
Recent policy developments and the “schoolification” of early childhood care and education in Aotearoa New Zealand

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This article responds to an increasing emphasis on early childhood care and education (ECCE) as preparation for academic success and the child as a future economic resource, manifest in various recent government policy initiatives in Aotearoa New Zealand. The article explores the way this situation has arisen despite the aspirations of openness and plurality in the early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, and a tradition of viewing the early years of childhood as a time *of* life rather than mere preparation *for* life.

A key focus of the article is examining the Ministry of Education (MoE) website’s framing of ECCE, including the linking to school sector National Standards for literacy and numeracy. Our analyses present this and associated policy initiatives as part of wider economically driven and globally referenced agendas that in turn position ECCE as preparation for school and the workforce. Our call is for closer, more critical analysis of these ongoing developments.

Introduction

This article is a response to an increasing national and global emphasis on ECCE as predominantly preparation for academic school success and the child as an economic resource, manifested in assessment-, literacy-, and numeracy-centred policy initiatives and underpinned by economically driven and narrowly construed views of cognition and learning (Ministry of Education, 2012a, 2012b, 2013; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2013). In particular, we explore the Aotearoa New Zealand context in which this situation has arisen despite the aspirations of openness and care within the early childhood curriculum,

Te Whāriki (draft and final versions) (Ministry of Education, 1993, 1996); despite traditional educational views of childhood as being for living; despite a general acceptance of the holistic and embodied ways in which children develop in and make sense of the world; and despite a growing body of research emphasising the interconnectedness of mind, body, and the environment with implications for learning and teaching (e.g., Kress, 2011; Malloch & Trevarthen, 2009; Wohlwend, 2007, 2011).

Signs of “the globalisation and related economisation of education policy” (Lingard, 2010, p. 129) are becoming increasingly publicly evident in Aotearoa New Zealand. For example, a recent *Listener* article, which comments

that “Treasury has its sights on education” (Laugesen, 2012, p. 28), illustrates this converging of national and international, economics and education:

Drawing on international studies on the impact of education on economic growth ... [and] the difference that higher student achievement would have on economic performance ... Treasury estimates that our GDP could increase between 3% and 15% by 2070 if mean student scores rose even higher to rival top performers in the OECD.” (pp. 26–27)

Signs that ECCE is at risk of being caught up in school-focused National Standards and a growing preoccupation with the measurement of student achievement include the recent introduction to the sector of the Early Learning Information (ELI) system, in which each child is to be allocated a unique National Student Number (NSN), which “will be used for research, statistics, funding *and the measurement of educational outcomes*” (Ministry of Education, 2012c) (our emphasis). These ELI and NSN initiatives can be seen as fitting with national and international trends toward increasing the accumulation of statistical information for the purpose of measuring educational achievement. Such trends are occurring in the face of considerable criticism both of the misuse of statistics and the associated simplification of whatever is measured (Lingard, 2010; Mansell, 2007).

A specific focus in this article is the recent emphasis on links to the school sector National Standards for literacy and numeracy evidenced in the ECE sections of the MoE website (Ministry of Education, 2012a, 2012b). Our analysis locates this and associated developments as part of a wider economically driven agenda that positions ECCE as preparation for school and later academic success: childhood is viewed as a preparatory stage for becoming economically productive/effectively functioning global citizens (Duhn, 2006b), and educational goals are increasingly driven by narrow economic imperatives (Lingard, 2010). Our analysis also highlights an intensifying focus on vulnerability, with early childhood education (ECE) positioned as a means of countering long-term welfare dependency and reducing costs to the state.

Conceptual framework

Inspired by the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and Nancy (2000), we take issue with the increasing prevalence of a future-focused, outcomes-driven, reductionist view of children as economic units: a preoccupation with what the child is *to become* rather than what the child *is*. From such a perspective childhood is always viewed as a preparatory stage. We are not arguing that attention should not be paid to children’s futures as learners but that this should not be at the expense of a focus on the whole child: mind, body, and spirit (Ministry of Education, 1996), and on children as present-day beings, not only future becomings (Moss & Petrie, 2002; Prout, 2005; Uprichard, 2007). Learning and teaching are complex; learning involves cognitively embodied and collectively distributed felt processes of meaning making and inter-connection, such as are described by Salomon (1993) and Trevarthen (2009). These ideas fit with a growing body of work that draws attention to the way we exist integrally in the world, in a reciprocally and actively interconnecting and transformative process of living, becoming, and just being (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008; Barad, 2007; Latour, 2005).

Recent interpretations of curriculum and assessment policies, and the trickle-down effect of school-based initiatives, increasingly position both knowledge and learning within narrow conceptions of learning. Narrowing teacher understandings of early literacy, for example, to a reductionist focus on “reading first and foremost” (Spencer, 2009, p. 218), ignores the multidimensionality, unpredictability, and complexities of both literacy and of teaching and learning (De Freitas, 2013; Kress, 2000, 2011; Wohlwend, 2011). This narrowed emphasis on academic outcomes obscures the holistic, embodied, and interactive ways in which young children learn, grow, and develop. This article argues for ongoing critical interrogation of the ways in which childhood and curriculum and assessment discourses in ECCE are framed.

Methodology

We came to writing this article with common interests in understanding the complexities of early childhood pedagogy and a shared dismay that there seemed to be an increasingly reductionist direction in ECE policies. In looking for updates around curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy, we first turned to

the MoE’s early childhood website. We noted emerging tensions and contradictions between old and new curriculum and assessment policy initiatives, and an increasingly narrow focus toward school preparation, in particular toward the recently introduced school-based National Standards, which are exclusively focused on benchmarking skills in literacy and numeracy (Ministry of Education, 2012b).

These initial findings prompted us to undertake a closer, more systematic analysis of the MoE website. As co-researchers we worked together—and separately—reflexively interrogating and cross-checking our understandings and other possible interpretations of the “official” texts on our screens. In our analyses of the website we borrowed strategies from critical discourse analysis (Gee, 2011), which examines what is being sanctioned in relation to governing power relations. This examination took place in two phases, which reflected the journey of this article from a more pedagogical focus in the initial iteration as a conference presentation (November 2012), to the present article’s stronger policy focus. This second phase developed in revising the article for publication. We looked at the architectural structuring of the MoE site and the hierarchies within this as well as the headings, key words, and phrases. With a broad focus on curriculum we looked at what was emphasised and what was not. We particularly looked for recent shifts in emphasis in relation to key discourses such as curriculum, assessment, learning outcomes, development, and care. This in turn led us to examine the interconnections with two other government websites that have major responsibilities relating to the care and education of young children: the Ministry of Health (MoH) and the Ministry of Social Development (MSD). We systematically tracked all links to ECE and ECCE on these websites. A significant methodological challenge in using websites involved having to re-analyse texts which are in a process of continual change as they are updated. This article presents our analyses of the MoE website and its interconnections with these other Ministry websites over the years 2012–13. In addition, in looking to analyse patterns over time, we start with the early childhood draft curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (1993), as the first concrete iteration of government-introduced ECCE curriculum discourse in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Venturing onto the MoE's ECE website (at the time of writing)

The home page for the ECE website consists of two main subportals (Ministry of Education, 2012d). One is the “ECE Lead” portal, which opens the way to a large number of menus related to the management, administration, licensing, funding, and regulating of early childhood services (Ministry of Education, 2012c). The other sub-portal, “ECE Educate”, concerns curriculum and assessment, the main focus of this article and where we began our analysis. Through “ECE Educate” the reader is greeted with bold headlines reading: “Welcome to early childhood teaching and learning” (Ministry of Education, 2012e).

On the left side of the front “ECE Educate” web page, under a menu called “Learning”, sits the section heading “Curriculum and learning”. Inside this section are five subsections called:

- Te Whāriki
- Assessment for learning
- Learning environments
- Learning resources
- National Standards and ECE.

Te Whāriki

A brief commentary introduces the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) as “the Ministry of Education’s early childhood curriculum policy statement” (Ministry of Education, 2012e). The entire document sits on this site. *Te Whāriki* is an open and inclusive framework: this is reflected in both its metaphorical title of curriculum as weaving, and in its definition of curriculum as “... the sum total of the experiences, activities, and events, whether direct or indirect, which occur within an environment designed to foster children’s learning and development” (p. 10). The weft and warp of the woven curriculum mat were envisaged by the curriculum developers as metaphorically containing and reflecting the diversity of early childhood families and communities by providing space “for all to stand”: each early childhood centre is expected to weave their own curriculum mat, creating their own patterns from features and contexts unique to their children and their community (Carr & May, 2000, p. 59). While an in-depth analysis of this document is beyond the scope of this article, we draw attention to how the document *Te Whāriki* metaphorically embodies key policy shifts in its two iterations, first as

a draft document (1993) and finally in the MoE-edited version (1996). Editorial changes made by the MoE to the final version seem to be concerned with bringing the early childhood curriculum into closer alignment with the school curriculum and the discourse of learning outcomes.

Between the documents the emphasis shifted from viewing ECCE and school curricula as “together” part of broader lifelong learning (1993, p. 120), towards positioning the ECCE curriculum as “a foundation” that during the school years children “are able to be build on” (1996, p. 93). An entire section titled “The special nature of the early childhood curriculum” disappeared between the draft and final versions. This section referred to “differences of emphasis between the school curriculum and the early childhood curriculum”; it set out to identify what was seen to be “distinctively appropriate to early childhood education” (p. 126), pointing out that ECCE curriculum “emphasises the intertwining of provisions for care and education, and ... interweaves all aspects of children’s learning and development” (p. 126).

Also of note is the shift in language from references in the draft document to “learning opportunities” which offer “more than one possible strategy or outcome” and include “expressive and creative activities (those which do not have a defined outcome)” (Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 117) towards references to “learning outcomes” in the final document. Rather than highlighting the place of opportunities that do not predetermine outcomes as part of the plurality of learning—what Duhn (2006a) refers to as the openness of the draft “toward considering heterogeneity” (p. 168)—the final document offers a closer specification of the ideal child as ECE product, framed as 118 learning outcomes.

To summarise: efforts to position ECCE as preparation for school are not new. This is reflected in the changes made between the draft and the final versions of *Te Whāriki*. Notably these changes were made despite an extensive and unprecedented sector consultation process covering almost 3 years that endorsed the draft document. Since then efforts to position ECCE more strongly as preparation for school (and the economic world of work) have started to intensify, through successive waves of curriculum, assessment, and other policies, as our analyses of government websites shows, and as we discuss in the following sections.

Assessment for learning

The “Assessment for learning” section on the MoE website’s “Curriculum and learning” menu contains three subsections:

- the assessment exemplars *Kei Tua o te Pae Assessment for learning: Early childhood exemplars*—the assessment arm of *Te Whāriki*
- the Māori assessment exemplars: *Te Whatu Pōkeka*—a second part to the assessment arm of *Te Whāriki*—developed as a resource for the assessment of Māori children in Māori early childhood settings (Ministry of Education, 2009)
- a section titled “Learning outcomes”.

Kei Tua o te Pae/Assessment for learning: Early childhood exemplars

Kei Tua o te Pae (KTotP) is a set of 20 resource booklets that were developed over a 9-year period, beginning in 2000, to provide examples of assessment practices that would maintain continuity with *Te Whāriki*. The exemplars are described as “examples of assessments that make visible learning that is valued so that the learning community (children, families, whānau, teachers, and others) can foster ongoing and diverse learning pathways” (Ministry of Education, 2004–9, book 1, p. 3, our emphasis).

However, while the resource developers may have intended to maintain pedagogical open-endedness, we suggest that KTotP may also have been instrumental in fostering an overly future-focused curriculum emphasis. We see this occurring through the positioning of children exclusively as “learners” and viewing events solely as “learning opportunities” (Buchanan, 2011). This positioning is reflected in the frequently reiterated call for assessments to “include clear goals” (e.g., book 16, p. 5) and through the inclusion of “What next?” or “Where to next?” sections that are presented as a model format for documenting narrative assessments (Ministry of Education, 2004–9).

While it is possible to view the question “Where to next?” as inviting teachers to give thought to ongoing and worthwhile pedagogical considerations, research by New Zealanders Peters and Davis (2011) found that even where adults were committed to supporting the development of children’s working theories, planned “What nexts?” could lead to adults taking control and “hijacking” children’s activities and thinking. Other

international early years studies highlight related tensions between children having the freedom to pursue their own agendas at their own pace—as traditionally encouraged in play- and interest-based curricula—and busy teachers pressed to come up with learning goals for accountability purposes (Spencer, 2009; Wohlwend, 2007, 2011).

A particular concern, as discussed in the next section, is the effect of the way KTotP is positioned on the MoE website, as if it paves the way for the recently introduced National Standards, which focus on literacy and numeracy skills as “all important” for school learning.

Learning outcomes

Click on the “Learning outcomes” section under the “Assessment for learning” section and then on the title “Learning pathways” and you are taken to a diagram illustrating links from *Te Whāriki* to the school curriculum, *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007), i.e., this is the *only* pathway offered. In other words, the learning outcomes of ECCE lead only to *The New Zealand Curriculum*. This singular emphasis on one path is at odds with the many possible “diverse learning pathways” foregrounded in the rationale for developing the early childhood assessment exemplars, KTotP (Ministry of Education, 2004–9, book 1, p. 3).

Such an emphasis on school would be less concerning if the school curriculum also emphasised diverse learning pathways along with a broad vision of learning for living in the present as well as the future. However, notwithstanding a recent shift from “essential skills” to broader “key competencies”, the school curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) can itself be seen as becoming more narrowly academic through being recently partnered with National Standards, which focus solely on literacy and numeracy. National Standards are used to make judgements about individual children’s (and schools’) academic achievements.

The Ministry webpage elaborates on the links between ECE and National Standards by posing and answering the following question:

How do the National Standards relate to early childhood education?

National Standards aim to lift achievement in literacy and numeracy by helping teachers, students and families be clear about what students should achieve and

by when. They come into effect in 2010 for English-medium schools with pupils in Years 1 to 8. National Standards in reading, writing and mathematics will be used to assess children’s learning progress after the first 12 months of attendance at school. The development of National Standards in schooling has not changed *Te Whāriki* the early childhood curriculum.

Te Whāriki the early childhood education (ECE) curriculum links to the NZ curriculum in schools. Parents can expect children to develop early skills in literacy and numeracy while their children are enrolled in ECE. (Ministry of Education, 2013b)

The reference to “National Standards and ECE” as a recently added section under early childhood “Curriculum and learning” reinforces the impression that ECCE is becoming an increasingly narrowed preparation for National-Standards-focused school learning. This is further reinforced through a subsequent reference to what we would argue are manufactured continuities between the multiple literacies advocated in KTotP and the narrow National Standards focus on numeracy and literacy in ECE as preparation for school learning.

The ways in which curriculum (*Te Whāriki*) and assessment (KTotP) are positioned within these key framing sections on the website gives the impression that their central purpose is to pave the way for National Standards. The narrowly focused links between assessment and National Standards concentrated solely on literacy and numeracy skills as curriculum are at odds with the open and inclusive *Te Whāriki* definition of curriculum. Such an emphasis serves to obscure and dismiss the reference in KTotP to “ongoing *diverse* learning pathways” (Ministry of Education, 2004–9, book 1, p. 3, our emphasis).

Dis/re/placing development and care

Closer critical scrutiny of what is displaced by the concentrated future-focused emphasis on the child as learner reveals further key shifts in emphasis. For example, the words *development* and *care*—traditionally associated with the phrases *early childhood care and education*, and *learning and development*—are notably absent in the “Curriculum and learning” sections of

the MoE web pages. Also notable is that it is just these elements that were identified in the original draft curriculum guidelines as key manifestations of “differences in emphasis between the school curriculum and the early childhood curriculum” (Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 129).

The broader phrase *development and learning* has been replaced with singular *learning* in official discourse (MoE publications). The loss here is in the shift from seeing children as complex, developing, growing human beings—constantly becoming—to simply seeing them as “learners”. We suggest there is value in the term *development* as a conceptualisation of the life course as a phenomena; *development* retains a focus on the physical and biological as well as the social and cultural. We exist in the world in our mind-heart-bodies, through which we perceive, act, experience, learn, think, love, and feel the world. Thinking, feeling, loving, and learning are embodied processes; the body is a “subject of cognition” (Cheville, 2006).

This view of development (and learning) as cognitively embodied processes has profound implications for how we understand and educate children. Not only is cognition individually embodied, but thinking and feeling are also socially and collectively distributed across and between bodies (Gee, 2008; Salomon, 1993). *Development and learning* may therefore be understood as including socially and materially embodied processes that mediate, connect, and interconnect individual children inter- and intra-actively in and with the world (Barad, 2007).

In arguing for reclaiming *development* we are not denying justifiable critique of normative stage theory; however, we suggest that development can also be understood as relational, complex, and non-linear, and as a way of reintegrating thinking, feeling selves in living, changing, material bodies. Developments in neuroscience further highlight the interrelatedness of mind and body and the permeability of our mind-bodies and their capacities—the ways in which we are neurologically transformed by our activity-practice (Ramachandran, 2011).

Link to MoH website

Further evidence of a deepening split between development and learning can be found on the MoE website on the “ECE Lead” page under the right-hand menu heading “Useful links”, where

references to “development” are hidden behind the “B4 School Check” heading, which functions as a link to the MoH, who administer this initiative. The function of the B4 School Check is described as “to identify and address any health, behavioural, social, or developmental concerns which could affect a child’s ability to get the most benefit from school, such as a hearing problem or communication difficulty” (Ministry of Health, 2013). In effect this “places” the physical (bodies) and development with the MoH, while learning (heads) remain the province of the MoE. Thus “development” has been split off from learning and repositioned with health: from integrated mind-bodies to split-off physical bodies. Also notable is the way the singular reference to development on these website pages is coupled with the reference to school readiness in the “B4 School Check”, and by implication the role of ECCE in preparing children for school.

Connections with the MSD website

Care joins *development* as another of the elements seemingly edged out of the ways in which early childhood pedagogy is framed on the MoE website. While *Te Whāriki* refers to ECCE, the website and more recent MoE documents refer simply to ECE.

Responsibility for “care” (the humane, human) seems to have shifted to the MSD—today’s equivalent of the Department of Social Welfare from whence “care” came when, in 1986, responsibility for ECCE was shifted to the Department of Education—today’s MoE. The move was heralded as joining care with education (May, 2011). Despite the explicit emphasis in *Te Whāriki* on children’s holistic learning and development, wellbeing, and sense of belonging, the care–education split appears to have resurfaced.

Under the auspices of MSD, “care” has made the further shift of becoming part of a discourse of vulnerability. This is evidenced on the MSD website: click on “About MSD” on the front page to be informed that “the care and protection of vulnerable children” is a major responsibility for MSD (Ministry of Social Development, 2013a). The word *vulnerable* crops up repeatedly on the website in relation to children, ECE, and ECCE.

Hyperlinks connect the three ministries, MoE, MSD, and MoH, in a nexus of “supporting vulnerable children” policies, with MSD having the leading responsibility for meeting policy results. Under the government agenda of “delivering better public services”

“The Ministry of Education is the lead agency on boosting skills and employment”, working “with the Ministry of Social Development to support vulnerable children” (Ministry of Education, 2013a). Within this discourse of vulnerability, the MSD, MoE, and MoH interconnections and references to ECE centre on economic imperatives as part of a “wider welfare reform programme aimed at reducing long term welfare dependency” (Ministry of Social Development, 2013b).

In summary, ECCE seems to have become stretched across different government departments in unequal proportions, with development under the MoH, care reconceptualised as vulnerability under the auspices of MSD, and MoE retaining a reduced and narrower pedagogical responsibility. The MoE agenda seems to strongly prioritise ECCE as preparation for school learning, which in turn views education as academic learning in line with their wider school sector emphases on literacy, numeracy, and National Standards. Rather than helping to achieve the often-professed aim of integrating services, this stretching of ECCE across already siloed government departments seems to be leading to further siloing and narrowing of the different dimensions of ECCE: care, development, and learning.

This narrowing of ECCE also appears to be reflected in the positioning of children in ECCE. Our analyses of the image of the child on the MoE website show the focus shifting toward what the child is *to become*, ignoring what the child *is* as a young human being in his or her own right (Uprichard, 2007). The image of the “early childhood” child in the cited sections of the MoE website is of the “becoming competent” child, narrowly construed as the “becoming competent in literacy and numeracy” schoolchild and future worker, while the MoH and MSD websites emphasise the “vulnerable child”. The focus here seems to be on ensuring that “at-risk”, “vulnerable” children become more effectively functioning, less costly citizens.

Conclusion

This article voices our concerns about these developments, suggesting that much that has been valuable in ECCE in Aotearoa New Zealand is at risk of being discarded if the narrow economic imperatives currently coming to prominence, nationally and internationally (Lingard, 2010), are allowed to drive education

policy. ECCE in Aotearoa New Zealand has a history of resisting moves towards the “schoolification” of the sector, illustrated in the avoidance of the term *preschool* (May 2011). Its tradition of viewing education broadly is demonstrated in the foregrounding of an ethic of care as integral to education; aspirations to include families and communities in pedagogical decision making; an emphasis on the integrated nature of growth and development—mind and body and spirit; and a belief in the purpose of education as including life and childhoods as lived now, rather than education as being solely a preparation for economic futures (Ministry of Education, 1996).

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