

Reweaving practice: The challenges and opportunities for overseas-trained teachers in Aotearoa

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This opinion piece explores the complex journey of overseas-trained teachers (OTTs) entering New Zealand's early childhood education (ECE) sector. While these educators bring diverse professional experience and cultural capital, they face significant challenges aligning their practices with Te Whāriki and bicultural commitments grounded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi. This piece critiques current induction systems, highlighting gaps in cultural mentoring and relational support. It calls for a reimagined induction process that emphasises culturally sustaining pedagogies, iwi partnerships, and reflective practice. The paper advocates for reweaving rather than merely integrating OTTs' knowledge into Aotearoa's unique educational fabric, emphasising the transformative potential of well-supported international educators in strengthening culturally inclusive learning environments.

Introduction

This opinion piece explores the nuanced experiences of OTTs, many of whom arrive in New Zealand with substantial experience, qualifications, and cultural capital, only to find themselves having to start again not because their knowledge is irrelevant, but because it must be reinterpreted and transformed through the unique lens of Aotearoa's educational ethos.

Overseas-trained teachers (OTTs) are increasingly seen as a vital part of New Zealand's education workforce strategy. With a need to overcome teacher shortages, the Ministry of Education has introduced fast-track immigration pathways such as the Straight to Residence Visa and expanded the range of supports available for international teachers

(Ministry of Education, 2025). However, these structural solutions often overlook a greater challenge: the cultural, pedagogical and emotional recalibration required when transitioning into a bicultural education system grounded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the principles of Te Whāriki, Aotearoa's early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Cultural transitions and the third space

Overseas-trained teachers bring with them extensive professional experience, strong pedagogical content knowledge, and diverse cultural worldviews. Their teaching philosophies often reflect deeply embedded cultural values and approaches to learning that are highly effective in their countries of origin. When I arrived in Aotearoa as an overseas-trained teacher, I brought with me a kete (my own basket of knowledge) full of experiences, years of teaching, degrees, child development theory, and culturally rich pedagogical practices grounded in the values and worldviews of my home country. Like many educators who cross borders, I arrived with what González et al. (2005) describe as “funds of knowledge”, the accumulated cultural, social, and intellectual capital shaped by one's community and life experience. These funds of knowledge can initially be undervalued or go unrecognised. Upon entering early childhood education (ECE) settings, OTTs quickly learn that their existing frameworks may not fully align with Te Whāriki. This curriculum is distinctive not only in its holistic and child-centred approach, but also in its philosophical underpinnings that prioritise relationality, indigenous knowledge systems and a commitment to honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi. For OTTs, this often means letting go of previously dominant assumptions and pedagogies and starting a professional journey of reorientation, unlearning and new learning. This transition can lead to a sense of professional disorientation, as well as an internal tension between maintaining their pedagogical identity and adapting to local expectations. Culturally responsive practice is not only about incorporating indigenous content into lessons, it also requires educators to engage in critical reflection, relational learning and humility in the face of different worldviews.

Despite my experience, I found myself starting again not because my knowledge was invalid, but because it was not complete in this context. I had to shift away from viewing children as merely individual learners progressing through developmental milestones to seeing them as mokopuna (descendants with living ties to their whānau, hapū, and iwi). The concept of mokopuna holds cultural meaning, encompassing intergenerational connections and recognising each child's inherent gifts and status. Embracing this perspective can be both a disorienting and humbling experience.

For teachers who are used to being experts in their field, entering the ECE sector in New Zealand may feel like beginning again. The shift requires not only an understanding of curriculum content but a greater engagement with concepts like *manaakitanga* (care), *whanaungatanga* (relationships), and *ako* (reciprocal learning). These are not merely values to be displayed in policy documents or token terms but principles of relational practice that are integral to the curriculum.

Third Space Theory (Bhabha, 1994) provides a conceptual and practical framework for navigating the complexities of cultural diversity, biculturalism and teacher identity. The theory describes a transformative space where different cultural knowledge systems intersect, allowing for the emergence of hybrid practices and insights. In the case of OTTs, this Third Space becomes a site for negotiation, where prior pedagogical knowledge interacts with local frameworks such as *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017), the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) and commitments to *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*. This space supports the co-construction of hybrid teaching identities and inclusive practices, fostering closer connections with *tamariki* and *whānau* from diverse backgrounds. The Third Space supports relational pedagogies that enable reciprocal learning between OTTs and mentors, rather than a one-way assimilation into dominant norms.

Te Whāriki as a living document

Te Whāriki is described as a woven mat, open-ended and adaptable to diverse communities and contexts. It positions learners within their family, cultural and spiritual worlds and calls on educators to honour these connections (Ministry of Education, 2017). For OTTs, the curriculum offers space to integrate their own knowledge into the local context. However, doing so requires a foundational understanding of New Zealand's colonial history, the ongoing significance of *Te Tiriti*, and the current aspirations of *tangata whenua*. This is where the gap often lies. While OTTs may be experienced and culturally knowledgeable in their own right, many are unfamiliar with New Zealand's bicultural commitments. This lack of familiarity is compounded by inconsistent or insufficient induction support. While recent Teaching Council reforms mandate a two-year induction and mentoring program for new provisionally registered teachers, and a shorter period of one-year induction for OTTs with their overseas teaching experience and appropriate documentation, the quality and depth of these supports may vary significantly across centres and providers (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2015).

The induction conundrum

The induction experience is pivotal in shaping a teacher's transition into the New Zealand education system. Ideally, it offers not only procedural orientation but also cultural mentoring, opportunities for critical reflection, and a safe space to explore the principles of bicultural practice. However, many overseas-trained teachers navigate complex professional landscapes, where initial experiences can feel rather focused on procedural and compliance-based requirements, often leaving limited room for relational, culturally grounded or transformative engagement.

There is a case for the need to move beyond surface level induction processes and instead adopt culturally sustaining pedagogies that affirm the identities of incoming teachers while also building their competence in local cultural practices. This includes mentorship that goes beyond classroom management and curriculum delivery to actively support understanding of tikanga Māori, engagement with iwi and hapū, and incorporation of te reo Māori in daily practice. Without this depth, OTTs can feel isolated, underprepared, and even disillusioned. The emotional labour of navigating a new system, coupled with the pressure to perform and assimilate quickly, can take a toll on teacher identity and confidence. In the worst cases, it leads to attrition, a loss not only for the teachers but for the communities and tamariki who would benefit from their unique contributions.

From integration to reweaving

What is required is not simply integration, but reweaving. This metaphor, drawn from the curriculum itself, invites us to think about educational spaces as collaborative and relational. It acknowledges that while Te Whāriki sets out specific principles, it is not a static or prescriptive document. Instead, it offers an invitation to educators from all backgrounds to co-construct learning environments that are respectful, responsive, and rich in cultural meaning. Overseas-trained teachers are often encouraged to “fit in” before they are supported to contribute. Yet I have come to realise that integrating into Te Whāriki does not mean discarding an earlier identity or pedagogical history. Instead, it is an act of reweaving, bringing together your own threads of knowledge with the Kaupapa Māori and Pasifika foundations present in the curriculum. This aligns with Te Whāriki's image of the curriculum as an open-ended mat, woven together with the aspirations of diverse communities (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 10).

When OTTs are given the support, trust, and professional development needed to truly engage with this vision, their contributions can be transformative. They bring new languages, perspectives, and pedagogies that can enrich tamariki's learning experiences and broaden the cultural horizons of early learning communities. They also serve as cultural bridges for increasingly diverse whānau, helping to create inclusive spaces where all identities are affirmed.

Policy implications and reform

The recent policy focus on recruiting OTTs is an important step, but it must be matched by investment in long-term support. The Overseas Relocation Grant, Overseas Finder's Fee, and dedicated navigator roles are helpful at the point of entry but do little to sustain teachers once they are in the system (Education Workforce, 2022; 2023). Similarly, while the Teaching Council requires that OTTs undertake a structured induction program, there is limited oversight of how effectively bicultural practices are integrated.

Based on my personal and professional experience in navigating the transition into Aotearoa's bicultural landscape, it has become evident that the induction for overseas-trained teachers requires more than procedural guidance; it calls for a relational and culturally grounded approach. Meaningful support might include bicultural induction experiences developed in partnership with local iwi and cultural advisors with access to mentors who are equipped to support cross cultural dialogue and committed to culturally sustaining practices. Support should integrate reflective practice that invites teachers to examine their own identities, positionality, assumptions and roles within a Tiriti-honouring context. These elements are not prescriptive solutions but suggested pathways that could make the process of reweaving one's professional identity both enriching and transformative.

Conclusion

The journey of an overseas-trained teacher in Aotearoa is both a challenge and a profound opportunity. While structural supports around immigration and registration have improved, deeper cultural and pedagogical integration remains inconsistent. For OTTs, the process of "starting again" is not about discarding what they know, but about reweaving their knowledge into a new context, one that values both their contributions and the unique cultural foundation of Aotearoa. Induction should be dialogic and not just procedural, encouraging mentors to learn from as well as guide OTTs. Te Whāriki

offers a vision of education that is inclusive, relational and grounded in the land and its people. It is not an easy framework to step into, especially for those unfamiliar with its origins. However, with the right support, mentorship and cultural guidance, overseas-trained teachers can do more than adapt, they can thrive and enrich the tapestry of early childhood education in New Zealand.

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Originally arriving in New Zealand to undertake doctoral studies, the author brings a background of international education and a commitment to culturally-responsive, place-based practice. A practising teacher and academic, she is committed to bridging the gap between research and classroom practice. Her work is grounded in culturally sustaining pedagogy and the integration of global perspectives into local educational contexts.

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