

## THESIS SYNOPSIS

# Culturally Oriented Environmental Identity Transitions: Migrant Indian Teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand Early Childhood Education

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## Thesis synopsis

There has been a growing awareness of the detrimental impact of human activity on the environment in the Anthropocene (Crutzen, 2002; Eames & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2017). This impact requires a reconsideration of human-environment relationships including an examination of our environmental identities. An environmental identity can be described as the way individuals view themselves or extend their sense of self in relation to the natural environment (Thomashow, 1995) mediated by personal and social experiences. To address this critical need to restore the human-environment relationship through the exploration of an environmental identity, education has emerged as a vital strategy, and culture has emerged as a significant resource.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the natural environment is considered an integral part of the national identity, and early childhood has been recognised as an important stage when environmental and sustainability education should begin. The early childhood education (ECE) bicultural curriculum framework *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017), which is grounded in Indigenous Māori worldviews, acknowledges strong spiritual connections to land and place. The idea of respect for the natural world and *kaitiakitanga* (environmental stewardship as referred to in *Te Whāriki*) are included in the curriculum document.

Within the context of this superdiverse nation (Vertovec, 2019), and an increasingly multicultural ECE context (Chan & Ritchie, 2023), a significant number of migrant teachers may transfer their cultural and environmental knowledge, practice and identity as they transition into the Aotearoa New Zealand context. Migration to this country by people from India has increased significantly in number over the past few years (Stats NZ, 2018), and this growth is being reflected in the increasing numbers of migrant Indian teachers in ECE.

Within this context, as a migrant teacher myself, and a cultural insider with lived-familiarity of the teachers' experiences, I was keen to examine if the environment might hold different meanings and places in their home (Indian) and host (Aotearoa New Zealand) cultural systems. An exploration of my own culturally oriented environmental identity, concern for nurturing my young son's environmental identity and the want of environmental awareness among my own

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student–teacher cohort, eventually led me to this journey and shaped my research. Therefore, my research explored migrant Indian teachers' understandings of their culturally oriented environmental identity development as they negotiated their cultural and environmental transitions into the multicultural and environmentally inclusive Aotearoa New Zealand ECE context. The aim of the research was to gain insights into the teachers' perceptions of the influence of cultural identity on their environmental identities within the ECE context.

A sociocultural theoretical perspective informed this study, drawing primarily on Sauvé's (2009) model of personal and social development of the self in relation to other humans and the environment. This was considered with reference to, and overlaps with, certain Indian environmental philosophical perspectives and Indigenous Māori environmental perspectives. Primary data for this interpretivist study were gathered through in-depth interviews with nine Indian ECE teacher participants. Interviews with their ECE setting managers/head teachers were conducted to support and supplement the teachers' practices and experiences. The audio-recorded interview data were transcribed and examined using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Observations of teacher participants' workplaces were used to provide a contextual profile for each of the nine Indian teachers. I also obtained a small number of assessment documents in the form of Learning Stories (Carr, 2001), which the teachers had prepared, to analyse them for cultural and environmental themes and experiences.

Indian teacher participants' perceptions of their own culturally oriented environmental identities highlighted the significance of these teachers' own early childhood environmental experiences and home cultural context influences on their environmental identities. Teacher participants' perceptions shed light on their cultural and environmental identity transitions and acculturation process. These teachers brought their cultural and environmental identities from their home cultural context and used their cultural lens to interpret the connections between the host cultural context and environmental worldviews.

The Indian teacher participants perceived close connections between their cultural and environmental identities. At the same time, they recognised cross-cultural connections between their culturally oriented environmental identities and *tikanga* Māori (Māori ways of doing, including practices, customs and rituals) and *te ao Māori* (the Māori world). These perceived connections were most evident through the significance of Indian philosophies of spirituality, relationships, belonging and cultural recognition and exchange in their specific ECE contexts. These connections facilitated teachers' cultural and environmental identity transitions and had a positive impact on their cultural and environmental teaching practices, and in some cases, this was supported by the ECE setting and by the respective management/leadership.

The findings indicate a scope for increased opportunities for migrant teachers to explore, share, enhance and add to their context-specific environmental values and beliefs within initial teacher education programmes and their professional practice as qualified teachers. A more in-depth orientation to environmental and sustainability education values, philosophies, practices and programmes within Aotearoa New Zealand would provide the required support during the cultural crossover and environmental identity transition.

The teachers perceived cross-cultural and spiritual connections that could provide ideal spaces to encourage the inclusion and facilitation of migrant teachers' cultural and environmental identities. These connections could also become sites for cultural exchange where teachers from diverse cultures can share their unique environmental and sustainability perspectives, knowledge and experiences to enrich the ECE context. Migrant teachers bring their own funds of identity (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014), cultural and environmental, which could facilitate sharing of ideas and approaches from various worldviews. One significant finding that emerged from the study is the spiritual connections that Indian teacher participants made between their home and host cultural identities as well as their cultural and environmental identities, which is an interesting and valuable focus that I hope to explore in the near future.

Cultural and environmental transitions for this steadily growing group of migrant teachers require further investigation to facilitate their cultural and environmental participation and acculturation into the Aotearoa New Zealand ECE context. In these ways, the existing cultural, environmental and sustainability connections within ECE could be strengthened to foster children's culturally oriented environmental identities.

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### Publications arising from the thesis

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## Author Biography

**Devika Rathore** is a lecturer in early childhood education at the New Zealand Tertiary College, Aotearoa New Zealand. She was engaged in tertiary education and research while pursuing her PhD from the University of Waikato. Her research explores the intersection of environment, culture and education. She is particularly interested in learning more about how people's connection to place, nature and the more-than-human shapes their environmental identities. Her research interests include environmental/nature-based/sustainability education, early childhood education, identity, cross-cultural studies and visual dissemination of research.