and, as Chan (2009) commented, early childhood teachers need to "address issues of inequity" and "advocate for social justice" (p. 33). One father recognised the importance of children's cultural inclusion, and said "it is important for every centre, and teachers, to create a multicultural society". Importantly, as Souto-Manning (2013) claimed, early childhood teachers needed to deconstruct cultural essentialism, which amplified perceived differences in cultural groups, and instead communicate and engage critically with people of all ethnic backgrounds. As one parent noted, teachers also

needed to monitor and eliminate racism among children.

Overall, parents wanted teachers to be more sympathetic and better listeners, especially as children struggled to communicate and understand routines and environments. Quality of interactions was noted by one mother, who said that low interactions and poor communication with one teacher left her daughter "a dull and disinterested child". The parents' focus on communication, interactions, and listening was good advice, as positive communication encourages, welcomes, and validates others (Cheung, 2012) and tuning into children's responses to questions helps to scaffold children's learning.

In Indian culture, teachers are viewed as another parent and may be referred to as the "mother-teacher". Hence, Indian children expect regular one-on-one attention, especially from a consistent educator. Therefore, one approach to support Indian children and families' cultural adaptation would be to allocate primary caregiver/s or key teacher/s. The benefits of this approach are well documented in New Zealand, and both children and key teachers can benefit from developing new cultural understandings and competencies. As some Indian families are not fluent in English, let alone the New Zealand dialect, key teachers would help parents and children to understand and communicate better. Rather than limiting children's interactions, having a dependable adult promotes security and supports increasing independence.

The New Zealand early childhood curriculum recognises the importance of diverse language environments that support children's identities, languages, and cultures. To foster children's sense of identity, belonging, and well-being, teachers are encouraged to learn and use phrases, songs, books, and other such learning resources in children's home language. Some other simple approaches may include teachers greeting parents and children in their own language, using simple English when communicating, and learning and using simple words at ECE in the children's mother tongue.

To assist in Indian children's adjustments, three participants recommended that centres had at least one Indian teacher who spoke several languages. One mother said this would make a lot of difference to Indian children, especially when settling in. Also, when other children speak their language, this assists in intercultural relations and adjustment (Guo

& Dalli, 2012), and having a teacher who can speak with children, and encourage supportive interactions between children, would support children's learning and social development.

Additional implications

Across the research, five other implications emerged including the need for teachers to pay special attention to immigrant children when they first arrived; understanding relevant diverse Indian cultural, religious, and social practices; communicating about the connections between play-based learning and academic skills; recognising that immigrant parents may be anxious about their children's everyday health and hygiene routines; and consciously creating a multicultural society in ECE.

The parents indicated that initial periods of adjustment were especially challenging for the immigrant children, parents, and teachers. When teachers and other children were open-minded and welcoming, the Indian children become more independent and confident at ECE and home. The implications of this are that special attention needed to be paid to the children as they arrived, and communication with parents must be concerted and purposeful—especially as parents may be reluctant to communicate concerns and be experiencing social isolation and cultural adjustments. Meaningful communication may more quickly address issues of inequality, discrimination, children's social isolation, and parental concerns, as well as address underlying cultural biases.

While New Zealand is a small nation, India is the second-most populous country in the world and Indian families may come from various cultures and diversities. Therefore, it is advisable for teachers to be aware of a child's background, and his/her culture. For example, depending on an Indian family's religious and cultural practices there may be different ways of greeting. In addition, Indian parents may have dietary requirements for their child (e.g., vegetarian), and a child's cultural attire may include wearing a turban, or a bangle, or thread that is of religious significance. High value is placed on social and cultural bonds, and it may mean a great deal to Indian families if teachers were informed about the relevant culture. Small gestures such as greeting and using simple words in their home language will help create a welcoming environment and build parents' and children's trust.

What might be regarded as friendly in one culture can be seen as confronting in another.

New Zealand is arguably a nation of huggers who happily strike up conversations with strangers, and children are encouraged to be outgoing and communicative. This cultural practice can be challenging for immigrant Indian children and parents who have been brought up in close-knit family environments that do not easily accept new people or faces. Indian children are trained not to talk or respond to people they do not know. Hence, teachers may have to adjust expectations of how Indian children might respond to new people, including teachers and children, within the ECE community. An Indian child who appears aloof or shy may be quite disoriented with New Zealand's social practices. This is where a key teacher may be the central person to regularly engage in conversations with the child, and parents, to help build trust, security, and confidence.

New Zealand ECE teachers develop learning experiences based on emergent curriculum, which works with the centres' learning priorities and values children's play-based learning, exploration, skills, and interests. This research revealed that children enjoyed playing and it encouraged their social and cognitive development. Teachers developed planned learning experiences that built on children's interests, and recorded learning stories that communicated this learning with parents. However, as parents were unaware of the deliberate nature of the planned curriculum, this caused some anxiety around children's academic skills. Therefore, clearer communication with parents about planned learning experiences, and how play-based learning builds academic skills, may reduce parental concerns.

Centres catered for children's holistic needs, including eating, sleeping, exercising, and personal hygiene. These practices were undertaken with professional care and should reflect partnerships with families. However, these practices can still create anxiety for immigrant families, and discussion about how these were done, or could be done, may support the connections between children's cultural and home-based and centre-based practices.

Finally, concerted efforts must be made to celebrate each culture in ECE communities. This might include organising multicultural programmes, inviting parents to attend events and contribute to learning environments in ways that may vary from those routinely used. The participants in the current research were clear that, while they valued the New Zealand education curriculum and society, it was

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important for teachers to *create* a multicultural society in the centres that embraced *their* child's cultural identity. Given the diversity in Indian populations, educators should be facilitating parents' discussions about their cultural practices and expectations and integrating these into the curriculum. Supporting immigrant families and developing multicultural communities of belonging was a dynamic and evolving responsibility that included and benefited many.

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