

How to use a superdiversity approach to work with migrant families in early childhood care and education settings



ECE resources

Recent mass global human migration has transformed the demographic landscape of Aotearoa (New Zealand) significantly. The latest available census results show that 25% of New Zealand's population and 39% of Auckland residents were born outside of the country¹. Aotearoa is now home to more than 200 different ethnic groups and 160 different languages, and is being described as a superdiverse New Zealand.² A superdiverse population has implications for education, including early childhood care and education.

What is superdiversity?

The term 'superdiversity' was coined by Steven Vertovec in 2007, and it has been applied extensively in academic writing across a range of disciplines. Instead of mainly examining the 'typical' considerations in 'diversity' study, such as cultures and languages, the notion of superdiversity focuses on social inequality issues driven by migration-related variables, including differing migration patterns (such as permanent integration, temporary settlement, and transnational migration which involves the ongoing commute between home and host countries) and migration statuses (including refugees, asylum-seekers, and voluntary migrants).

Social inequality issues for refugees and voluntary migrants include unequal access to entitlements and resources. For example, many highly educated migrants struggle to find employment that utilises their overseas-acquired qualifications and professional knowledge because of accent, language, and cultural barriers. Some of them have to take up unsatisfying jobs reluctantly. Others have to continue working in their home country in order to financially support their family (usually the wife and children) in the host country. These families occasionally reunite in either the host or the home country, thus becoming transnational migrants. Transnationals usually take longer to understand the dominant practices of and to develop a sense of belonging to the host countries.

Diversity and superdiversity in early childhood care and education

The latest enrolment statistics show that a superdiverse demographic landscape is similarly visible in early childhood education. In 2018, the dominant ethnicity, European/Pākehā, only accounted for 48% of the enrolments, while the remainder comprises Māori, Pacific, Asian, and other (the broad categories used by the Ministry of Education) ethnic groups³. *Te Whāriki* states that:

New Zealand is increasingly multicultural. Te Tiriti | the Treaty is seen to be inclusive of all immigrants to New Zealand, whose welcome comes in the context of this partnership. Those working in early childhood education respond to the changing demographic landscape by valuing and supporting the different cultures represented in their settings. (p. 3)

This aspiration of *Te Whāriki* is often translated into displaying greetings in different languages, celebrations of various festivals, sharing of cultural foods, and so on. Whilst these practices signal messages of inclusion, they are insufficient to address the migration-driven inequality concerns highlighted in the notion of superdiversity.

Inequality concerns are emphasised in [He Pou Tātaki: How ERO reviews early childhood services](#), which states that the Government has identified a group of priority learners who are the most vulnerable children in New Zealand, including Māori, Pasifika, those from low income families, and children with diverse needs (particularly children who speak English as an additional language, and children of migrants and refugees). ERO expects early childhood settings to implement inclusive practices and provide additional supports to help priority learners, such as children of migrants and refugees, achieve equitable outcomes.

Strategies to address migration-driven inequality concerns

Below are a few suggestions to support early childhood teachers to work with diverse migrant (including refugee) families, and particularly to address inequality concerns. These suggestions are made in light of *Te Whāriki's* aspirations and the *Standards for the Teaching Profession* required by the Education Council Aotearoa New Zealand. Since each setting is different, teachers may need to build on the suggestions in order to develop context-relevant strategies.

Build relationships and work in partnership with migrant families to understand and address their aspirations and [concerns](#). Recognise that complex inequalities exist. Intentionally initiate dialogues and, if there is a language barrier, request the support of family or community members who speak English to provide translation. Consult and collaborate with families and community support services in adjusting or developing policies and routines that alleviate migrant families' concerns and address their aspirations.

Create an inclusive environment that celebrates and normalises diversities and [differences](#). Embrace home cultures and languages in early childhood settings. Seek support from families to collect (ideas for) resources that reflect their cultures and languages. Resources include, but are not limited to, books, songs, music, cultural artefacts, visual displays, food, and traditional clothing.

Organise social functions to give diverse families opportunities to get to know more about each other. Most migrant families have a limited social network because they are new to New Zealand, and they yearn for social interactions. Social events also help to minimise unknowns and support the normalisation and acceptance of differences.

Avoid un/intentional biased and exclusive language. Remind children that no one (group) is superior to another, and encourage them to respect differences and to be inclusive. Challenge children's use of exclusive comments such as 'you can't play with us (or you can't come to my birthday party) because you don't speak English'.

Support children of migrant families to develop English language ability and to understand New Zealand [culture](#). Most migrant families want their children to integrate into the majority culture and become proficient in English while maintaining their heritages. Speak slowly, and use simple English, body language, and visual aids when communicating with these children. Buddy them with local English-speaking children.

A superdiverse population has brought unknowns and uncertainties to early childhood settings, but it has also brought huge potential for cultural exchange and reciprocal learning. Applying a superdiversity approach to working with migrant families involves embracing diversities and differences, and enacting responsive, inclusive, and equitable pedagogies. For more strategies on working with recently immigrated families and families from diverse cultures, see our other resources on culturally responsive pedagogies in early childhood.

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Endnotes

- 1 Auckland Council. (2014). Auckland Profile: Initial results from the 2013 Census.
- 2 Royal Society of New Zealand/Te Aparangi. (2013). Languages in Aotearoa New Zealand.
- 3 Ministry of Education. (2018). Overview of attendance at licensed ECE Services in 2018.

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