

(New) Critical Readings of Aotearoa New Zealand Early Childhood Policy and Practice

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The globally nomadic Reconceptualising Early Childhood Education (RECE) Conference affords scholars from around the globe regular opportunities to come together in diverse geographical locations and cultural contexts with an overall common purpose to “challenge and dismantle traditional assumptions about childhood and theory and/or feature new directions in research, policy and practice in early childhood education and care (ECEC)” (RECE 2014, 2015, 2016 Call for Proposals, p.1). Conferencing in a diversity of global settings also provides the local researchers, practitioners, and critically minded early childhood education community members access to presentations, provocations, and an expanding reconceptualist conversation and community that may otherwise be limited or completely unattainable on this international scale.

Each conference location brings that community’s unique cultural and sociopolitical emphasis to the yearly conference’s theme. The title of the 2016 RECE conference in Taupo, Aotearoa New Zealand was, “He kōrero, he kaupapa, he whāriki – Kia tipu whakariotrito: Re-weaving theories and practices to re(construct) critical questions, new imaginings and social activism.” It aimed to focus attendees minds on intersections between thinking and theory, collective activism, and reconceptualist practices in work with children, families, and communities. This theme was particularly relevant to the Aotearoa New Zealand context at that time as the country’s early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), was celebrating its twentieth anniversary while also undergoing the first revision in its history. In recognition of this momentous event, the 2016 RECE conference invited the original writers of the curriculum to share with the international early childhood community the curriculum’s origins, embedded in extensive community collaboration and strongly influenced by collective activism, Māori cultural and theoretical foundations, and reconceptualisations of early childhood curriculum (Te One, 2013). Meanwhile, the local national early childhood community was facing great uncertainty over the impending revised curriculum the shape of which was in the hands of a small group of early childhood professionals and a limited number of “user hubs” (Kaye, 2017, p. 6). Questions, concerns, and uncertainties about how much of *Te Whāriki*’s sociocultural and critical theoretical underpinnings would survive the revision were posed. There were also further questions raised about whether and how the curriculum would maintain or strengthen its bicultural underpinnings, serve to support obligations and commitment to *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*, and address the place of ECE in the lives of children and families in a rapidly increasing multicultural society. The significance of the moment was frequently discussed within RECE 2016 sessions and amongst conference attendees, including during community kindergarten visits.

One particular group of conference attendees, a small group of post-graduate students from throughout the country, became greatly enthusiastic by the coming together of local/national and international concerns. They also found amongst themselves an emerging community of critically reconceptualist-minded early career scholars. The student group was particularly excited and motivated to share their work beyond the conference presentations each had made. Especially since recognising how, within the international research community, there was so much interest and discussion amongst the conference delegates about Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood research, history, policies, and practice. The keen interest and feedback the students had already received on their work during their presentations provided sufficient encouragement for them to approach us about creating a special journal issue that might build from the conference and highlight some of the post-graduate research emerging from Aotearoa New Zealand at that time. Four of the collection of postgraduate projects presented at RECE 2016 have found their way to this collection.

Our contributors' studies were taking shape in the midst of a nine-year period (2008-2017) of conservative, financially austere, and restrained domestic education policy. Initiatives targeting so-called "priority learner groups" rather than universal system supports have been the recent norm. Coupled with this context, education in general within Aotearoa New Zealand has been operating for a long while with strong neoliberal underpinnings (Gunn & Gasson, 2017) and principles of competition, market provision, private venture capitalism, and user-pays have flourished. To some degree these students and their advisors designed studies that speak back to that context, urging policy and practice development beyond this recent compromising and inequity laden period. A period which, as reported by Smith (2009), included for early childhood education, loss of teacher qualification targets, reduced adult-child ratios, a narrowing of professional development support for curriculum implementation, and the cessation of a major research initiative within the sector. As a nation we are currently re-establishing policy and practice settings, with a current wholesale review of many aspects of the education system underway (Minister of Education, n.d.).

A child wellbeing strategy has been central to the current policy development work and alignment of government approaches across health, welfare, and education are seen as key to improving children's experiences and lives (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2018). During 2018 the Education Minister ran two flagship consultations with the New Zealand public to establish an orientation for system-wide development and reform. From and concurrent with the so-called Education Conversation (<https://conversation.education.govt.nz>) the Minister has sought to articulate a vision for New Zealand education, establishing several major reviews, key initiatives, and medium-term strategies. In early childhood education a new 10-year strategic plan has been proposed (Minister of Education, 2018). In recognising the need to re-set policy priorities for early learning provision in ways that improve equity, raises quality, and supports parents' choice-making while not being undermined by competition, the plan was released for public consultation (November 2018). It aims to set a pathway for policy and practice development for the decade to come. The proposed plan upholds the well-being of children, teachers, families and ultimately the nation at its core providing a means of helping early childhood education to move practically, conceptually, and materially towards a more nuanced, connected, and sustainable system for all.

Harnessing these moments, the four papers in this collection bring new theoretical and research tools to problems in inequity, social justice, inclusion, and well-being to early childhood education policy and practice in Aotearoa New Zealand. Seeking to disrupt the logics of neoliberal thought, competition, market driven standardization, these emerging scholars' questions raise issues about policy relevance and the discursive potentialities of critical responses to universalizing policy mandates. The studies reported in this special section of the *International Critical Childhood Policy Studies Journal* urge us to heighten our pursuit of the development of ethical, reflexive, and culturally relevant early childhood education beyond the inequities of the recent policy priorities. Critiques of human capital theory, neoliberalism, and structuralism are achieved through the analyses and inquiry. In addition, the under-served questions of emotionality and identity work of early childhood teachers are re-theorized by these scholars, which by way of introduction are mentioned below.

Suzanne Manning's paper comprises a close comparative policy analysis of a major government early childhood education taskforce report and set of associated publicity videos with a New Zealand Playcentre Federation video designed to introduce new parents to the organisation, both from 2011. Manning's analysis illustrates how policy outcomes are contingent with policy framings – recognising that the way in which one constructs a problem in the first place will presuppose certain forms of response. Suzanne argues that the government's construction of early childhood education as principally a labour market supporting commodity undermined multiple alternative constructions and valued purposes of early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand. The study demonstrates the active marginalization of forms of early childhood education may be brought about through policy and how the strength and diversity of the early childhood education sector's well-being is compromised as a result.

A different kind of concern for wellbeing is addressed in Alison Warren's study of early childhood teachers' emotions and professional practices. Putting theoretical tools from Deleuzoguattarian philosophy to work on a conversation about teaching amongst early childhood teachers, Alison introduces readers to different ways thinking, feeling, and being in relation within the field. "How do emotions work in teaching? What opportunities exist for early childhood teaching to become different?". These are central questions posed in Alison's work as she foregrounds relationships in assemblage and shows how emotions may play significantly into early childhood professionalism in exciting and innovative ways.

Vicki Hargraves' paper decenters neoliberal moves to standardize language and interactions between and amongst adults, children, and the environment as she imagines language beyond predetermined significations and representations. Utilizing a conceptualization of language from Deleuze and Guattari that perceives language as performative rather than a "neutral representational device," Vicki "plays" with the language and concepts in the interactions between a child, adults, the child's drawing, and a dead bee. In re-performing the language amongst connections in this manner, Vicki disrupts the logic of how and why children speak, reconceptualizing how early childhood interactions and relationships can be explored through creative capacities rather than through the (re)production of adult-determined knowledge, facts and standardized patterns of interactions that perpetuate the status quo. Such re-

performances open avenues to perceiving teachers' and children's interactions, lives, and wellbeing differently in order create spaces to imagine alternative possibilities and priorities.

Further disrupting neoliberal discourses, this time of individualism and early childhood education for the perpetuation of the market economies, is the focus of Andrea Delaune's article. Andrea begins her paper with a description of the neoliberal individual as a rational, autonomous individual who is constructed by participation in the market economy, desiring both the acquisition of material goods (things) and the desire to be able to procure the means by which to acquire these goods (income to buy things). Neoliberal discourses see the pathway to participation in this market economy and the fulfilling of material desires as a competitive and entrepreneurial education system that is regulated through accountability measures focused on costs and benefits. Drawing from the theoretical perspectives of Simone Weil, Andrea challenges these neoliberal discourses and asserts that it is our attention to the "Other," the opening of ourselves to the needs and wellness of the Other, that will ultimately result in our own and children's personal growth and wellbeing.

We are excited to share this body of work from these post-graduate students from Aotearoa New Zealand.

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