

Voices of belonging: Inclusion of minority kaiako in Aotearoa New Zealand

Jo Ward  and Monica Cameron 

This article shares findings from a study exploring how kaiako from minority cultures experience belonging in early childhood education settings in Aotearoa New Zealand. In an increasingly diverse early childhood education sector, it is important to understand what belonging means for kaiako and what happens when it is missing. A sense of belonging supports the health, wellbeing, and professional effectiveness of kaiako. When belonging is missing, kaiako may experience isolation, anxiety, reduced job satisfaction, and disengagement. Because belonging is shaped by personal experiences and interactions, it can look different for each individual and setting. Drawing on participant voices and existing research, this article highlights the need for greater awareness, reflection, and inclusive practices to foster a strong sense of belonging for all kaiako.

Introduction

Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) highlights the vital role of early childhood leaders and kaiako in creating safe, respectful environments where culture, identity, and relationships support a strong sense of belonging. Mana whenua | Belonging, one of the five strands of *Te Whāriki*, is essential for wellbeing and helps ākonga feel confident to explore and learn. In the same way, a strong sense of belonging also supports kaiako to engage and thrive.

Aotearoa New Zealand has experienced increasing workforce diversity, a trend shaped by ongoing globalisation and migration (Griffiths et al., 2022). However, many kaiako from non-dominant cultural backgrounds continue to be positioned as “minorities” within teaching teams. The term “minority” reflects not only numerical representation but also the marginalisation of kaiako whose cultural, ethnic, or linguistic identities

differ from dominant norms (Griffiths et al. 2022; Souto-Manning & Cheruvu, 2016). When dominant cultural norms are prioritised, kaiako may feel excluded or undervalued, affecting their identity, wellbeing, and professional confidence (Griffiths et al., 2022). Kelly-Ware (2020) argues that privilege is not evenly distributed and inequalities can go unnoticed, making it harder for some kaiako to feel a sense of belonging. This highlights the need for ongoing critical reflection and inclusive practices that support all kaiako.

Diversity and belonging amongst kaiako in Aotearoa New Zealand

The shift toward a more diverse population is evident throughout Aotearoa New Zealand, though Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland stands out as the country's most culturally diverse city, home to over 100 ethnicities and more than 150 languages (Education Review Office [ERO], 2018). To address pressures on the early childhood education (ECE) workforce, initiatives to grow and diversify the teaching population have resulted in more kaiako from varied ethnic and cultural backgrounds entering the sector, reflecting the priorities outlined in the Early Learning Action Plan (MoE, 2019). Increasing diversity within the ECE workforce necessitates the need to clarify how diversity is understood and how it can influence experiences of belonging.

This article uses the terms ethnic diversity and cultural diversity intentionally and with distinction. Ethnic diversity refers to differences in ancestry, heritage, and often shared language or geographical origin. In contrast, cultural diversity encompasses broader values, beliefs, practices, and ways of being that shape individuals' identities and interactions (Griffiths et al., 2022; Souto-Manning & Cheruvu, 2016). Although these concepts are related and may overlap, recognising both is essential for understanding the nuanced ways kaiako experience inclusion, identity, and belonging in ECE settings.

A sense of belonging is fundamental to kaiako trust and self-efficacy, which supports motivation and resilience (Bjorklund et al., 2021). Belonging directly influences teaching performance, enhances self-esteem, increases willingness to contribute, and creates a psychologically safe environment for kaiako. Conversely, a diminished sense of belonging can have serious negative effects, such as social anxiety, health issues, disengagement, isolation, depression, and reduced job satisfaction (Tillett & Wong, 2018). These impacts are amplified for kaiako from minority ethnic and cultural backgrounds, who often face additional challenges like cultural isolation, marginalisation, and othering. Othering refers to the treatment of individuals or groups as different or lesser.

The dominance of particular cultural norms significantly shapes the experiences of kaiako from minority ethnic backgrounds. Souto-Manning and Cheruvu (2016) argue that the normalisation of whiteness and monolingualism can make belonging more difficult for minority kaiako. Kelly-Ware (2020) similarly calls for ECE settings to confront dominant cultural privileges and recognise how these can silence or marginalise certain groups. When dominant cultural norms are prioritised, whether explicitly reinforced or embedded in everyday practice, minority kaiako may experience marginalisation (Griffiths et al., 2022), impacting their sense of value, identity, and belonging. It is critical for all kaiako to be supported in identifying and addressing visible signs of privilege, oppression, exclusion, and discrimination, given the impact on experiences of belonging.

Research highlights that kaiako identity and relationships are vital in fostering a strong sense of belonging (Gould et al., 2021). Identity, like belonging, develops through lived experiences; when identity is validated and respected, individuals' sense of belonging and positive self-view are strengthened. Identity and relationships are also interconnected. When identity is not recognised and valued, trust cannot be established (Bjorklund et al., 2021). Strong trusting relationships support effective professional practice and help kaiako feel part of the team, while a sense of connectedness to people and places promotes acceptance and belonging (Bjorklund et al., 2021). However, when kaiako do not feel secure in their professional relationships, they may be unable to express themselves authentically, resulting in reduced engagement and a weaker sense of belonging within the teaching team. Given the increasing diversity of kaiako in Aotearoa New Zealand, and the importance of belonging for all kaiako, a research project was undertaken, exploring how kaiako from minority cultures experienced belonging.

Methodology

As belonging is shaped by people's lived experiences within social groups, this research was guided by an interpretive paradigm through which knowledge is understood as fluid and uniquely constructed by individuals (Scotland, 2012). Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Research and Ethics Committee at Te Rito Maioha Early Childhood New Zealand.

Interviews were conducted to gain insight into the experiences of kaiako from minority backgrounds and to explore how these experiences shaped their understandings of the world around them. Six participants from across Tāmaki Makaurau, who identified as

being non-Pākehā/European kaiako, were involved. Following informed consent, participants were interviewed to explore how kaiako from minority cultures experience a sense of belonging in ECE settings. Interviews were held via Zoom, using a set of semi-structured questions. Data were analysed through thematic analysis, in which key patterns were explored, identifying common threads and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings

Defining belonging and identity

In describing what belonging and identity meant, participants emphasised the connection between personal expression and identity. One participant described identity as “culture and cultural values, ideologies and ways of being,” outwardly expressed through clothing, food, speech, and behaviour. Belonging was defined by another participant as the freedom to be authentic: “I think just being myself, I don't have to change the way I look, the way I talk or the way I present myself. If I'm free to be me, that's my sense of belonging. You don't have to be anybody else.”

The importance of belonging in ECE settings

All participants expressed that a sense of belonging in their ECE setting was crucial, positively influencing their feelings of safety, value, and authenticity. They highlighted that when accepted and listened to, they were able to participate more fully, contribute meaningfully, and thrive both personally and professionally. One kaiako explained, “If you don't feel a sense of belonging, you're not able to function ... at home or [in] professional spaces.” Others similarly highlighted that without belonging, effectiveness at work suffered and trust could not develop: “If you don't have a connection, you don't have trust, [and] you will never be able to open up and explore.” When kaiako felt connected and valued, they were more engaged, committed, and likely to remain at their centres, supporting team continuity.

Pressure to assimilate

All six participants reported feeling compelled to change aspects of themselves to gain acceptance. One participant explained, “You are so afraid that people are going to judge you, and you just stay in your comfort zone, you're afraid to try things out, and that will limit your growth as a teacher ... I think it's just because you want to protect yourself.” Others described often “fitting in” to avoid judgement, despite occasionally feeling a

sense of belonging. As one participant shared, “In trying to look like or in trying to speak or trying to dress like the people that I am with ... would be just trying to fit in.” Another noted that “the majority of the time I'm just fitting in because I feel like I would be judged if I do it the other way.” Despite their efforts, participants reported that assimilation did not lead to a genuine sense of belonging, but instead undermined their identity and sense of self.

Fostering belonging through trust and relationships

Participants identified trust, respect, connectedness, and open communication as crucial for fostering a sense of belonging among kaiako. They valued working with non-judgmental, honest, and open-minded colleagues who empower each other and cultivate a culture of acceptance. The willingness to learn about and respect all kaiako, regardless of background, was emphasised. One participant noted that discussions about “what makes you, you” built cultural understanding and belonging. Yet, other participants shared that meaningful conversations about culture and identity were often lacking. Four out of six participants had never been asked about their ethnicity or only discussed culture superficially, signalling that their backgrounds were frequently overlooked.

Communication and workplace dynamics

Reciprocity, consistency, and negotiated shared values were also identified as important for building trusting professional relationships. Clear and purposeful communication around consistent practice was essential, with one participant noting that “we can't be working in complete opposite directions.” However, communication could also negatively affect kaiako when respect was absent. Several participants described adjusting their communication styles to avoid judgement or exclusion. One shared that she altered her humour and energy levels so as “not to offend anybody,” while another described experiencing negative assumptions about her communication skills and accent, contributing to feeling challenged and unaccepted. Ineffective communication was seen to lead to disengagement, with one participant observing that it resulted in “minority teachers taking a step back.” The need for greater guidance and support to build self-confidence and empower kaiako to speak up and participate fully was emphasised.

Experiences of bias and exclusion

Participants reported experiencing bias and assumptions about their ethnicity and culture, which negatively affected their sense of belonging. Discrimination, particularly

around language, was prominent. One kaiako recalled being told, “It’s an English centre, you should speak in English,” while others had their language skills questioned despite being born or educated in Aotearoa. Participants expressed a desire to feel “as important as other kaiako” and “to be heard and respected in the same way,” highlighting the emotional impact of exclusion and the need for equitable recognition. These experiences are not isolated but contribute to the ongoing reproduction of dominant norms in ECE settings.

Discussion

Belonging and dominant norms

While participants recognised the importance of belonging, the findings suggest that kaiako from minority cultures do not consistently experience a sense of belonging within their own ECE settings. This is problematic because not feeling a sense of belonging can result in issues such as anxiety, health problems, disengagement, and job dissatisfaction (Griffiths et al., 2023). Furthermore, Tillett and Wong (2018) have suggested that kaiako who appreciate the importance of belonging are better equipped to foster inclusion for children, families, and communities. It is important that all kaiako feel they belong, for their own wellbeing and so that they are well positioned to support the belonging of others.

Building on the findings around language-related bias, the broader literature indicates that such discrimination is neither isolated nor incidental but part of a wider pattern within the ECE sector (Gould et al., 2023; Griffiths et al., 2023). These findings highlight how assumptions about communication, accents, and language proficiency, extend beyond individual interactions and reflect broader patterns of marginalisation within the ECE sector. These findings echo those of Gould et al. (2023), who noted that perceptions around accents and language can foster disconnection and diminish belonging for kaiako with English as an additional language. The data from this study further reveal the adaptive strategies kaiako feel compelled to use, such as modifying humour, communication styles or energy levels to avoid judgement, or “taking a step back” when communication felt unsafe or ineffective. Such withdrawal not only signals a compromised sense of belonging but reinforces patterns of silencing and marginalisation. Together, these experiences highlight the emotional and professional toll of exclusion, and underscore participants’ calls to be valued “as important as other kaiako.” These experiences undermine the confidence of kaiako from minority cultures,

reinforce dominant norms, and promote conformity. Such dynamics operate by positioning dominant norms as neutral or standard, against which difference is othered.

Findings from this study suggest that the historic and dominant monocultural practices continue to shape and constrain the ways belonging is experienced and enacted within ECE settings. Gould et al. (2023) have highlighted the historic and problematic history of colonisation and dominant discourses for minority. Gould (2021) has expressed concern that a largely monocultural workforce has resulted in a lack of action and change in realising the bicultural and multicultural expectations outlined in *Te Whāriki*. Therefore, as Kelly-Ware (2020, p. 22) notes, “white privilege and the normalisation of white identities, otherness and sameness are key issues that students/kaiako from the dominant culture and diverse cultures need to grapple with as society becomes more diverse.”

Identity, trust, and relationships

The need to “fit in” led participants to let go of aspects of their identities and cultural uniqueness. These adaptations illustrate how dominant cultural expectations shape the experiences of kaiako from minority backgrounds. The pressure to conform and assimilate into dominant cultural norms can erode a teacher’s sense of belonging, as it prioritises uniformity over diversity. The ability to express cultural identity is closely tied to relational trust, as authenticity enables deeper connection and mutual understanding. When kaiako feel compelled to adopt or assimilate to the dominant culture’s behaviours, values, or appearance, it can undermine their authentic sense of self and create internal conflict. Both this study and Kelly-Ware (2020) identify assimilation as problematic because it positions dominant cultural norms as the standard, leading kaiako from minority cultures to suppress aspects of their identity in order to fit in.

Infrequent opportunities for kaiako to share information about their identity constrained the development of trust, relational depth, and belonging within their teams. This lack of engagement in turn limits opportunities for learning about diversity and supporting belonging, reflecting a broader failure in ECE settings to recognise and celebrate diverse identities (Gould, 2021). There is a missed opportunity within ECE practice to actively foster culturally responsive and relationally grounded environments.

Because belonging is a socially constructed concept, shaped by individual experiences within groups, it is important that kaiako have time and space to explore diverse cultures within their settings to build familiarity and reduce pressures to conform to the dominant culture. Tillett and Wong (2018) shared that collaborative understanding of

what belonging means within a teaching team is essential, as it supports cultural connectedness, while Griffiths et al. (2022) caution that when communication or relational connection is absent or weak, kaiako feel less valued and less connected, which can undermine belonging.

Creating spaces to explore belonging, dominant norms, culture, identity, bias, and exclusion is essential for fostering belonging and culturally safe environments for kaiako. These findings suggest further work is required to ensure the voices of minority kaiako are actively recognised, valued, and embedded within ECE practice.

Recommendation for practice

Create spaces for cultural conversations

Creating time and safe spaces for kaiako to share their cultural identities, experiences, and ways of being could foster authentic conversations about language, identity, and culture, and support understanding, grow trust, and reduce cultural assumptions or stereotypes. Over time and as trust develops, these conversations could include diverse expressions of professionalism, communication, and cultural practice. Moving away from expectations of conformity allows kaiako to participate authentically without feeling pressure to assimilate in order to belong.

Challenge dominant norms and assumptions

Critical reflection on how dominant cultural norms, including monocultural practices are normalised in practice is essential. By reflecting on and challenging unspoken biases kaiako can disrupt inequitable practices and othering in their settings. Professional development focused on cultural responsiveness, power, privilege, and belonging can support kaiako to develop greater awareness and shared responsibility for inclusion. Learning that is ongoing, reflective, and embedded in everyday practice is recommended as it is more powerful than a one-off initiative.

Role model inclusion

Kaiako play a critical role in modelling inclusive behaviours that ensure all members of society feel seen, heard, and valued both within the teaching teams and in communities.

Conclusion

While participants described belonging as essential for wellbeing, confidence, and professional engagement, their experiences also reveal how dominant cultural norms continue to shape environments in ways that can marginalise and silence minority kaiako. Findings illustrate that pressure to conform or assimilate often comes at a personal cost, requiring kaiako to suppress aspects of their identity in order to feel accepted. This can undermine authentic inclusion and reinforce existing inequities. Conversely, where trust, respect, open communication, and genuine curiosity about identity were present, kaiako reported feeling empowered, valued, and able to participate fully in their professional roles.

As the diversity of the ECE workforce continues to grow, this research highlights the need for a shift from superficial inclusion toward culturally responsive, relational, and equity-focused practice. By fostering environments where diverse identities are recognised and affirmed, ECE settings can create the conditions for all kaiako to thrive, benefiting not only kaiako, but children, families, and communities.

Author notes

We would like to thank the participants of this research project who shared their voices and experiences.

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AUTHOR PROFILE

Jo Ward, Te Rito Maioha—Early Childhood New Zealand

Jo Ward lectures with Te Rito Maioha and recently completed her Master of Education, focusing on teacher belonging for kaiako from minority cultures. Her work is grounded in advocacy for equity, wellbeing, and effective teaching practice, and she continues to champion diversity and belonging in early learning settings across Aotearoa.

Email address: Jo.ward@ecnz.ac.nz

Dr Monica Cameron, Te Rito Maioha—Early Childhood New Zealand

Monica Cameron is a senior lecturer and senior research advisor at Te Rito Maioha—Early Childhood New Zealand whose research interests include assessment, curriculum, teacher pedagogy, intentional teaching, disabilities and leadership.