



UNDERSTANDING THE ONBOARDING JOURNEY: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF BEGINNING TEACHERS IN NEW ZEALAND

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ABSTRACT

The research purpose of this project was to explore and describe the experiences of beginning teachers in New Zealand during their initial period of professionalization, to include adjustment to the culture of the school and classroom, and access to professional development resources, as well as to investigate the role of these experiences in relation to teachers' professional development and longevity in the teaching profession. The study identified essential structures that defined onboarding through teachers' descriptions of their daily activities, support systems, and the difficulties they encountered in their work. The research also aimed to develop an accurate, detailed description of the phenomenon that school leaders, policymakers, and teacher educators could use to develop more effective onboarding procedures. This study used a phenomenological research design, employing semi-structured questions to guide interviews and collect the necessary data. The participants in this study were 7 purposively selected ECE teachers in Auckland, New Zealand. Data from the interviews, in the form of transcripts, were analyzed using thematic analysis. The generated themes included: 1. Unstructured Onboarding to Gradual Professional Adjustment; 2. From Unfamiliarity to Adaptation on Curriculum and Bicultural Practices; 3. Fragmented Support System; and 4. Strengthening Onboarding Through a Structured Support System. The practical output of this study is the Growing and Understanding Induction for Developing Educators (GUIDE) Framework, a structured onboarding framework specifically for first-time Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers in New Zealand. This study gives insights into the onboarding practices and needs of beginning teachers in New Zealand.

KEYWORDS: Beginning Teachers, Onboarding Process, Early Childhood Education, Teacher Support, School Culture, Professional Adjustment, Phenomenological Research, GUIDE Framework.

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

Transitioning from pre-service teacher education to professional practice represents a crucial point of intersection in a beginning teacher's career. At this juncture in a new teacher's career, s/he assumes greater responsibility for teaching while learning to handle the competing, often challenging, demands placed on the teacher by her teaching, by professionalism, by the workplace, and by collegial and official school members. This experience at the forefront of the teaching profession can have a huge impact on, among other aspects, a new teacher's continued professional growth, professional self-confidence, professional wellbeing, and commitment to the teaching profession. Recently gathered global information confirms that professional learning, induction, mentoring, and a stable environment for teachers are critical to both a new teacher's professional expertise and wellbeing (OECD, 2025).

New teachers, in addition to the difficulty of classroom instruction, may face various other problems, such as student discipline, workload, curriculum demands, administrative matters, and relationships in the professional setting. With mentorship and induction programs, new teachers are better able to learn and master the act of teaching through guidance, support, and professional development feedback (Courtney et al., 2023; Keese et al., 2023)—assistance that is especially important in the early stages of their teaching careers.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, there are formal options for induction, mentoring, and professional learning to support the transition into professional practice. According to the Education Review Office (2024), new teachers can be ready to

different degrees when they enter the classroom, and adequate assistance is important in the early career period. Research on early-career teachers and kaiako in New Zealand also underscores the value of mentoring, induction, and professional learning in supporting teachers as they improve their practice and respond to the demands of their professional roles (Watson et al., 2023).

Onboarding can then be seen as more than an initial administrative orientation. It is a continuous process in which new instructors are introduced to their professional obligations, workplace expectations, organizational culture, the relationships they have, and the support available to them. The novice teachers adapt to the real world of professional work and build their self-knowledge as teachers through induction, mentoring, professional learning, and day-to-day workplace communication.

The induction period is likely to bring both motivating and challenging times for the teacher. Learners might also find themselves motivated by mentors and participation in a professional learning community. The learner will experience stress due to overworking, role confusion, and difficulty adapting to the environment.

This transition is vital to understand, as the early years of teaching are a formative stage in teachers' professional lives. Recent study evidence demonstrates that well-designed induction and mentorship programs can positively impact rookie teachers' professional growth and career-related outcomes (Keese et al., 2023). International data also points to the need for ongoing professional learning and supportive professional environments in the development of teacher expertise (OECD, 2025).



Against this background, the present study investigates the onboarding experience of new teachers in New Zealand. I explore their experiences upon entering professional practice, including induction, mentoring, professional development, workplace relationships, support systems, obstacles, and professional adjustment.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

This study seeks to identify and describe the challenges faced by beginning teachers in New Zealand during the onboarding process, including adjusting to school culture, managing classroom responsibilities, and accessing support systems, all of which can affect their professional growth and retention in the teaching profession.

The central question guiding this inquiry is: What are the onboarding experiences of Early Childhood Education beginning teachers in New Zealand?

The following questions further guide the study:

1. How do early childhood beginning teachers in New Zealand describe their onboarding experiences?
2. What are the challenges they encounter during the onboarding process, particularly in adjusting to Te Whāriki and bicultural practices?
3. What kind of support do these teachers receive, and how effective do they seem to be?
4. In what ways can onboarding practices be more effective in supporting beginning ECE teachers in New Zealand?

1.5 Scope and Delimitation of the Study

This study has interviewed and described the lived experiences of beginning ECE teachers during the induction process, as experienced by this particular group of young ECE teachers in New Zealand. This study explored beginning ECE teachers' lived experiences of work transition, teaching responsibilities, professional support, professional learning, and the difficulties encountered during this transition phase.

The participants in this study include about 10-15 beginning ECE teachers in selected ECE centers in Auckland, Wellington, and Christchurch. Locally and internationally trained ECE teachers have been selected as participants to explore their different lived experiences during onboarding.

A phenomenological research design was adopted for this study, and semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' onboarding experiences.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURES AND STUDIES

2.1 Thematic Review of Related Literature

This is an important point for teachers moving into the teaching profession from teacher preparation, transitioning into new positions, a new way of working, new working relationships, and a different kind of organization. Mentoring and induction might guide teachers through transitions by building confidence, supporting their continuing professional development, and shaping how they teach their pupils (Courtney et al. 2023, Keese et al. 2023).

To support kaiako (teachers) and rookie teachers' needs, as new early childhood educators need ongoing flexible support. A study completed in Aotearoa, New Zealand,

identifies that what rookie teachers and mentors find support useful are mentorship, release time, professional development, professional learning communities, and wellbeing support, which are desired by the early career teachers and their mentors, while their induction varied by learning context (Watson et al. 2022). According to the Education Review Office (2024), rookie teachers' professional development, mentorship, structured onboarding, and chances for reflection in their first two years of teaching support their early professional experience.

Because professional development is embedded in the relationships and unique circumstances of early childhood settings, mentorship is especially important for new Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers. Mentorship in Aotearoa New Zealand ECE is a complex, collaborative, and relational procedure that supports teachers' professional growth (McCosh and Clarke, 2025). The formal mentors that new educators connect with enable them to pursue professional development as they navigate relationships, expectations, and barriers within their ECE setting.

Within the New Zealand ECE system of Aotearoa, new teachers will also learn about professional relationships, procedures, curriculum, and culturally responsive teaching. These facets of practice are encountered through regular interactions and duties in early childhood settings, and they aid teachers' professional development and adjustment. Examining how onboarding, induction, mentoring, and workplace assistance influence the early professional experiences of new ECE instructors requires understanding how these new teachers navigate this transition.

2.2 Review of Empirical Studies

Recent empirical studies suggest that being a teacher is a complicated process shaped by professional development, working conditions, professional relationships, and the formation of teacher identity. Strom and Martin (2022) explored beginning teacher development through a multi-case study of beginning teachers. They found that beginning teacher development is a complex and relational process in which teachers translate pre-professional learning into practice, negotiate classroom relationships, and construct their teacher subjectivity. This leads us to conclude that the move from teacher training to professional practice is not merely a technical transfer but also a process of developing professional identity and agency.

Similar to Admiraal et al. (2023), I would assume that, rather than work readiness or in-service professional training for new instructors, there would be connections between work conditions and discomfort levels. TALIS 2018 was analyzed, with data from 77,376 teachers across 24 European countries. Admiraal et al. (2023) found a distinct link between discomfort and both the Management of problem student behavior and teacher workload stress. These scholars, along with those who write about pre-service and in-service professional development, endorse the idea that, regardless of the school setting, work context, and support networks are crucial for new career teachers. Knowledge obtained from a global perspective of starting teachers and the transition is valuable, even though



my project will focus on schools in New Zealand rather than the ECE environment.

Watson et al. (2022) researched early-career teachers' and kaiako perspectives of mentorship, induction, and professional learning in New Zealand. They found that induction experiences differ across educational environments and that novice instructors benefit from mentoring, time away from the classroom, professional development, and professional networks. These results demonstrate the significance of organizational and social support in early-career teachers' adaptation to their professional duties.

Specifically in early childhood education, McCosh and Clarke (2025) investigated mentoring in early childhood education organizations in Aotearoa, New Zealand. They found that mentoring is a relational and individualized process that contributes to teachers' professional development. Also, the results reflected issues concerning time Management, resources, professional development, and support provided by the organizations for the mentor, and are very pertinent to the present study, as a mentor plays a role in a new ECE teacher's initial adjustment.

Cultural adjustment is another crucial issue for new ECE teachers in New Zealand. Burke (2024) noted that the pedagogical approaches and connections with tamariki, colleagues, and whānau were influenced by the migrant novice ECE teachers' cultural conceptions of children. As a result, new teachers may have to navigate differences between their prior schooling and the sociocultural and bicultural standards of early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Internationally, Courtney et al. (2023) highlighted persistent induction, mentoring, mentor preparation, and organizational support as essential features of effective induction in their comprehensive review of teacher induction studies. Their findings support the notion that onboarding should not be limited to initial orientation but should include ongoing professional and relationship support for beginning instructors.

When considered collectively, these studies indicate that professional identity construction, workplace expectations, mentoring, professional learning, cultural adjustment, and organizational support are all interconnected facets of the move to teaching. However, rather than taking into account the unique experiences of new ECE teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand, much of the currently available literature treats these factors either in isolation or in relation to generic school environments. As a result, it's important to understand how new ECE instructors feel and to make sense of their onboarding experience as they adjust to professional responsibilities, workplace relationships, cultural norms, and the early childhood environment in New Zealand.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

This study employed phenomenology (Creswell, 2018) to interpret the lived experiences of new ECE teachers during onboarding, including their capacity to adjust to the work culture and teaching role, and the assistance they received throughout the transition. Both Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984) describes a process of practice, reflection, and action by which teachers learn through experience, and Vygotsky's Socio-cultural theory (1978) explains how mentors,

colleagues, leadership, whānau, and New Zealand culture shape the teachers' professional learning experience and competence in the profession. Using these theories, it is possible to represent and describe the learning experience of a beginning ECE teacher.

2.4 Research Gap and Justification

The influence of professional development, working conditions, professional support, mentoring, and the teacher's Preparedness on the first few years of teaching is a common theme in the literature. These themes, although widely explored individually, are less discussed in relation to how new ECE teachers understand them in relation to each other during the early years of entry into the profession. In a study of early childhood education in Aotearoa, New Zealand, McCosh and Clarke (2025) explored mentorship.

While Watson et al. (2022) carried out a study in early-career teachers and kaiako experiences of mentoring, induction, and professional learning in New Zealand, finding that support systems and workplace context within mentoring relationships were critical in early-career teachers' understandings of mentorship and induction, it does not necessarily encompass what new ECE teachers understand about entering this field of work.

Workload, Preparedness, and the professional support and wellbeing of novice teachers, among other things, are critical to initial work experiences, according to studies on novice teachers (Admiraal et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the bicultural yet highly and most recently superdiverse nature of the Aotearoa New Zealand context is missing. Newly qualified ECE teachers would need to develop teaching skills through Maori perspectives, Te Tiriti o Waitangi, culturally responsive pedagogies, and an understanding of the diversity of communities, argue Chan & Ritchie (2023). Onboarding then extends beyond organizational orientation and includes professional, relational, cultural, and pedagogical adaptation. Yet, there has been scant study exploring starting ECE teachers' understanding of these aspects as related elements of their transition into the profession.

So, the core research gap is the lack of in-depth, experience-based understanding of the complete onboarding journey of beginning ECE instructors in Aotearoa New Zealand and how they experience, interpret, and manage it. To fill this gap, the study uses a descriptive phenomenological design that focuses on teachers' first-hand experiences of teaching responsibilities, workplace relationships, mentoring and induction, organizational support, professional development, and bicultural and culturally responsive expectations.

The research could generate experiential support for developing more contextually relevant induction and mentoring practices, support for organization-level stakeholders, professional growth, and the personal wellbeing of novice ECE teachers, and support Target 4.2 of the fourth goal of the Sustainable Development Goals, which concerns access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education. In examining the experiences and needs of beginning ECE teachers, the study can implicitly support workforce development towards quality early childhood education.



III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

In this study, a qualitative descriptive phenomenological approach was employed to gain a full understanding of new ECE teachers' lived experiences of onboarding in New Zealand. Firstly, semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit participants' views and understanding of the new ECE teachers' lived experiences, perceived problems, supports, and transformation. Themes, patterns, and meanings were explored in the interview data, with attention to ethical guidelines on informed consent, confidentiality, and privacy (Bonyadi, 2023).

The technique captures the experiences of beginner Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers as they begin professional practice, including aspects of teaching, workplace relationships, mentoring, organizational support, and professional development in the bicultural environment of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Selection of Participants / Co-participants

The study involved seven beginning ECE teachers employed at selected ECE centers in Auckland, Wellington, and Christchurch, New Zealand, with between 0 and 24 months of teaching experience. The participants were selected through purposive sampling because they had direct experience with the onboarding phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants had to be working in ECE settings at the time of the study, volunteer to participate, and be able to provide rich accounts of their experiences to be considered to be eligible for the study. The sample excluded teachers with more than two years of experience, teachers working outside of ECE, and non-teaching employment. The sample size was appropriate for producing detailed, descriptive narratives of the events necessary for the descriptive phenomenological study (Bonyadi, 2023). An ethical approach was implemented: informed consent was obtained, and measures were in place to ensure confidentiality, voluntary participation, and safety.

Research Locale

The study was conducted at three selected early childhood education schools in New Zealand. Auckland, Wellington, and Christchurch. The centers were selected based on their perceived representativeness of different types of ECE centers and, consequently, of the different organizational, professional, and cultural contexts that influenced teacher onboarding. The New Zealand setting was also appropriate for the research because teacher mentoring, professional development, culturally responsive and bicultural practice are significant underpinnings of beginning ECE teachers' onboarding experiences, and the selected centers varied in their organizational cultures, resources, and support systems.

Data Generation Methods

Semi-structured interviews, guided by the major and sub-study questions, were used to gather data. Participants' concerns about onboarding, support and mentoring, cultural adaptation and bicultural practices, professional development, and retention were all covered in the interview guide. All experiences and surprising observations were covered because

the semi-structured style allowed for follow-up and probing questioning.

Face-to-face or secure internet communication was used for each interview, which lasted between thirty and sixty minutes. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, that it was voluntary and confidential, and that they might withdraw before giving their informed consent for the interviews, depending on their availability and choice. The following data collection and analysis were guided by emergent insights, and the interviews were responsive.

Role of the Researcher and Reflexivity

This phenomenological study employed interviews to gather data. During data collection, the researcher used bracketing and reflexivity to separate their perspectives from those of the interviewees and reduce bias related to prior and current experience. After data collection, the researcher analyzed participants' narratives to discern themes from their onboarding experiences.

The researcher kept a reflexive diary to record what they believed was a true representation of knowledge and practices used throughout data collection. The interviewee also employed self-monitoring. The researcher thought it was important that the story told during the session remained with the participant throughout. The researcher's self-monitoring during the interview enabled him to be aware of whose story he was telling. It also clearly reflected how he wanted the interviewee to learn about himself. Confidentiality and voluntary consent were followed during the interview. Appropriate treatment, equality, and anonymity represented the ethical guidelines.

Data Transcription and Management

All interviews were recorded (with consent) and transcribed verbatim. The transcription was checked and corrected by the researcher, with all personal details deleted and assigned a pseudonym or code. The transcripts were methodically arranged for analysis.

Digital research data were stored in password-protected, encrypted storage, accessible only to the researcher. Back-ups of the data were kept secure to prevent data loss. All information was kept confidential and used for research purposes only in compliance with applicable data protection and ethical research standards.

Data Analysis Procedures

The interview data were evaluated by theme analysis following the framework of Braun and Clarke (2021). This enabled the systematic identification and analysis of patterns and themes in participants' lived experiences of onboarding.

The research proceeded through six stages: 1) become familiar with your data, 2) generate preliminary codes, 3) search for themes, 4) refine the themes, 5) name and define the themes, 6) write up the report. The researcher read and reread the transcript, assigned codes to utterances of interest, collapsed themes, and refined themes to be representative of the participants' construction of the responsibilities and mentorship of the role, workplace support and structure, professional and learning experiences, cultural adaptation, and adjustment, and reflexivity notes were taken throughout the process to facilitate transparency and rigor.



Trustworthiness and Rigor

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IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Unstructured Onboarding to Gradual Professional Adjustment

The teachers described the first onboarding process as chaotic and intimidating, with no clear guidelines on the curriculum, classroom procedures, paperwork, or their responsibilities. One participant said, *"I had to figure things out on my own."* while another stated, *"At first, I was unsure of what I was expected to do."* These increased the difficulty and the emotional toll of the learning curve for all nurses in the beginning stages of their practice. They developed ability and confidence as their learning continued through practice and self-teaching. As one participant stated, *"As time went by, I became more confident because I learned through experience."*

The outcome makes it evident that induction is a process rather than an event. It appears to be an ongoing adjustment to professional life. Phan and Pham (2022) stressed that entry-level teachers may face difficulties upon entering the profession and that induction and mentoring can promote development and support teachers in adjustment, self-efficacy, and personal and professional growth, including professional socialization. Likewise, McCosh and Clarke (2025) agreed on the significance of mentoring and organizational support in promoting professionalism among early childhood teachers in New Zealand.

Theme 2: From Unfamiliarity to Adaptation on Curriculum and Bicultural Practices

Initially, participants found it difficult to grasp and use Te Whāriki and bicultural practices. Participant 3 said it *"took time to translate the principles into daily practice,"* while Participant 5 said she *"had difficulty with the unstructured, play-based nature"* of New Zealand ECE. Participant 4 stated that the *"curriculum felt broad and open-ended"* and that she learned through *"trial and error."* A related difficulty was bicultural practice. Participant 1 found it *"challenging and intimidating."* Participant 3 said he was *"underprepared."* The participants eventually built confidence in the face of these problems through practice and assistance. *"I'm more comfortable with using simple te reo Māori words, songs and greetings,"* said Participant 7. These experiences suggest that beginning ECE teachers' adaptation was a gradual process of

comprehending Te Whāriki, acquiring bicultural competency, and using both in everyday practice.

This finding is reinforced by Cameron et al. (2023), who evaluated teachers' comprehension and application of Te Whāriki, and Williams et al. (2023), who highlighted problems in building bicultural ECE practice. Burke (2024) also illustrates how beginning migrant ECE teachers in New Zealand slowly adjust their cultural understandings and teaching techniques.

Theme 3: Fragmented Support System

Participants reported that onboarding help was inconsistent, casual, and insufficiently structured. Participant 1 said, *"I didn't have regular contact with a mentor"* and Participant 7 said, *"there was no formal mentoring or structured buddy system."* Workshops were seen as limiting as well as Participant 1 said that they were *"too general and not tailored to the needs of new or internationally trained teachers"*. Participant 5 also commented, *"Peer support helped when available but there were times when I felt alone."* A few participants received support from their supervisors and colleagues. Not all participants had this support available or in a timely enough manner to fully utilize it. This experience reflects how assistance was available yet inconsistent, typically offered spontaneously rather than through a structured orientation.

This conclusion is similar to Watson et al. (2022), who found that induction methods differed between New Zealand centers and that access to mentorship and support varied. Moreover, McCosh and Clarke (2025) noted that effective mentoring relies on a sound organizational foundation in ECE settings in New Zealand. Participants' comments reveal the need for a consistent, organized, and responsive induction process for newly beginning ECE teachers.

Theme 4: Strengthening Onboarding Through Structured Support System

The participants explicitly stated that they would like more formal, defined support and guidance through the onboarding process. For instance, the following statement from participant 3 shows this desire: *"Something more formal like formal mentoring, check ins or more clear guidance would have made the onboarding process smoother and more supportive."* A similar point was raised by participant 7: *"more organized support during onboarding would have made the transition smoother and less stressful."* Participants also identified helpful practices when available. Participant 2 said, *"My colleagues were kind and always ready to answer my questions. I was given time to watch and learn before taking on full responsibilities,"* which helped her feel *"more confident and adapt into my new role."* Participant 5, however, indicated that they required *"more structured and tailored guidance as an internationally trained teacher."* The findings show that beginning teachers benefit from sustained mentoring, frequent feedback, opportunities to observe, and professional learning that targets their specific requirements.

Common aspects of effective teacher induction (Courtney et al., 2023) included prolonged and structured mentor support. Similar gains in teacher efficacy and retention due to structured induction and mentoring were reported in



Keese et al. 's 2023 study. Regarding mentoring, observation, reflection, and professional learning in New Zealand contexts, the Education Review Office noted that these resources were perceived as beneficial for teachers just entering the profession (Education Review Office, 2024). Participants' reports indicate that entry induction processes for beginning ECE teachers need to be organized and ongoing, with a student-centered focus.

V. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of Findings

New ECE teachers in NZ have often had unsystematized and stressful onboarding. They first experienced insecurity and a lack of supervision, then found their feet and grew in confidence, independence, and strength. They often felt challenged in learning Te Whāriki as a "flexi, play-based" approach. They also struggled to gain knowledge and confidence regarding bicultural practice, particularly te reo Māori. Support systems were often characterized as uneven, informal, and fragmented, and mentoring, professional development, and workplace guidance did not necessarily align with participants' current requirements. The areas where participants desired more professional learning included structured mentoring; more curricular and bicultural professional learning; practical support, managing workload and wellness; and specific support for overseas-trained teachers. The overall results from the study suggested that beginning teachers' onboarding in ECE settings in Aotearoa NZ was complex, involving social, cultural, personal, and pedagogical adjustments, and that the need for systematic, sensitive, and culturally responsive support for onboarding was more clearly recognized.

Conclusions

The findings point to a largely unstructured induction and a lack of adequate understanding of Te Whāriki and biculturalism, alongside poor and disjointed support that most newly graduated ECE teachers would experience when commencing a teaching position in New Zealand. As such, there are clear requirements for induction that are holistic, sequential, and culturally grounded and responsive. Therefore, the Growing and Understanding Induction for Developing Educators (GUIDE) Framework was developed to provide a practical yet empirically grounded framework for supporting new teachers' transition into the profession, cultural Awareness, teaching confidence, and pedagogical understanding. Our findings also indicate the need for ECE centers to improve structured mentoring, curriculum and bicultural support, reflective practice, and wellbeing initiatives; for policy makers to establish clearer ECE-specific onboarding standards, sufficient resources, and equitable support; and for future researchers to investigate the long-term effects of onboarding on teacher retention, professional identity, teaching effectiveness, bicultural competence and experiences of locally and internationally trained teachers.

Recommendations

Future studies can increase the sample size and include novice ECE teachers from other geographic locations and types of ECE facilities to provide a broader, more diverse perspective

on onboarding experiences. Longitudinal studies can delve deeper into the effects of onboarding events on teachers' professional identity, teaching competence, wellbeing, and retention in their first two to three years of practice. Future studies might investigate the effectiveness of structured onboarding initiatives, notably mentoring, bicultural training, and Te Whāriki-focused support, using mixed-methods or other appropriate research designs. Studies may also examine beginning teachers' development of bicultural competency, particularly in incorporating te reo Māori and Māori viewpoints into everyday ECE practice. Work examining differences between intern-teachers trained abroad and those trained in New Zealand will tell us more about what is being supported regarding onboarding and cultural adaptation. In brief, additional work with mentors, ECE directors, and government officials will help create more context-specific, comprehensive, sustainable, and developmentally appropriate onboarding experiences for beginning ECE teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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