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What's in a philosophy statement? A critical discourse analysis of early childhood centre philosophy statements in Aotearoa/New Zealand

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Early childhood centres use philosophy statements to share the underpinning values and beliefs that frame their programmes. It could also be argued that, in an increasingly privatised and corporatised sector, philosophy statements are also used to market early childhood services to potential and existing users of the service. This research project used critical discourse analysis to examine the philosophy statements of 50 early childhood centres across Aotearoa New Zealand, arguing that a collective analysis of these statements would reveal which discourses operating in the sector are privileged and those which are marginalised. This research project sought to understand how dominant discourses in the sector reflect or resist current prevailing (and, at times, contradictory) ideologies in the broader early childhood political landscape – both nationally and globally. The research revealed that Western notions of play and play-based pedagogies were strong discourses across the philosophy statements examined. Also, neo-liberal and neo-colonial discourses pertaining to the child as an individual consumer of education, a capable, confident and flexible future worker, were also prevalent. Two discourses directly related to equity and social justice goals for the sector were less prevalent – these were discourses about inclusion and notions of indigenous rights and bicultural practices. This finding presents a challenge to the sector in which centres must find ways to re-engage with the inclusive, bicultural and locally relevant foundations of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996).

Introduction

The aim of this small research project was to seek the political in the philosophy statements of early childhood centres in Aotearoa New Zealand. This research comes at a time when multiple and even contradictory ideologies are operating in the sector (Tesar, 2015). Farquar and Gibbons (2010) point out that childcare has become a complex site of politics. The rise of neo-liberal policy that leaves the provision of early childhood to the marketplace and privileges parental choice has occurred alongside other early childhood education (ECE) policies that champion equity and social inclusion. This project seeks to examine how these competing ideologies have shaped (or are contested by) the ECE sector by undertaking a collective analysis of philosophy statements from a variety of centre types across Aotearoa New Zealand. Since philosophy statements outline the values and beliefs of teaching and learning that guide centre practice, examined collectively, they can also provide a snapshot of what is stated to be fundamental and valuable to the sector. They might also uncover what is silenced and/or marginalised. Centre philosophy statements allow a glimpse of how discourses operating at global, national and local levels struggle for domination and, therefore, which discourses the sector privileges.

Gibbons (2010, p. 138) explains that a philosophy of education (such as that expressed in a centre philosophy statement) draws together the "ideals, values, practices and beliefs, into a statement of what we think about education." The purpose of centre philosophy statements is to point the reader to the explicit and underlying values and beliefs that guide the practices at that centre. Peters (2009) suggests a



philosophy of teaching statement is a narrative of teaching and learning that includes a conception of teaching and learning. The philosophy statement describes and justifies the way teaching happens in a particular context, and communicates the goals and purpose of teaching practices.

Political landscape

In ECE, a number of competing ideologies are present. The global rise of neo-liberal reform has had a significant impact on ECE policy since the 1980s, and sits in contradiction to other important early childhood policy developments, such as the development of *Te Whāriki – He whāriki matauranga a nga mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 1996). Early childhood policy initiatives intersect with other state agendas. These include a focus on increasing the participation of women in the workforce, targeting 'at-risk' children and families, and preparing children for school, and for their future roles as participants in the global economy (Ball & Vincent, 2005; Mitchell, 2005, Farquar & Gibbons, 2010). The neo-liberal tenets of capitalism, free markets, choice, competition, individual freedom and the emphasis on economically productive citizens, alongside generous government subsidies in the sector have resulted in a rapid expansion of the sector. In particular, the rise of for-profit providers and the entrance of corporate providers that have 'reshaped the political landscape of early childhood politics' (May, 2009, p. 276).

Adding to this political landscape are other voices that offer alternative realities and points of resistance. May (2002) points out that many early childhood movements in this country have grown out of desire for social and political change. In particular, *Te Whāriki*, which offers a bicultural and non-prescriptive curriculum framework that "invites teachers to weave themselves, all children, their cultures and settings into the curriculum, and it urges dialogue and reflection" (Tesar, 2015, p. 106). Therefore, *Te Whāriki* offers teachers, centres and communities a point of resistance to the neo-liberal discourses that have become increasingly dominant in ECE in Aotearoa (Tesar, 2015). These national discourses themselves reflect, are shaped by and resist global discourses about children's learning and development, their economic worth, and their potential contributions to their country's wellbeing. At each level, there is contestation about the values and purpose of ECE that is shaped by particular competing ideologies. How, then, do these competing discourses make their way into the philosophy statements that make explicit the values and beliefs of individual centres?

Critical discourse analysis

In this research project, we used critical discourse analysis [CDA] to examine the philosophy statements of 50 early childhood centres that were freely available on centre websites. These were randomly chosen and split evenly between the North and South Islands. The centres selected covered a range of types of centres, including kindergartens, community-based day care centres, small privately owned centres, and centres belonging to corporate providers. Not all the websites accessed included philosophy statements, however, most did. Therefore, we can assume that having a philosophy statement is seen as useful for centres in allowing them to share something about themselves as a provider of early childhood care and education to both the existing and potential members of their centre community. Most philosophy statements examined for this project were succinct (less than a page long). Some were as short as a few sentences. Some philosophy statements included graphics that helped to express the intent or meaning of their words. For example, one kindergarten used the concept of river stones inside which a key underpinning statement was placed.

In this research, we argue that philosophy statements reflect the favoured discourses of the sector. These shared ideas and language of the sector are not neutral, but are socially and historically located. Gee (2005, p. 7) explains that "A discourse is a representation of a particular conceptualisation of reality, shaped by historical, ideological, cultural and socially constructed ways of making sense communicated



through language and other signs, symbols, and practices". Therefore, any examination of discourses needs to account for "both the social processes and structures, which give rise to the production of a text, and of the social structures and processes within which individuals or groups as social-historical subjects, create meanings in their interaction with texts" (Wodak, 2001, p. 12). In the case of this research, centre philosophies are created at a local level by teachers or teams who are operating in a wider social and political sphere.

Our values and beliefs have provided a lens through which this analysis has occurred. We acknowledge that our analysis of centre philosophy statements has not been neutral. Rather, we have taken the explicit position that early childhood teachers (and the organisations they work in) should seek to understand and resist inequity in society. We believe that early childhood teachers should be interested in how their practices, the embedded practices of the sector and the contexts in which those practices exist contribute to, or transform inequity. This aligns with Codd's (2005, p. 15) perspective that teachers should "embody within their practices the values of democratic citizenship" and acknowledges that government policy (social and educational) can create a smoke screen that draws teachers away from this purpose.

In line with our commitment to social justice, we chose CDA as a method for considering the centre philosophy statements. CDA is the systematic analysis and interpretation of discourse in order to explore how those discourses have arisen out of but are also shaped by struggles of power (Fairclough, 2003). CDA aims to investigate and reveal social inequity as it is expressed, legitimised and even contested by language. In the case of this research, the discourses we refer to are in text form. They are the stated values and beliefs about early childhood education made explicit by centres through their publically shared philosophy statements. In its simplest sense, a discourse can be understood as a "...shared language for talking about a topic, shared concepts for understanding it, and shared methods for understanding it" (MacNaughton, 2005, p. 20). Discourses are powerful in that they "make assumptions and values invisible, turn subjective perspectives and understandings into apparently objective truths and determine that some things are self-evident and realistic while others are dubious and impractical" (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 17). Therefore, discourses do not just reflect the reality they describe; they work to create them as normal ways of thinking about things (Bird, 2003). CDA seeks to uncover and disrupt these taken-for-granted discourses by asking how they have come to be, what/who they privilege, and what/who they exclude.

This leads to another important aspect of CDA that is particularly relevant to this research. This is because discourse is about the contestation of power, and is socially (and politically) constituted, and critical discourse analysis of centre philosophies includes the way in which competing ideologies within a text struggle for domination. Teacher's personal values and beliefs must be negotiated with the team of people contributing to the philosophy, but will also include the dominant discourses of the sector that are, themselves, at times competing. They must make decisions about what to include, and what is important. These inclusions (and exclusions) reflect dominant discourses, even if this is a largely an unconscious act on behalf of the writers.

Discussion on findings

This research identified several tensions concerning the purpose and place of philosophy statements for early childhood centres. Dahlberg and Moss (2005) mention the significance of philosophy in education that problematises taken for granted truths and the complexity of issues in education. Using this perspective, we might expect that, during the construction of a philosophy of education, a centre dialogue occurs about education theory, the purposes and methods of education, and the particular normative positions that are being expressed, in other words, discussion and questioning about teaching theories and practices and the relevance of these to the context of the centre. The processes for how centre philosophy statements were arrived at were not usually revealed on centre websites. It was not possible to know, in this small project, who was involved and what discussions took place.



The contexts in which philosophy statements were produced also caused us to question the purpose of philosophy statements, particularly where centres were part of a group of centres with shared ownership. For example, individual centres might have had unique philosophy statements but shared policies and procedures that were uniform across sites and communities. In these cases, we questioned the purpose, place and power of philosophy statements to lead practices. In addition, it could be argued that philosophy statements are also used by centres to position themselves in the marketplace because they allow centres to express to potential users of their service what kind of service they are and what their commitments to care and education are. Given this potential purpose, constructing philosophy statements involves the navigation of pedagogy, philosophy, education, as well as systematically sustaining the services' economic viability, including ever-increasing profit margins. Philosophy statements might be seen to be risky to future business if they challenge the current popular discourses around the care and education of young children.

Several discourses emerged across the 50 philosophy statements examined for this research. These both exemplified and resisted current dominant neo-liberal ideologies dominating the current political landscape in ECE. We have chosen four of these to explore for the purpose of this article. The first two were dominant discourses – spoken in the majority of philosophy statements analysed. These were discourses about child-centred pedagogies and play, and discourses about competent and capable learners. The other two discourses discussed here are chosen because, despite the fact that policy supports their messages about equity and social justice, they were not strongly expressed across the statements. Although some ECE services showed resistance to neo-liberal and neo-colonial ideologies concerning children, teaching and learning, the significant lack of inclusion and biculturalism indicates marginalised discourses.

Child-centred and play-based pedagogies

Play as the main vehicle for learning was a dominant discourse across the philosophy statements, reflecting an entrenched and privileged discourse in the sector (Thomas, Warren & Deveries, 2011). Learning and teaching were mostly positioned within a framework that privileged the child's experiences and interests as the central focus from which a negotiated curriculum unfolded. Seventy percent of the philosophies analysed referenced play and child-centred pedagogies. Statements such as, "We believe in fostering an enjoyment of learning, through active exploration, child-initiated play and experiences and interactions with others," and, "We believe that children establish the foundational skills for learning through play," and, "We believe that play is the best tool for learning," were typical. Play was usually further defined as child-led or child-initiated. Following children's interests, supporting children to explore, discover, make their own choices and be independent were all common ideas. For example: "Our teaching programme is based upon extending each individual child's interests."

It is unsurprising that play and child-centered approaches to learning have such a strong voice in the statements. Aotearoa New Zealand's early childhood services are still influenced by theorists such as Rousseau and Froebel, who construct the idea of a 'natural child' and play as a natural vehicle for learning. In addition, theories such as Piaget's stages of development, which positions children's development as unfolding through play, and Vygotsky's socio-cultural development theory, which emphasises the importance of children learning through play alongside a skilled guide, continue to influence the sector. All of these (as well as Māori philosophical and pedagogical ideas) contribute to the foundations of *Te Whāriki*, which outlines the importance of teachers and children weaving their own curricula that are personally, locally, and culturally meaningful. Therefore, child-centred and play-based pedagogies have deep roots in the Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood experience.

The idea that play continues to be a privileged discourse in the sector possibly stands in resistance to concerns about a creeping schoolification of ECE (Alcock, 2013; Stover, 2013). For example, Alcock



(2013) worries that the future of ECE in Aotearoa New Zealand is playless, noting that the Ministry of Education's website makes almost no reference to play (but plenty to education, learning and development). Moreover, Alcock (2013) expresses concern that the introduction of National Standards to the school sector will have a downward push, meaning preparation for school becomes a central concern for early childhood centres. Increasingly, the neo-liberal child is positioned in their ability to contribute to future national and global economies – the neo-liberal child is individualist, consumerist and competitive (Farquhar, 2012). It might be that continuing to position play as an organising principle in early childhood services provides a kind of protective shield in which children and their learning is able to be collaborative, collective, shared and locally meaningful.

However, it is worth questioning further how we understand play, whose experiences are privileged through the notion of play, and who might be silenced or marginalized by this dominant discourse. Several authors seek to trouble the discourse of play in ECE. Canella and Viruru (2004) argue that play represents the biases and values of the West and that "the acceptance of play as a universal construct applicable to all creates a corporate structure of normalisation, and consequently, labels for those considered abnormal because they can not or choose not to play" (p. 108). Chan (2011) points out that not all families in New Zealand, and, in particular, some immigrant families, value play as the primary vehicle for learning in the same way. Therefore, the discourse of play can serve to isolate and disconnect families from further involvement in the ECE environment. Understanding that play is a discourse that privileges those who understand and value play in services also invites teachers to hear other ways of understanding children's learning that might be more inclusive of different world views.

The child as a capable and competent individual

Out of the 50 centre philosophy statements analysed, 78% percent identified each of the following terms; the child as 'capable', 'competent' and 'individual'. These concepts have become increasingly embedded in the lexicon of early childhood education discourse within Aotearoa New Zealand. We also see these concepts recorded throughout curriculum documents, such as *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), *Kei Tua o te Pae/Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars* (Ministry of Education, 2004), and further Education Review publications targeting notions of quality practice (Education Review Office, 2015). Such documents attempt to provide early childhood teachers with an ideology for pedagogy, ethics in teacher relations and sociological constructs of childhood. The following statements, although varied, primarily expressed an image of the child as a developing, capable and competent individual. "We believe children are capable, and we aim to focus on developing their full potential", "Our aim is for all children to be competent and confident learners," and, "We believe children are unique individuals and we aspire to build their confidence as capable and competent learners."

In the analysis of early childhood statement texts, it is imperative to ask how these current statements evident in discourse are not neutral and how these constructs may turn subjective perspectives into objective realities. Foucault (1980) describes how the human subject is governed by the state and centralised state apparatus. The state constructs an image for the human subject, one that is culturally and biologically defined, in accordance to race, sex and class. However, ongoing changes in contemporary society have troubled how the human subject is governed through the state. The increase in global information technologies, new modes of communication, and network systems proliferate boundaries, where money and goods are exchanged, where people traverse social and economic terrains globally. In an ever-increasing global market, the privatisation of society's institutions offer services of choice and, with that, governing that takes place locally. "We are no longer governed by centralized state apparatuses; we are individual, autonomous and flexible subjects that on account of our border-crossing and liberty of choice of lifestyles take on multiple, fractioned and hybrid identities" (Osberg, 2009, p. 35). The privatisation of ECE in Aotearoa New Zealand offers services in the guise of choice; parents may choose according to their individual tastes and preferences. We ask, does this rhetoric of individual



choice and freedom influence the image of the 'individual', 'competent' child represented in philosophy statements?

In a poststructural deconstruction of childhood, Dahlberg and Moss (2005) observed an emerging subjectivity for the child that relates directly to the philosophy statements analysed within this study. The 'competent, autonomous and flexible child' is prevalent in new forms of constructivism. This subjectivity of the empowered child that problem solves, analyses and reflects is created to fit the neo-liberal workforce, as well as fostering liberalists' ideals of citizenship. "This subject is an entrepreneurial self, a flexible actor ready to respond to new eventualities and empowered through self-reflections and self analysis...prepared to be a global citizen, worker, flexible, adaptable, ready for uncertainties in work as well as in [the] family" (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 38). According to Dahlberg (2003), within contemporary society, conceptions of competent and autonomous behaviour have become another way of governing subjects.

We acknowledge that, while these concepts have benefits for many children, it is also problematic, as it may be seen as new modes of self-government. Children's participation as competent and capable individuals is not neutral and decontextualized, as alluded to in some centre philosophy statements. Hartung (2011) explains that participation, offered as a technology of power, produces a type of individuality that can potentially homogenise and universalise children in a constant binary with adults. Consequently, there appears to be little room for those who do not conform to these discursive labels.

The exclusion of inclusion

In the analysis of centre philosophy statements, only 16% of early childhood centres were explicit about inclusion. Inclusion, as specified within the philosophy statements, varied from broad and general claims of provision to more specific commitments of accessibility for all children and inclusion within holistic, socio-cultural perspectives. For example, "We believe in supporting children holistically, in a socio-cultural and inclusive environment", "We believe that the ideal environment for children is one that is accessible for all children", and, "We respect children as individuals and believe in providing an environment that is inclusive and welcoming."

With the under-representation of inclusion, we question how inclusion may be marginalised and what tensions are present in the current political climate. Lyons (2012) warns how privatisation has changed stakeholders' view of early childhood education. With the commercial view, effectiveness, efficiency and performance become key imperatives that lead to the marginalisation of the sector's efforts in equity and social justice policies (Lyons, 2012). The resurgence of deficit views of disability has been exasperated by the market model of delivery, where concerns about funding and resourcing influence decisions about inclusive provision. This is particularly problematic regarding legitimising specialist assistance and funding, where the focus is on deficit views of the child. "The child is identified as dis/abled by a complex funding regime, their needs rather than rights are the focus, and their deficits rather than their competencies underlined" (Lyons, 2012, p. 39). This reality becomes a social justice issue, as research conducted within Aotearoa New Zealand have described practices of exclusion, involving conditional enrollment agreements. Extreme cases reported parents having been required to meet additional costs and given limited access for their child in hours of attendance (MacArthur, Purdue & Ballard, 2003; Macartney, 2008; Purdue, Gordon-Burns, Rarere-Briggs, Stark & Turnock, 2011).

We ask; if it is a right for children to have access to quality ECE, how do rights discourses (dis)serve us? Skeptical of rights discourse, Dahlberg and Moss (2005) provide a critique of liberalist views of rights and highlight the paradoxical positions posed in ECE discourse. The concept of rights is always contextual and is neither neutral or value free. The key concerns are when rights are discussed in a decontextualised way, as if a universal minimum condition suffices a good life (if any). Particular liberal and legal discourses have generated a greater prevalence of rights discourse, which coincides with an



understanding of the subject as an individual, autonomous, and rational. Rights involve a contractual exchange between calculating individuals, and are of tactical political value. The concept of rights is always present in a power-relation, providing agency to those with less power. Extending our reach outside of a liberalist view of rights, Dahlberg and Moss (2005) have suggested an 'ethic of the encounter' and 'ethics of care' in a re-imaging of education that foregrounds inter-dependence. If we consider this in connection with inclusion, perhaps a dialogical space for ethical choices concerning particular conditions and contexts may emerge (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). It is not to say that we resist rights discourse, it is rather an opening for dialogue about rights as universal codes entrenched in individual liberalism.

The marginalisation of bicultural pedagogies

Despite the sector's bicultural curriculum framework, *Te Whāriki*, and the strong statements in this document outlining Te Tiriti based obligations in practice, only 54% of the philosophy statements analysed indicated a commitment to bicultural development or practices as underpinning their centres' programmes. A commitment to bicultural practices was mostly in the form of recognition of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. For example, "As an organisation we acknowledge the dual heritage of Aotearoa/New Zealand and work to uphold the spirit and intent of the Te Tiriti" and "We acknowledge the bicultural partnership inherent in Te Tiriti o Waitangi and seek to ensure that the curriculum offered reflects this partnership." These centre philosophy statements did not usually elaborate on how Te Tiriti partnerships would be upheld in the programme, although this was sometimes implicit in other statements, such as statements about parent partnerships. Only one of 50 centre philosophy statements in this research elaborated on their commitment to the weaving of Māori epistemology beyond reference to Te Tiriti o Waitangi. This centre, a kindergarten, also outlined that its processes for constructing their philosophy included working with their families and wider community. The kindergarten organised its philosophy statements around notions of tikanga agreed upon by the centre community.

The silencing of Māori ways of being, knowing and doing in early childhood practice is a concern expressed by Rau and Ritchie (2011), who mourned the lack of confidence and capacity of early childhood educators to practice in ways that affirm and uphold indigenous rights, despite the support from policy developments to do so. *Te Whāriki* is a bicultural framework, weaving indigenous and Western epistemologies. Tesar (2015) argues that this bicultural nature should "give it the strength to resist the dominant neo-liberal and neo-colonial gaze" (p. 106). More recently, the Ministry of Education's Māori education strategy, *Ka Hikitia: Managing for Success (2008-2012)*, and phase two of that policy, *Accelerating Success (2013-2017)*, set out to purposely challenge colonial and racist discourse in relation to Māori education. The intention of these documents was to embrace identity, culture and language as essential ingredients to success (Ministry of Education, 2008, 2013). These policy developments, however, contradict other neo-liberal policy that is increasingly felt in the sector, such as the increased privatisation of the sector and the lowering of qualification and professional development requirements.

The colonising effects of neo-liberalism can be seen not only in the marginalising of Māori bicultural and counter colonial pedagogies in the centres analysed, but also in the elevation of the neo-liberal view of the child as a capable and confident individual mentioned earlier. These two ideologies struggle for domination and are counter to each other. The neo-liberal focus on individual achievement and competition expressed in philosophy statements referencing capable and confident individual learners is at odds with collectivist and non-materialistic world-view of Māori (Ritchie, 2011; Tesar, 2015). Given the contradictions and tensions that appear within philosophy statements outlined above, we question whether cursory mention of Te Tiriti o Waitangi in some philosophy statements was not merely a performance of compliance. We agree with Ritchie (2011, p. 796) that upholding indigenous rights requires more "than just a commitment" but rather that the teachers find ways to create spaces "for indigenous tamariki and their whānau to access their tikanga" (p. 813).



Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, we positioned early childhood services in New Zealand at the intersection of neo-liberal policy, which emphasises individualism, competition and the future capacity of children to contribute to the global workforce, and other kinds of policies that have, as their focus, equity and inclusion, such as the national early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki*. We questioned how services might resist or elevate these and how these might be examined through an analysis of centre philosophy statements. The 50 centre philosophy statements examined reveal that the neo-liberal and neo-colonial discourses operating at national and global levels (Farquhar, 2012; Tesar, 2015; Rau & Ritchie, 2011) are also embedded in the discourses of the sector. Play and child-centred learning appear as an entrenched discourse about how children learn. We have suggested that there might be multiple readings to this. In the first reading, teachers resisted the constant neo-liberal gaze on children using the elevation of play to ward off the schoolification of ECE. In the second, teachers are asked to consider how making play an objective truth might marginalise and silence the families for which play is not a learning tradition. Centre philosophy statements were likely to promote a vision of children as capable and confident individuals and learners, reflecting the neo-liberal discourses of flexible future consumers and workers. These discourses, which place children within the economic rationality and individualism of the marketplace, potentially squeeze out other more relational and socially just ways of understanding early childhood education, as was evidenced through the marginalisation of discourses pertaining to inclusion and indigenous rights through bicultural practice. Although there is plenty of support for these within policy and curriculum, they were not common or entrenched discourses for the philosophy statements analysed. The silencing of these discourses presents a challenge to the sector, which must find ways to resist the neo-liberal turn and reinvent practices that are inclusive, dialogical and socially just.

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