Process Over Product: Teacher Wellbeing Policy in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

This hermeneutic literature review explores the new phenomenon of teacher wellbeing policies in early childhood education [ECE]. Considered throughout this dissertation are the current state of wellbeing in ECE and the complex array of influences that have led to the present state of the sector. The plethora of research on teacher wellbeing reflects the current spotlight on the topic that has resulted in a policy window that could be used to create significant change. Concurrently, ECE teachers are beginning to create policy unique to their own contexts that explore practices that could facilitate the wellbeing of teachers. Despite the growing popularity of teacher wellbeing policies I am yet to see any resources to support the process of creating wellbeing policy, thus, this research aims to fill a gap in the literature by exploring how collaborative policymaking could be used as a tool to support teacher wellbeing. Recognising the contextual nature of this phenomenon, the research is influenced by Gadamer's theories of hermeneutic phenomenology which are used to navigate the literature on wellbeing, leadership, and policymaking to provoke thinking about this topic, and suggest possible strategies to explore this process in an ECE context.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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Chapter One: Teacher Wellbeing Policy in Early Childhood Education

The word wellbeing saturates legislation, the media, and public discussion (Wallace & Holman, 2019), yet often avoids definition as a highly personal and context-specific term (Hou et al., 2021). Despite the ambiguity of the term, wellbeing usually exists somewhere in the spheres of health, happiness, or purpose, and is generally agreed to be an ever-evolving process, rather than a set state (White, 2016). Although the concept of wellbeing is nothing new, Higgins and Goodall (2021) claim that there has been no greater focus on wellbeing than as of right now as the world responds to several global disasters such as disease, war, and environmental degradation, at once. Human wellbeing is believed to have reached a crisis point, particularly in terms of mental health, with governments scrambling to find strategies to better support their citizens (White, 2016). This focus on wellbeing is particularly relevant in Aotearoa New Zealand where the statistics on psychological distress, life satisfaction, and sense of purpose of its citizens continue to show a deterioration of wellbeing over time (Ministry of Health, 2021). Because of the global focus on wellbeing, society has reached a 'policy window' in which it is believed that this is the most optimal time to create meaningful change through policy (Higgins & Goodall, 2021).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the government is focusing on wellbeing as a central tenet of their policies, believing that this focus is one of the reasons they were voted into power (New Zealand Labour Party, 2020). In 2020, the yearly budget pledged almost nine million dollars towards teacher wellbeing by looking to invest in closing the pay gap in early childhood education [ECE], working to attract a strong workforce, and looking to create 'wellbeing hubs' for teachers to access (Hipkins, 2020). These policies seemed to recognise that teachers play an important role in their communities and that they required more support to thrive in their roles (New Zealand Labour Party, 2020). But, in 2021 there was a shift in focus. Whilst the government declared that they would use a wellbeing approach to tackle intergenerational challenges, the discussion of wellbeing itself was less about supporting individuals to feel “capable, supported, valued and connected” (New Zealand Labour Party, 2020), and more about investing in wellbeing as a means to improve human capital and “reduce future health costs” (Robertson, 2021, para. 3). Whilst the opening of the policy window in Aotearoa New Zealand indicated a humanistic approach that focused on the wellbeing of citizens, the management of wellbeing and the shift in tone seems to point to a neoliberal perspective that prioritises the economic implications of societal wellbeing. These two contrasting perspectives of humanism and neoliberalism appear to be competing for hegemony in governmental understandings of wellbeing.

ECE teachers are no strangers to the topic of wellbeing, as wellbeing is one of the central strands of the curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017). *Te Whāriki* notes that “the wellbeing of each child is interdependent with the wellbeing of their kaiako” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 20). If the sector takes this curriculum statement seriously, it should then also take seriously the reports of wellbeing concerns in which teachers report symptoms such as stress, burnout, depression, physical injury, and insufficient support (Jones et al., 2020). A 2022 article on bullying in ECE shows a possible disconnect between the perceptions of teachers and leaders in the sector, as teachers claim significant bullying and manipulation but leaders deny that this is a widespread issue (Gerritsen, 2022a). Relationships with children and a sense of personal reward are enough to sustain some teachers (Bates, 2018; Andrew, 2015), however, both the Office of Early Childhood Education (2022a) and Gibbons (2020) report that teachers are becoming disillusioned with the perceived declining state of the sector due to the concerning working conditions for ECE teachers. If the wellbeing of children and teachers are interconnected as *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) believes, then this bodes poorly for the wellbeing of children.

Policymakers within the education sector of Aotearoa New Zealand have adopted the policy window for wellbeing, with documents such as the Education Review Office’s (2016) *Wellbeing for Success* which focuses on strategies teachers and schools can implement to better support student wellbeing. Although a useful document to support students, *Wellbeing for Success* (Education Review Office, 2016) fails to recognise the impact that teacher wellbeing has on the curriculum, as does the majority of the wellbeing policy published in New Zealand (Higgins & Goodall, 2021). For those looking to cultivate teacher wellbeing the resources available are limited. There are a few web pages from the Ministry of Education (2021) or the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand (2021) which discuss how to support teachers in their wellbeing, however, when investigated further these redirect to links about student wellbeing. Whilst the Ministry of Business (2022) has a wellbeing policy template, the sections on being smoke-free and responsible hosting do not seem particularly relevant to the context of ECE. Due to the lack of government recognition and resourcing concerning teacher wellbeing this can add another job, wellbeing advocate, to the already overcomplicated and under-supported workload of ECE teachers (Mitchell et al., 2019).

Although the wellbeing hub promised in 2020 was never created due to unexpected technical issues (C. Hipkins, personal communication, May 20, 2022), the Ministry of

Education has launched a new website for teachers called Gold Star, which promises educators support in their emotional wellbeing (Gold Star, 2022). At the time of writing, the few resources provided online point to a behaviourist approach, which White (2016) recognises as practices that require teachers to change their behaviour or their mindset to cope with illbeing. Gold Star (2022) asks teachers to adopt ‘a positive outlook’ or ‘be kind to [them]selves’ as strategies to cope with issues that are often structural in nature such as inadequate resourcing and teacher shortages. Even if teachers are adopting a positive outlook, this advice does not address the cause of wellbeing related concerns (Shirley, 2020), and almost seems to shift the blame onto teachers for not coping with structural issues (White, 2016).

This research was born out of observations of teachers discussing the potential of teacher wellbeing policy on social media, as they explored what practices could be developed to support teachers in the unique context of their centre. Whilst the Ministry of Education (2021) are beginning to endorse the use of wellbeing policies or programmes within educational settings there are no resources or documentation available to support this process as of yet. Centres may usually turn to the use of policy templates when exploring a new idea (Calloway et al., 2017), but the main contributors of templates such as the Early Childhood Council (2022), the Office of Early Childhood Education (2022b) and Childspace (2022) have not yet created policy to support teacher wellbeing in ECE. Whilst my observations of the discussions on social media seemed to indicate a desire to see how a centre could support teacher wellbeing through policy there are very few resources available to support this. This is what I hope to contribute to the sector.

The Rationale for the Research

Historically, ECE was a sector that expected its teachers to forgo professional status as the role was seen to be a natural extension of the mothering role (Ailwood, 2008). Whilst the sector has made many strides in recognising the professional capabilities of teachers – through steps such as qualifications, registration and ongoing professional development – this historical perspective of ECE teachers persists (Zhang, 2019). The altruistic expectation of teachers results in issues such as low pay, lack of respect, and unfair or unjust working conditions (Andrew, 2015). The role of an ECE teacher is complex, critically important, and yet often underestimated and misunderstood by those outside of the sector (Mitchell et al., 2019). Burnout and stress are real issues that plague the sector due to the highly demanding nature of the role (Jones et al., 2020), but the lack of professional recognition for ECE teachers means that their wellbeing has often been neglected. This policy window provides an opportunity to address these concerns.

Whilst there are those within the sector that struggle to see the value in focusing on wellbeing (Thorburn, 2020), I have experienced first-hand the impact that practices supporting teacher wellbeing can have. Like many teachers documented across the literature on wellbeing, I burnt out as a new graduate; overwhelmed by the mental, emotional, and physical demands of the role. Whilst I was lucky to be working with a team that put steps in place to support my wellbeing to the point that I was able to return to the centre, I know that not all teachers are in the same sort of environment. Although I understand their perspective, I feel disheartened hearing student teachers or new graduates admit that they cannot see themselves as a teacher long term due to the range of demands the role places on their wellbeing, and it is worrying watching passionate teachers leave the sector regularly. This is why this research is so important to me.

Having worked in an environment where teachers' wellbeing is a priority, I see the possibilities that could arise from encouraging teachers to collaborate on creating wellbeing policies that value the perspectives of teachers. Literature on this topic indicates that when teacher wellbeing is made a priority within an educational setting teacher job satisfaction and commitment improve, as does the quality of teaching, and the wellbeing of students (Zinsser et al., 2016). I believe that this research is significant as not only will it create a resource for those in the community that are showing an interest in this phenomenon, but could potentially facilitate the shift in the sector where early childhood teachers are supported to thrive in their role, rather than simply survive it (Zelenski, 2020). I believe that supporting the wellbeing of teachers could have lasting effects on future generations of Aotearoa New Zealand.

I am yet to find any research on the subject of teacher wellbeing policies in early childhood education as this is a relatively new phenomenon, and so this research hopes to fill this gap in the literature. Engaging with policy is considered by Ebbeck (1990) to be a common role for ECE teachers, but Calloway et al. (2017) believe that policymaking, in the more formalised sense, is far less common for a number of reasons including the prevalence of policy templates and top-down bureaucratic decision making. Through this research, I will use both the literature and my own experience as an ECE teacher to explore how an ECE centre might approach the craft of collaborative, democratic, and empowering policy to support teacher wellbeing.

Therefore, my research questions are;

- How could an early childhood centre create policy to support teacher wellbeing?
- What does the literature tell us about wellbeing in the specific context of ECE?

- How might approaches to collaborative policymaking support teacher wellbeing in ECE?

The Conceptual Framework

The purpose of this research is to both provoke thinking and create a resource for those looking to write and implement a wellbeing policy within their own centre. Therefore, this research makes use of both the perspectives in the literature and my own experience as an ECE teacher to ensure that the interpretations provided are relevant to the ECE context in Aotearoa New Zealand. Taking inspiration from Gadamer, this research is influenced by hermeneutics which is used to interpret the literature and to create new understandings to imagine an approach for creating teacher wellbeing policy in ECE. My experience as an ECE teacher became fore-sight that allowed me to situate myself in the literature and create new horizons of understanding (Smythe & Spence, 2012). The use of philosophical hermeneutics and hermeneutic policymaking will be elaborated on later in this research.

As this is a new phenomenon there is little research to support an understanding of teacher wellbeing policy here in Aotearoa New Zealand, and so this research explores foundational theories of wellbeing, leadership, policymaking, and the local context of ECE to see what could be possible when these theories are employed together. As this research is constructed from a hermeneutic standpoint the literature selected, discussion formed, and suggestions presented represent my own interpretation of teacher wellbeing policies and the context of ECE, rather than a definitive answer (Dryzek, 1982). I hope that the perspectives offered by this research provoke thinking about how ECE teachers may experience wellbeing in the centre, and encourage centres to explore collaborative and dialogic methods of policymaking.

An Overview of the Dissertation

This chapter provided an introduction to the topic and its complex social and political ramifications, as well as my interpretation of the topic based on my own experiences in the ECE sector. Additionally, this chapter sets the purposes and aims of the research by introducing a rationale, research questions, and conceptual framework.

Chapter two explores Gadamer’s theory of philosophical hermeneutics in more depth and explains its relevance to the research, particularly Gadamer’s concepts of the historically affected consciousness, horizons of understanding, and the hermeneutic circle. These theories or methodology are used throughout all chapters of the dissertation, but primarily in chapters two, four, and five. Hermeneutics has not only influenced how literature was interpreted in this research but is also used to imagine alternative approaches to policymaking that centre on democratic participation and the importance of locality and diversity (Balfour, 1994).

In the third chapter, the literature on wellbeing in ECE is explored. This begins with general theories of wellbeing such as positive psychology, hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing, objective and subjective wellbeing, and hauora and Te Whare Tapa Whā. The literature review then examines wellbeing in the specific context of ECE, before looking at the historical perspective that led to the current societal perception of ECE teachers and how this affects wellbeing.

The fourth chapter centres around ECE teachers as policymaking professionals. Firstly, the dominant discourses of leadership in ECE are explored to create the context for collaborative policymaking in ECE. Then, I use my own experiences as an ECE teacher to navigate a broad range of literature such as hermeneutic policymaking, incrementalism, and policy roles, to demonstrate how these relate to collaborative policymaking in ECE. This chapter also explores implementations of wellbeing policy from across the sector and what can be learned from these instances.

Chapter five combines the literature explored thus far and hermeneutics to imagine the process of creating a teacher wellbeing policy. This chapter is broken into two distinct sections; policy as discourse, and policy as text (Ball, 2015). By using these two theories I explore the process of creating a teacher wellbeing policy and the effects of the documented policy itself. In this chapter, I hope to encourage teachers to think about what a hermeneutic approach to teacher wellbeing policy could look like in their own centre.

Lastly, chapter six is the conclusion of the dissertation. This chapter summarises the research conducted, discusses implications as a result of this research, the limitations of the research, and possibilities for future research. This chapter ends with final thoughts and an ode to the advocates in the sector fighting for greater wellbeing.

Chapter Summary

Wellbeing is somewhat of a buzzword at present, dominating discussions in the media, in government, and workplaces too (Higgins & Goodall, 2021). Yet, the term means something different to everyone, as its definition is often dependent on the context, culture, and historicity of its usage (Hou et al., 2021). Because of the breadth of the term, wellbeing offers the potential for a holistic approach to health, happiness, and purpose specifically catered to meet the unique needs of those it serves (Wallace & Holman, 2019) which means that this could be a powerful tool for meaningful policy. ECE teachers are seizing this opportunity, looking to create their own policy to support the wellbeing of teachers, however, there is little information or guidance to support this exciting development, despite the clear desire from teachers as they approach online forums to meet this need. Through a hermeneutic literature review, I explore the events that have led to poor wellbeing in ECE and the dominant model of policymaking in the sector to provoke thinking about how ECE teachers could use a hermeneutic approach to policymaking as a tool to support teacher wellbeing in their own context.

Chapter Two: Gadamer’s Hermeneutics and the Literature Review

Situating the Research in the Methodology Chapter

The current state of affairs addressed in the introduction paints a bleak picture for the future of the ECE sector, as a myriad of complex influences such as society, politics and the economy have affected how teacher wellbeing is understood and consequently supported thus far. A complex issue such as this is unlikely to be resolved by one approach (Balfour, 1994). An exploration into what is possible through ECE teachers’ policymaking to support wellbeing contributes to a perspective not yet seen in the literature. Of course, this research is inherently values-driven, and I make no effort to hide the fact that it is subjective (Tshuma, 2021). My perspectives on this topic were shaped by the context of my experiences in this time and place, from my childhood here in Aotearoa New Zealand, to the people that I interact with, the media I consume, and of course my experience as an ECE teacher. These experiences emerge as fore-sight to interpret the literature (Smythe & Spence, 2012), as I situate myself in new concepts to better understand them (Nixon, 2017). The role of prejudice in hermeneutic research will be explored later in this chapter.

This research is set in the context of philosophical hermeneutics and uses Gadamer’s methods of interpretation to better understand the literature through the concepts of fore-sight, the hermeneutic circles of interpretation, and horizons of understanding (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). These concepts are then engaged in chapter five to explore possibilities for how they could relate to ECE teachers and collaborative practice as teachers co-construct teacher wellbeing policy through hermeneutic policymaking. Gadamer was hesitant for researchers to follow any strict method as they believed that this obscured the researcher's ability to play with the data and remain open to the unexpected, and so I would consider this research to be inspired by hermeneutics rather than strictly following any methodological tenets (Smythe & Spence, 2012). Whilst I cannot claim that my interpretation of the texts are absolute or without fault, I hope that they will be beneficial to the aims of this research regardless. This chapter explores the philosophy of Gadamer and hermeneutics and the methodology of the literature review.

Gadamer and Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Hermeneutics itself originated as a method to interpret archaic texts like the Bible, but modern understandings of hermeneutics are often attributed to the work of German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer whose methods are used as tools for more general understanding (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). Gadamer was the student of prominent phenomenologist Martin Heidegger, who believed that interpretation was not merely a method for understanding, but was central to the experiences of life (Zimmerman, 2015); one cannot function in the human world without interpreting the people, places and things around them, interpretation is life itself (Wagenaar, 2007). Gadamer believed that every phenomenologist approached the phenomenological paradigm differently (Gadamer, 1976) and took inspiration from the work of their mentor to develop their approach to hermeneutics. Whilst phenomenology interprets the human experience, hermeneutics interprets the language of human experiences, by interpreting texts such as documents, dialogue, or culture (Rosfort, 2019). Both philosophical paradigms are closely connected under the umbrella of interpretivism (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021) and centre on the importance of interpretation to existence.

In hermeneutics, Gadamer emphasises that people cannot interpret the world without a "historically effected consciousness" (Zimmerman, 2015, p. 41) as interactions with the world influence the ability to understand it. Gadamer did not believe in objective understanding, instead believing that interpretation is intrinsically motivated and ever-evolving as understanding shifts and changes over time (Lawn, 2006). When individuals interact with new concepts they situate themselves in them (Nixon, 2017), bringing their experiences, the context of their background, and their interpretations of their history with them in order to understand (Zimmerman, 2015). They play between interpretations of the past, present and future (Smythe & Spence, 2012) and use this to forge new horizons of understanding (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). Whilst interpretation is guided by the ego, Gadamer cautions that this may stand in the way of new horizons of understanding, and so it is crucial that individuals are able to recognise their own bias and how this may be influencing their ability to form new perspectives (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014).

Central to Gadamer's hermeneutics is the method of the hermeneutic circle which refers to the process of interpretation where one moves between the understanding of each part and the understanding of the whole (Lawn, 2006). Whilst the hermeneutic circle is usually considered as a means to interpret text, Lawn (2006) emphasises that the hermeneutic circle takes place in everyday interpretation too, which in this case could relate to both conceptual and practical applications of wellbeing. In order to understand the meaning of a section of the text readers have to understand the more general meaning of the whole text, but to understand the whole text they have to understand the themes or field the text is situated in, yet to understand these themes they have to understand the greater context of the culture or time period, and so on (Lawn, 2006). Understanding is so ensconced in the wider context of the text that to understand each phrase readers pull in their wider understandings of the world, cycling between the meanings of each moment against the meaning of the greater whole (Lawn, 2006).

This is where fore-knowledge is instinctively applied to interpretation as it establishes a horizon of understanding that encapsulates everything an individual knows about a topic and provides them with a platform to think further (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). Gadamer views the existing knowledge individuals bring to interpretation as ‘fore-having’ which in turn allows the opportunity for ‘fore-sight’ that prepares individuals for what they may expect to encounter (Smythe & Spence, 2012). Engaging in dialogue with the text through the hermeneutic circle provides the opportunity for the horizon of understanding to broaden or to create completely new horizons as individuals encounter new or challenging understandings (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). However, this growth in the horizon is not a given and requires individuals to approach the text with the aim of understanding and a mind that is open to new perspectives (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014).

Hermeneutics and the Literature Review

This research uses a hermeneutic literature review as an interpretive method to provoke thinking about teacher wellbeing policies in ECE, rather than providing a definitive solution (Smythe & Spence, 2012). A literature review is a common research method, generally used to illustrate what is already known about the topic in question, highlight any gaps in the literature, and draw new insights through a unique analysis (Cohen et al., 2017). As a common research method, there is a multitude of ways a literature review can be conducted with the style typically influenced by the research topic and field in question (Harris, 2019). In some fields of research, a literature review is considered more reliable when the researcher sets out with a strictly determined method for both acquiring and examining the literature along with a rigorously defined standard of literature to produce a definitive answer to predetermined questions (Dawidowicz, 2010). However, this would not be an appropriate method for this research as teacher wellbeing policies in ECE are so rooted in the context of the history of the sector and public opinion, and, additionally, are difficult to locate in the literature. Because of the importance of context to this phenomenon, a more interpretive method that “spans across time, discipline, genres and culture” (Smythe & Spence, 2012, p. 22) is more beneficial to the research as it makes space for a serendipitous interpretation of the topic (Cohen et al., 2017). Whilst I prioritised academic texts that centred on ECE and searched key terms related to wellbeing, leadership and policymaking, I followed my instincts in seeking literature that resonated with my understanding of the topic and used the hermeneutic circle of interpretation to explore its relevance to the greater purpose of this research. Thus, this review considers literature outside of the scope of education, government reports and news articles.

In a hermeneutic literature review, it is acknowledged that the researcher is unlikely to ever come to a final conclusion, but that their interpretations represent a process that is recognised to be ongoing and ever-changing as the topic itself evolves and changes (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). Teacher wellbeing policies are a new phenomenon yet to be explored in depth, and I expect their significance to wax and wane as the sector responds to change. Additionally, I cannot anticipate how each centre will interpret this process as this will relate to their unique needs and context, and interpretations of a myriad of concepts such as wellbeing, policymaking, leadership, and collaborative practice, and so it seems unwise to make a prediction about the sector as a whole. Because of these variables, this research can only capture the context of the topic in relation to this point in time and from my interpretation of the topic, with my horizon sure to grow and change after this dissertation is submitted. Nevertheless, I hope that this intuitive exploration into the topic will help to fill the gap in the literature concerning teacher wellbeing policies in ECE, and provide a resource that could benefit those wanting to create their own (Cohen et al., 2017).

In a hermeneutic literature review, Gadamer's hermeneutic circle is used to interpret the text as a partner in dialogue (Smythe & Spence, 2012). Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic (2014) expand on Gadamer's work by proposing two intertwined circles at play when used in a literature review; the search and acquisition circle and the analysis and interpretation circle. In the search and acquisition circle finding new literature leads to a greater understanding of the topic itself, and often leads to new and unexpected sources of interpretation with the reader moving between acquiring individual pieces of literature to considering how this contributes to a greater body of literature (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). The analysis and interpretation circle looks at how the reader interprets the content of each text and how this contributes to a greater understanding of the overall meaning of the topic itself (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). The researcher moves in and out of each circle, as the engagement with one invariably affects the course of the other. Both contribute to a gradual unfolding of the topic.

In the spirit of hermeneutics, I used an intuitive approach to engage with the search and acquisition hermeneutic circle (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014) which meant that acquiring literature occurred in many different formats. As typical of most literature reviews, I began by searching key terms related to topics such as wellbeing, leadership, policymaking, hermeneutics and so on in the AUT Library and Google Scholar databases which provided a plethora of information. From these texts, I engaged with the analysis and interpretation circle by seeking key theorists or seemingly significant ideas that drew my interest which then snowballed as I came across more and more significant leads in each of the texts (Newby, 2014). This was bolstered by recommendations from others, perusing the physical shelves of libraries, and remaining open to inspiration from other sources of media encountered in my daily life. Carried out in the spirit of open-mindedness and a questioning disposition there seemed to be new insights at every angle, with each individual text influencing my understanding of the topic as a whole.

In a hermeneutic literature review, it can often be more difficult to discern when you have reached a point of saturation, as the researcher casts a wider net by exploring outside of their own discipline and in a variety of genres (Smythe & Spence, 2012). Gadamer themselves advocated for not breaking off the conversation with the literature until absolutely necessary (Gadamer & Dutt, 2001) however, there must still come a point where the researcher stops the search and acquisition circle in order to cast a final interpretation of the data (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). In lieu of this ambiguity, Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic (2014) recommend that researchers consider saturation to be reached when their exploration into the literature struggles to offer new insights or interpretations.

The Fore-Knowledge I Bring to the Research

> At the beginning of every effort to understand is a concern about something: confronted by a question one is to answer, one's knowledge of what one is interpreting is thrown into uncertainty, and this causes one to search for an answer. In order to come up with an answer, the person then begins asking questions (Gadamer & Dutt, 2001, p. 50).

As mentioned in the introductory chapter I am an ECE teacher with a vested interest in wellbeing due to my own brush with burnout as a new graduate. By the time I joined the sector it was already in crisis, evidenced by the decades of research that documented the lack of ECE teacher wellbeing (Cumming, 2017); teachers lamented the fact that the pay was terrible, they often did not get their breaks, they were working to minimum ratios, and they had to pour their own resources into the centre to provide a rich curriculum, but these were all things that they put up with as they loved working with children. Surviving in the face of these conditions was worn almost as a badge of honour, as their selflessness proved that they were a truly passionate teacher. Having to put their own needs first in this flawed construct seemed to be perceived as a shameful admission of selfishness or greed.

Because of this, I saw wellbeing as a set of emergency procedures handed to teachers as a last resort to keep them in the sector. My own brush with work-related wellbeing support only seemed to confirm this, as I was given the time and resources to get me back on my feet and back into the centre but nothing more. Whilst this was enough for me to build some resilience, it did not change the factors that contributed to illbeing in the first place (Shirley, 2020) and I seemed doomed to repeat the process throughout my time at the centre. This momentary recognition of my wellbeing opened my mind to the idea that recognising my own needs was not a betrayal to the children but instead meant that I was better able to support them rather than living in survival mode. My own questioning of the sustainability of this sector led me to resources on genuine wellbeing that helped me to break the cycle of surviving and helped me to thrive in my role (Seligman, 2011).

As I had always had this view of wellbeing as a means to prevent illbeing, encountering the idea of wellbeing for wellbeing's sake was a revolutionary idea that created a new horizon of understanding (Zelenski, 2020). It seems so obvious now, but this was so contrary to all that I thought I knew about the topic that it filled me with questions and a desire to know more. Because of this, I began looking into wellbeing, completing further study on the subject, establishing habits to improve my own, and beginning to advocate for more genuine wellbeing practices within my own centre. I bring this experience with subjective wellbeing and my own understanding of the care of the self with me as knowledge of fore-having to this research.

My experiences working in the sector mean that I understand the multitude of contextual influences that contribute to the complexities of the role, from the social, to the economic, and the political, and how these influence both wellbeing and practice within a centre (Soykan et al., 2019). During my time in the sector, I have worked in centres that value teachers taking initiative in organisational development, and the importance of collaborative practice and democratic decision-making, but I am aware that these practices are not experienced in all centres. Part of the collaborative work I have experienced is the process of policy development, which was a regular aspect of my role as an ECE teacher (Ebbeck, 1990). In my experience, a policy is constructed in a collaborative process where each member of the teaching team is invited to share their perspective on the topic and what they want this to look like in the curriculum (Calloway et al., 2017). It is then shared with the wider community for their input and then reviewed on an annual cycle. In this way, it was hoped that all involved would be able to contribute their perspective to policymaking. Whilst this is my experience with policymaking, I am aware of the variances within the sector, and had to be mindful of my bias when interacting with literature on the topic as my assumption of collaborative policymaking may not be what is experienced in other centres. Therefore, the literature review explores different perspectives on policymaking but makes a case for models that favour collaborative policymaking that relates to the unique circumstances of the centre to reflect the contextual nature of wellbeing.

Gadamer believes that prejudice is a natural part of all understanding, and so I see these experiences as the fore-having I bring to this research (Lawn, 2006) rather than obstruent biases. Far from impeding the research, I believe that my experience in and understanding of these traditions have assisted me in feeling my way towards understanding as I move between hermeneutic circles in the literature (Nixon, 2017). Had this research been conducted from a detached objective standpoint, I am unsure as to whether the effective history would have been recognised for the active participant in dialogue that it is (Gadamer & Dutt, 2001), as this phenomenon is so specific to this particular context. The knowledge I possess positions me with the fore-sight required to be able to understand new horizons of understanding (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014), and when coupled with a mindset that is open to exploring new insights and interpretations it has opened new avenues of action that could be taken to further this movement. Whilst this dissertation represents only my interpretation of this phenomenon, I hope that its enduring themes will be beneficial to teachers exploring the possibilities of policy in supporting teacher wellbeing (Zimmerman, 2015).

Chapter Summary

This chapter represents my ontological and epistemological positioning, as I discuss the importance of history and context to all efforts of interpretation, and my alignment with the prominent theories of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics. I believe that a systematic or detached objective review of the literature would not be appropriate for this topic, and so the hermeneutic approach is adopted to acknowledge the significance of history, culture and context to the interpretation of this phenomenon (Smythe & Spence, 2012). Alas, this dissertation simply portrays my understanding of the phenomenon, complete with the prejudices that have contributed to my interpretation of it, and does not necessarily represent an ultimate truth as I cannot stand apart from my understanding of the world when forging new horizons (Smythe & Spence, 2012). Nevertheless, I hope that my interpretation of the literature and hermeneutical imagination (Gadamer & Dutt, 2001) of what teacher wellbeing policy could look like in ECE will provoke thinking about this phenomenon and help move the field forward to increased wellbeing (Cohen et al., 2017).

Chapter Three: Wellbeing as a Complex and Contextual Phenomenon

Introduction

Whilst the wellbeing of ECE teachers has been a topic of concern for at least three decades (Cumming, 2017), recent literature shows that the sector is moving beyond merely dealing with the effects of illbeing, and looking towards a sector where teacher wellbeing is expected, and supported within the curriculum (Jones et al., 2020). The creation of wellbeing policy is one of the tools used to support this shift but is yet to be explored extensively in the literature. Because centre-specific wellbeing policy is a new phenomenon, this research considers a wide range of subjects in order to better understand the topic of teacher wellbeing policy itself, exploring the horizon of understanding on this topic. A hermeneutic lens recognises that wellbeing is likely to be understood differently by each individual and each centre as they interpret the phenomenon and create shared understandings based on their own context (Zimmerman, 2015), with the interpretation of the theories presented in this chapter emerging from my own horizon of understanding (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). Regardless, playing with different interpretations provides an opportunity to expand thinking, and so whilst some of these concepts may challenge another's horizon new insights may arise from this struggle (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). This literature review will begin with an exploration of wellbeing by looking at varied understandings of the topic and what I interpret as the prevalent theories used in wellbeing literature. The review will then move into a brief exploration of ECE in Aotearoa New Zealand, before discussing the varied ways in which wellbeing presents itself in this unique sector and why a focus on wellbeing is necessary.

Wellbeing: Interpreting an Undefinable Term

Wellbeing is one of those terms that is often taken for granted in general discussion. Most individuals would claim that they understand what the term means, however, their understanding of the concept of wellbeing is likely to be unique to their own beliefs, experiences, culture, and context (Hou et al., 2021), with each individual interpreting wellbeing a little differently. Wellbeing is a fluid and dynamic concept (Higgins & Goodall, 2021), that hosts a multitude of definitions depending on the circumstance. Depending on the text, wellbeing could indicate happiness, health, purpose, safety, or an amalgamation of all of these concepts. White (2016) sees this undefinable quality of the term as its strength, as it allows for a contextual adaptation to meet a range of needs and purposes by creating space for prejudiced interpretation. Whilst the literature holds different perceptions on the definition of wellbeing, it seems to be generally agreed upon that wellbeing is something that can be achieved through intentionality, and is an ever-evolving process, rather than a set state (White, 2016).

Exploring the literature presented several key theories that influence contemporary understandings of wellbeing, significantly ‘the science of wellbeing’, hedonic and eudaimonic conceptualisations of wellbeing, subjective versus objective lenses of wellbeing, and in Aotearoa New Zealand the kaupapa Māori theory of hauora and Te Whare Tapa Whā. Whilst other notable theories contribute to the current landscape of wellbeing, I am choosing to focus on these four topics specifically, as I believe them to be the most relevant to the understanding of wellbeing in the context of ECE. This is because of the theories' influence on the construction of wellbeing discourse relevant to this time and place, as will be elaborated on later in this chapter.

Positive Psychology: The Science of Wellbeing

Jones et al. (2020) recognise that the literature on wellbeing in education seems to be mostly comprised of research that examines the ‘disease-model’ of wellbeing, in which treatments for symptoms such as burnout, stress, and teacher retention issues are discussed comprehensively. Whilst burnout, stress, and teacher retention are issues occurring frequently in the education sector globally, the disease-model of wellbeing generally only looks at how to treat symptoms caused by the system, rather than looking at what is possible beyond these (Shirley, 2020). Historically, the disease-model is the dominant lens on wellbeing and represents one of the great challenges of the sector in which wellbeing is seen as a last resort to prevent attrition rather than as a means to promote health, happiness, purpose or to enrichen the experiences of teachers (Jones et al., 2020). In contrast to the disease-model, wellbeing through the lens of positive psychology is more than the absence of symptoms but instead looks at how teachers can go further to promote a good life (Zelenski, 2020). This could be a transformative new horizon of understanding for a sector conditioned to accept illbeing as a part of their role.

According to Zelenski (2020), positive psychology was born out of a desire to move beyond traditional psychology which focused on the ills of the psyche instead of acknowledging the potential that could arise from a focus on wellbeing. In the positive psychology view of wellbeing, individuals are not aiming for the *summum bonum*, or the highest good (Shirley, 2020), but instead are focusing on ordinary behaviours that promote a richer life (Zelenski, 2020). Seligman (2011) stresses that individuals do not need to be exceptional to achieve wellbeing, but rather that it occurs in ordinary people through ordinary behaviours such as positive dispositions, engagement and relationships. Positive psychology theorises that teachers do not need to wait for a symptom to treat, but rather that wellbeing could be used to support all individuals to live a better life.

Hedonic and Eudaimonic Understandings of Wellbeing

Thorsteinsen and Vittersø (2020) point to hedonic and eudaimonic conceptualisations of wellbeing as a common framework to understand wellbeing, with the hedonic approach framed as a more defined approach to understanding wellbeing whereas eudaimonic is viewed as more complex and open to interpretation. Joshanloo and Jovanovic's (2021) interpretation of the term hedonic wellbeing centres around happiness or life satisfaction. Rather than exploring why or how someone is feeling happy, research involving hedonic wellbeing usually measures occurrences of happiness (Thorsteinsen & Vittersø, 2020). Although happiness is certainly a factor in the wellbeing of ECE teachers, focusing solely on measuring happiness fails to consider the complex and contextual influences that contribute to perceptions of happiness (White, 2016), as hermeneutics could be used to show that teachers are likely to interpret this differently based on their thoughts, feelings, experiences, and relationships with the teaching team (Zimmerman, 2015). This may be why eudaimonic wellbeing seems to be regarded more highly in research.

Eudaimonic wellbeing explores a range of different methods for achieving wellbeing that contribute to a larger picture of living 'the good life'. Joshanloo and Jovanovic (2020) give examples of eudaimonic wellbeing such as "autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life" and optimal psychosocial functioning (p. 439). Eudaimonic wellbeing is more than simply the absence of unhappiness, but instead looks for approaches to improve the greater quality of life, and empower individuals to live their life with purpose and intention. I am anticipating that my research is going to align more closely with eudaimonic wellbeing, in recognition of the multifaceted nature of wellbeing in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017). For example, wellbeing in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) relates to the concepts of not only happiness but aligns with the discourses of autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose, and psychosocial functioning in the way that it discusses the role of the teacher in empowering children. In *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) teachers have a responsibility to foster the mana of children; a Māori term which is understood in English through concepts such as the spirit, status, agency, empowerment or interconnection with others that are inherited from their family (Ministry of Education, 2017). The curriculum acknowledges mana as a holistic concept, with different approaches that can be used to relate to a higher purpose, much like eudaimonic wellbeing.

As wellbeing is a core strand of the ECE curriculum, I expect that teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand will be familiar with the eudaimonic lens of wellbeing as the curriculum provides fore-sight to understand eudaimonic wellbeing in the context of teachers' own practice. But, considering teachers' interpretations of wellbeing from the lens of hermeneutics recognises that teachers will situate themselves in a theory based on their experiences, and so whilst I might assume that eudaimonic wellbeing is more relevant to the work of teachers there may be those that find a hedonic lens more applicable. If a teacher's experiences of wellbeing relate to happiness, then their fore-sight may predispose them to relate to hedonic perspectives more closely. Experiences, existing knowledge, and relationships will influence the interpretations of new concepts.

Objective and Subjective Wellbeing

The terms subjective and objective wellbeing are very different to hedonic and eudaimonic understandings of wellbeing, but relevant to interpretations of the topic from a differing yet related angle. Whilst hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing refers to different understandings of what can lead to wellbeing in individuals, objective and subjective wellbeing relates to factors that speak to universal experiences that can be used to measure wellbeing, in comparison to measures of wellbeing that are best understood by the individual. Objective wellbeing indicates factors that contribute to wellbeing that can be easily identified or interpreted by another. White (2016) gives the examples of “quality of housing, level of education or income” (p. 6) to illustrate how objective wellbeing often presents in societal understanding through mutuality. Because objective wellbeing examines contributing factors to wellbeing that can be more easily recognised and interpreted, these standards are often used in government policy to predict wellbeing (White, 2016). Whilst the quality of housing or income can give an idea as to the quality of life of an individual, wellbeing is related to but more complex than just the context people live in. This is where an understanding of subjective wellbeing is beneficial to understanding the greater whole of wellbeing.

White (2016) defines subjective wellbeing as personal aspects of wellbeing that are recognised by the individual, for example, thoughts or feelings. Only an individual can truly recognise and thus interpret their own thoughts and feelings, which is why it is important to consider subjective wellbeing alongside the individual's context to have a greater understanding of their wellbeing. White (2016) explains that policies or programs that address subjective wellbeing generally rely on the individual to change their own behaviour, as they inquire into the participants' interpretation of a topic. The benefit of addressing subjective wellbeing, according to Joshanloo and Jovanovic (2020) is that it requires individuals to take responsibility for their own wellbeing, which promotes self-regulation skills and positive health behaviours. However, this is not always appropriate in some contexts, as behaviourist approaches such as the Ministry of Education's Gold Star fail to recognise the complex challenges that restrict individuals from changing their behaviour when an environment, structure or context is causing illbeing (White, 2016). Whilst subjective wellbeing policy can be beneficial in some contexts, in a community such as a teaching team in ECE it may be worth considering how these policies contribute to or reflect shared understanding, and whether they acknowledge potential barriers to participation (Dryzek, 1982).

Rather than focusing on either objective or subjective wellbeing in isolation, it is helpful to have an understanding of how both lenses impact the wellbeing of individuals. Because wellbeing can refer to a multitude of concepts and can be understood differently based on the perspectives of those assessing, this makes for a complex topic. Interpreting wellbeing through the hermeneutic circle presents an opportunity to expand horizons on what contributes to an individual's wellbeing, as I consider the subtle and more personal details that contribute to wellbeing in the context of the more universally accepted factors that shape my understanding of wellbeing. Rather than focusing solely on subjective or objective wellbeing, considering one aspect in relation to the other may allow a new horizon to form, for example, considering how practices centred around collaborative inquiry could influence a teacher's feelings concerning their relationships with the team and connection to the centre itself.

Wellbeing Through a Kaupapa Māori Lens

In Aotearoa New Zealand, there is an indigenous approach to understanding health and wellbeing known as hauora and Te Whare Tapa Whā. Durie (1994) explains hauora as a Māori theory that sees health as an interrelated phenomenon and uses the model Te Whare Tapa Whā to discuss the different aspects of health as the four walls of a house. The four aspects of health are discussed as "taha wairua (the spiritual side), taha hinengaro (thoughts and feelings), taha tinana (the physical side), [and] taha whānau (family)" (Durie, 1994, p. 69). As indicated by the metaphor of the house, all four aspects of health are required to be in balance for the structure to remain stable, meaning that all aspects of health are needed to experience wellbeing. In this belief, the people and places surrounding the individual are also responsible for good health, and connection to the natural environment is essential (Durie, 1994). As a balance between the four walls indicates wellbeing, poor health is believed to be a deterioration of the relationships between the four aspects of health and the individual. If any of these aspects are lacking, then the overall health of the individual begins to decline.

Because of the concepts regular use in education policy, hauora and Te Whare Tapa Whā have significantly influenced a holistic understanding of health and wellbeing in education, and as a result of this, are regularly referenced in the work of teachers (Higgins & Goodall, 2021) which is why it felt important to include this theory in the literature review. Whilst this is a comprehensive theory of health and wellbeing, and familiar to teachers in the education sector of Aotearoa New Zealand, its frequent use in English medium education is contested (Gibbons et al., 2017). Many believe that the culturally rich concepts of hauora and Te Whare Tapa Whā have been assimilated into Western understandings of health and wellbeing and are often used as buzz words, rather than recognising them as the indigenous taonga that they are (Higgins & Goodall, 2021).

Hermeneutics encourages the play between concepts that challenge us and our own understanding of the topic, believing that it is the struggle for understanding that leads to a new horizon forming (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). In my teaching career, hauora and Te Whare Tapa Whā have been regularly discussed concepts that teachers use to interpret a bicultural and holistic approach to wellbeing. Whilst I recognise the influence these concepts have had on my interpretation of wellbeing, I also recognise that hauora and Te Whare Tapa Whā are borrowed concepts that have gradually become simplified in their assimilation into New Zealand English (Barr & Seals, 2018). To twist these concepts to fit Western understandings of wellbeing for the purpose of this research feels unethical, but I cannot deny the influence these concepts have had on the sector. Whilst my discussion in chapter five acknowledges how *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) was influenced by the concepts of hauora and Te Whare Tapa Whā, in this research I choose to focus on other prominent wellbeing theories as I do not have a clear understanding of the historical and cultural context of these theories (Balfour, 1994). This is done out of solidarity with tangata whenua, the indigenous people of this land.

Early Childhood Education in Aotearoa New Zealand

In order to understand how wellbeing is perceived in early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand, it is important to understand the context that affects perceptions of wellbeing. ECE in Aotearoa New Zealand refers to the care and education of children from birth to age five typically outside of the child's home. This can be in a range of settings, from education and care centres, kindergartens, home-based care, or kohanga reo for example. Whilst the experiences of teachers in these settings tend to differ based on the curriculum, government support, and public opinion offered to the service, these services are united under the banner of early childhood education. In Aotearoa New Zealand education and care centres are the biggest supplier of services and often maintain the most freedom in designing their philosophy, curriculum, and organisational practices (New Zealand Educational Institute, 2014). Having worked solely in education and care centres this influences my perceptions of the sector, contributing to the fore-sight that emerges as I navigate the literature and explore my understanding of wellbeing and collaborative policymaking. Whilst this research in both the literature review and discussion chapters will be relevant to a variety of contexts, education and care centres are the most commonly focused upon in the literature related to wellbeing. As the largest provider of ECE I can understand why education and care centres feature most frequently in the literature, but additionally, it is argued that these teachers are likely to experience more unique challenges to their wellbeing than ECE teachers in other types of services due to the nature of the business model (Mitchell, 2019); this will be explored further at a later point in this chapter.

In Aotearoa New Zealand the economy is governed by the market principles of neoliberalism which Ptak (2015) recognises as a political and economic discourse that prioritises economic competition, choice, and entrepreneurship in the belief that this will lead to greater prosperity. In the 1980s sweeping neoliberal education reforms prioritised the private sphere of education, with those in power believing that the market rather than the state would be better able to support high-quality education (McMaster, 2013). This rise in quality was expected to develop from the competition that would occur between centres as parents became consumers and invested in centres that represented best practice (Mitchell, 2019). ECE quickly succumbed to this shift to neoliberalism as education and care centres became an investment opportunity for centre owners and corporations which meant that private centres soon outnumbered community centres (Mitchell, 2019). Switching to a business model transformed the democratic history of ECE too, as teachers were not only seen to be co-creating a learning environment but now had to consider how their practice influenced profits (Mitchell, 2019). Rather than leading to prosperity, this shift to neoliberal education has been critiqued as a failure, as divisive funding was introduced, teachers lost their professional status (Farquhar & Gibbons, 2019), and as a result job satisfaction swiftly declined without the quality of education improving (McMaster, 2013). Neoliberalism remains the dominant discourse in education which is one of the contributing factors for the majority of centres operating as education and care centres (New Zealand Educational Institute, 2014).

Interpreting the economic governance of ECE through the lens of hermeneutics supports reflection on how the neoliberal positioning of the sector contributes to teacher wellbeing today. How does society perceive teachers and a dynamic and contextual concept such as wellbeing in a business model? *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) regards teachers as “the key resource in any ECE service” (p. 59), which I find an interesting choice of language. From a hermeneutics perspective, the use of the word ‘resources’ in relation to teachers gives me pause, as when considering the base form of the word resources it seems to connote that teachers are an expendable material to be used by an organisation. It can certainly feel this way at times, as the turn to neoliberalism meant that teachers became labour as opposed to professionals, and were manipulated to participate in the business model whether they wanted to or not (Mitchell, 2019). Neoliberal education policies that normalise education and reproduce successful citizens (Gibbons & Tesar, 2020) are at odds with the vision of education presented in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) that champions a holistic, collaborative and democratic approach to learning.

Education and care teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand have the unique challenge of working towards best practice in the centre, whilst also managing the needs of a business (New Zealand Educational Institute, 2014), which means that the curriculum and care of the children can sometimes be weighed against business profits. The New Zealand Educational Institute (2014) believes that the growth in education and care centres has been detrimental to the quality of the sector, as many businesses choose to cut labour costs for profit. Whilst the quality of a centre is a highly contested topic based on a range of different factors such as ratios, resourcing, or relationships (Ewens, 2019) when considering the greater themes portrayed across a variety of texts the perception of teachers on the quality of the sector continues to deteriorate (Office of Early Childhood Education, 2022a; Cumming & Wong, 2019). Mitchell (2019) writes that for-profit centres “cannot operate as democratic and participatory organisations” (p. 75), as their priority is the company and shareholders as opposed to children, families, and teachers. This provides a challenging environment for teachers to improve both curriculum and wellbeing practices.

Reports about worsening conditions in ECE are featured regularly throughout the media, yet despite their frequency conditions are yet to improve. Particularly noteworthy reports this year include the Radio New Zealand [RNZ] piece that labelled ECE as “a horrific industry to be in” due to frequent claims to employment advocates of a toxic bullying culture (Gerritsen, 2022a), the Stuff article written about the NZEI report in which “65% of [ECE teachers] reported burnout, compared to 34% in the health work population” (Williams, 2022), or the RNZ article about the government quietly cutting funding to the heavily publicised ECE pay parity campaign in order to keep their spending in check (Gerritsen, 2022b) which all seem to point to the continuation of an overworked, under-supported, and underpaid workforce. It is no wonder that the sector struggles to retain teachers (Williams, 2022).

Concurrently, ‘quiet quitting’ is a big trend on social media and is gaining traction in the wider media, where users encourage others to only do the work that is required of them, rather than going above and beyond and burning out in the process (Krueger, 2022). However, Krueger (2022) argues that this option is not available to all careers and that for sectors such as teaching it is not quite so simple to choose where your boundary lay. Whilst quiet quitting does not seem to be an option for many ECE teachers, Andrew’s (2014) concept of ‘foot dragging’ resonates with what I have experienced in centres. When I was burnt out the tamariki still needed my care and attention, but focusing on what was essential rather than going above and beyond was an act of self-preservation and protection to ensure that I would be able to provide the tamariki with what they needed. Although the work may be tinged with bitterness for the system that exploits the love labour of teachers, Andrew (2015) recognises that despite disillusionment teachers can still show dedication and care in their work with children.

The perceived drop in quality and the growing disillusionment of ECE teachers (Office of Early Childhood Education, 2022a; Cumming & Wong, 2019) are occurring simultaneously as the government continues to push for increased attendance rates in ECE. Although attendance has dropped during the COVID-19 pandemic, statistics show that the attendance rates of children in ECE have climbed significantly in the past decade (Education Counts, 2022), with 96% of children attending ECE before starting school in 2016 (Office of Early Childhood Education, 2022a). Attendance in ECE is believed to lead to better outcomes in later life such as academic and economic achievement, improved cognitive functioning, and improved social skills, especially for children from disadvantaged families (McLeod et al., 2018). ECE is a powerful tool for improving the wellbeing of children and their families, but only if they are offered a high-quality experience (Ewens, 2019). The literature reviewed thus far seems to indicate that it might not be.

By encouraging high levels of attendance in ECE, the government is seen to be investing in a future of economic success, as children grow to be adults with potentially greater academic and economic influence (Brown et al., 2015). Whereas children were once seen as ‘the well of being’ or a direct link with the divine in European Romanticism, today’s political discourse positions them primarily as resources for future use (Kennedy, 2006). Kennedy (2006) uses hermeneutics to illustrate how adults have become disconnected from childhood, as society views children as an other and excludes them from a world built primarily for adults. Although curriculums such as *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) aspire to empower children to contribute to society, Kennedy (2006) laments that the majority of current education assimilates children into the adult world to be used as an economic resource.

The neoliberal perspective places a higher level of responsibility on ECE teachers, who are expected to cultivate the next generation of super-citizens, whilst still being treated as an unessential branch of the education sector (Gibbons & Tesar, 2020). Traditional instructional teaching views children as a vessel to be filled with knowledge, whereas modern dialogic learning where teachers work in partnership, such as in ECE, gives space for children to demonstrate their competence and capability (Kennedy, 2006). In this system children are no longer colonised subjects but rather closer to equals that can seek out their own learning and pursue what serves their wellbeing (Kennedy, 2006). The younger that a child attends an educational service, the younger they are influenced by educational policy and societal beliefs (Ewens, 2019). The possibilities of this form of social engineering are contested throughout the literature (Kaplan, 1994), however, if teachers encourage an environment where wellbeing is a valued, living concept, then children may grow to expect wellbeing as a necessity of life (Education Council, 2017).

The work of teachers in ECE is challenging as they manage the emotional, physical, intellectual, economical, and political demands of the role (Cumming & Wong, 2019). Coupled with a business model that does not prioritise their needs, and increasing pressure placed on the sector, I can understand why teachers continue to struggle with their wellbeing. If society can reach a new horizon of understanding about what is possible in relation to teacher's agency in wellbeing in ECE, White (2016) theorises that this will have flow-on effects to the greater community, in this case, children and their families, and contribute to a more well society as a whole.

What Wellbeing Feels Like in Early Childhood Education

As mentioned above, much of the literature on wellbeing in ECE explores the disease model of wellbeing where symptoms such as stress, burnout and retention issues are discussed at length (Jones et al., 2020). Mitchell (2019) reports that for teachers working in education and care that this is often worse, as teachers experience fewer opportunities to collaborate as a team, have excessive workloads, and have high turnover rates. Illbeing has almost become an expected occurrence for teachers in ECE, where a commitment to facilitating the best possible care and education of children often comes at the expense of teachers' own wellbeing as they use the limited resources they have to improve outcomes for children, rather than protecting themselves (Cumming, 2017). Soykan et al. (2019) in their research on schools in Aotearoa New Zealand note that "even individuals who are hopeful, optimistic, confident and resilient cannot manage high levels of demands without supporting resources for very long" (p. 137), illustrating the importance of systemic and structural wellbeing practices. The Ministry of Education (2017) stresses that teachers are role models for wellbeing, however, Zinsser et al. (2016) counter that teachers can only promote wellbeing if they are experiencing it themselves.

The literature explored so far demonstrates the lack of wellbeing throughout the sector and some of the constructs that stand in the way of teachers experiencing it. However, interest in the wellbeing of teachers continues to grow (Cumming, 2017) and so this is more likely to become a priority in centres in the future. Brady and Wilson (2020) believe that one of the biggest indicators of wellbeing is a management or leadership team that appears to genuinely care about the wellbeing of their teachers, rather than using it as a performative exercise. In these environments, resources and structural support are made readily available so that when teachers do come across stressful situations that this is perceived as a challenge, as opposed to a threat (Soykan et al., 2019). In these settings where wellbeing thrives, there are often strong relationships between individuals (Bates, 2018), teachers experience greater autonomy (Cumming, 2017), and structural supports are in place such as regular breaks, good ratios, and adequate pay (Bates, 2018). In order to normalise ECE centres where wellbeing is fostered, there needs to be initiatives at both political and societal levels to encourage this change (Soykan et al., 2019).

Higgins and Goodall (2021) state that teacher wellbeing is largely overlooked across policy documents in Aotearoa New Zealand but the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) details a comprehensive exploration of the concept of wellbeing, clearly defining what is expected for children and of teachers as one of the central strands in the curriculum. Although *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) does not explicitly define how wellbeing is interpreted in teachers it is worth noting that teachers in this curriculum are expected to model positive attitudes towards wellbeing, as teachers' wellbeing is believed to be intertwined with the wellbeing of the children (Ministry of Education, 2017). With the idea of wellbeing being intertwined in mind, I imagine that the many aspects of wellbeing expected in children by the curriculum should then also in turn be expected in and facilitated for teachers, as setting an expectation for one group would also affect the experiences of the other. Although the wellbeing of teachers is mentioned briefly in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) in relation to the influence this has on the wellbeing of children, the vague stance on teacher wellbeing in the curriculum could have implications for how teacher wellbeing is acknowledged in the centre (Higgins & Goodall, 2021).

Wellbeing in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) builds on the concepts of hauora and Te Whare Tapa Whā by looking at how the different aspects of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health contribute to a bigger picture of holistic health and happiness. Firstly, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) recognises that the environment must be safe, calm, predictable, and responsive to the needs of tamariki, whilst also providing opportunities for movement and healthy eating to support physical health. Next, supportive, dependable, and trustworthy adults are required to build attachment relationships to support emotional development, in which they can build on their identity and dispositions such as confidence and resilience. Mental wellbeing embraces concepts such as risk, challenge, responsibility, autonomy, and independence. Lastly, children are supported to explore their sense of self, connections to culture, and relationships with the natural environment in spiritual wellbeing.

When children are in an environment in which their wellbeing needs are met in this way this provides a foundation for them to thrive (Ministry of Education, 2017). Kennedy's (2006) work uses hermeneutics to consider the dichotomy of childhood and adulthood, recognising that whilst we consider these as two separate constructs that both groups have the same needs as human beings. Yet, I wonder if it is our perceived differences between the two groups that leads to wellbeing prioritised for one and not the other, as adults are perceived to be independent and self-reliant, yet children are seen as vulnerable and in need of adult protection (Kennedy, 2006). Perhaps it is the neoliberal perspective of independent and self-reliant adults that construes illbeing as a personal failure, as wellbeing is often linked to connection, relationships, and collective understanding (White, 2016). Whilst the curriculum acknowledges the importance of teacher wellbeing, the research and perspectives of teachers in the sector show that this is often not a priority in ECE centres, as the limited resources are focused on providing a high-quality teaching and learning environment for the children (New Zealand Educational Institute, 2014). Although a focus on teacher wellbeing is slowly becoming more common throughout the sector (Cumming, 2017) advocating for teacher wellbeing can sometimes feel like a betrayal of the children.

Maternalism and Altruism as Barriers to Professionalism

Ailwood (2008) argues that the lack of wellbeing for teachers in ECE stems from the philanthropic history of the sector, where ECE teachers often went unpaid and undervalued as the job was seen as a natural extension of the mothering role. Froebel saw the ideal ECE teacher as "the mother made conscious" (Ailwood, 2008, p. 158), and attributed the skills of the teacher to a natural, feminine instinct. Ailwood (2008) writes that historically the requirements for an ECE teacher were a joyful disposition and a love of play and childhood, meaning that it was "a lovely job for a 'not-so-bright' young girl straight from school" (May Cook, 1985, as cited by Ewens, 2019, p. 37). The implications of ECE being an ideal job for a 'not-so-bright' young person goes far beyond maternalism, but from a hermeneutic perspective raises questions of why roles that are perceived as women's work become associated with low intellect, and why jobs that centre on community and care are viewed as simple. When considered that teaching is often perceived as a calling or vocation (Ewens, 2019) that aligns with eudaimonic concepts of a higher purpose or meaning (Joshanloo & Jovanovic, 2020), Andrew (2015) believes that governments rely on this calling to perpetuate the altruistic stereotype and exploit ECE teachers. In other words, knowing that ECE teachers will feel compelled to work in this sector regardless of poor conditions and a lack of recognition means that government does not need to provide additional support. Whilst a joyful disposition and a love of play are still seen as positive qualities in a teacher focusing solely on these dispositions undermines the professional skills and knowledge required of teachers today, as the work of teachers is more than just instincts but a concerted effort to grow practice (Zhang, 2019).

The sector is still suffering from the historical and societal perspectives of maternalism and altruism with a majority female workforce and these discourses perceived as standing in the way of professional status (Ewens, 2019). ECE is often still regarded by wider society as a career that requires little education and expects teachers to endure illbeing because of a love for the role (Andrew, 2015). Andrew (2014) laments that teachers have to devote themselves to the value of their work as a means to negate the negative perspectives and lack of support from society, which means that teachers often settle for practices and centres that are 'good enough' as a result. As mentioned earlier, there is a lingering attitude in the sector that focusing on the wellbeing of teachers is selfish, as the needs of the children are expected to be above their own (Andrew, 2015). This altruistic attitude instead expects teachers to cope with illbeing, whilst simultaneously forgoing their professional status (Ball, 1994).

As the work of ECE teachers now expects qualification, registration, appraisal, self-review and professional development it raises questions about the solidarity of the wider education sector if ECE teachers are not recognised for their professional status (Ewens, 2019). Teachers can no longer rely on a joyful disposition and a love of play to foster a career in this sector but are expected to be lifelong students that reflect on their work and continue to grow their practice (Earl & Timperley, 2009). ECE teachers are held to the same professional standards as the rest of the sector and are required to demonstrate professional attributes such as implementing a bicultural curriculum, having a thorough knowledge of recent research and pedagogy, demonstrating leadership, creating an inclusive environment, and assessing and planning for learning (Education Council, 2017). ECE teachers are held accountable for their professional practice and are required to meet the professional requirements of the role to teach

(Ewens, 2019), so one would assume that they would be recognised for this work by being supported in their wellbeing. If children are to receive the benefit of ECE, then their teachers must be afforded professional status so that they can teach to the best of their ability (New Zealand Educational Institute, 2014).

Chapter Summary

Despite the popularity of the term in public discussion and the media, the literature on wellbeing emphasises that this is a concept that avoids straightforward definitions and is purposefully vague. Wellbeing is so useful as a concept because it intentionally gives space for an individual or community to adapt their definition to meet their own unique needs (Hou et al., 2021), and because of this, there are a large variety of theories and models available to analyse wellbeing based on the definition or outlook that the user chooses (White, 2016). I believe that the theory of eudaimonic wellbeing aligns most closely with the new perception of wellbeing in early childhood education, as teachers look beyond simply the absence of unpleasantness towards a sector that supports them to thrive (Zelenski, 2020).

However, at this stage, ECE teachers do not have good wellbeing, as the literature points out that the majority of teachers report feeling stressed and burnt out due to a lack of both structural and societal support (New Zealand Educational Institute, 2014). Because of this, the sector is struggling to retain teachers, which means that conditions are only worsening as those left are required to shoulder more responsibility. Yet, the sector is changing, with teachers trying to use the policy window to their advantage by pushing for more structural support to foster wellbeing. With the ECE curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) expecting teachers to model wellbeing it can be assumed that teachers should also experience wellbeing as defined by this curriculum.

The lack of wellbeing in ECE is believed to stem from a historical perspective that saw the sector as another form of mothering, and therefore a natural role for women to take that did not require compensation (Ailwood, 2008). Because of this, issues such as a lack of respect in the wider community, low pay, and limited resourcing are expected to continue in this female-dominated career unless the societal perspective of ECE teachers can change from one of a biological role to a qualified professional (Zhang, 2019). As ECE teachers are now required to demonstrate their professional capabilities through avenues such as qualifications, registrations, and ongoing professional development, it is unethical that teachers continue to be treated as if they are simply fulfilling their gendered role (Ewens, 2019).

Chapter Four: The Policymaking Professional

Introduction

Teacher wellbeing policies are a new phenomenon emerging in ECE in which ECE teachers co-construct policy based on their unique interpretations of wellbeing. The previous chapter explored the current state of wellbeing in ECE, noticing the struggles that teachers face and the ways in which these struggles are influenced by insufficient systemic support. Ailwood (2008) believes that this stems from the historical positioning of the sector, which viewed the work of ECE teachers as a natural role for women and therefore undeserving of professional recognition. Challenging this view of the natural role of women in ECE, Mitchell et al. (2019) recognise that the actual work of ECE teachers is far more complex than this perspective realises. As discussed in the previous chapter, Andrew (2015) believes that altruism and maternalism are perpetuated in ECE as this frees governments to continue exploiting both the labour and good will of teachers.

ECE teachers are guided by the ethical standards set by the then Education Council's (2017) *Our Code, Our Standards* which supports teachers to stand together as professionals with their peers in the wider education sector. This document emphasises "our trusted position in society and recognise[s] the influence we have on learners, their understanding of the world and the future wellbeing of our society" (Education Council, 2017, p. ii). Teaching is a role where an individual is expected to develop their practice over time, as society changes and the understanding of quality teaching and learning changes with it (Hall & Simeral, 2015). *Our Code, Our Standards* (Education Council, 2017) reiterates this, noting that teachers should be reflecting on practice, engaging in professional learning, seeking feedback, demonstrating leadership, and contributing to the development of organisational practices as a part of their role.

Creating policy provides an opportunity to reflect on what is important to a community, as what is documented in a material text can in turn influence what practices are normalised (Barakos, 2016). Policymaking requires teachers to step into their professional selves, reflect on the curriculum they have created, and develop organisational practices in the pursuit of continual growth (Ball, 2015). Defining what is important, and what is expected in this space at a particular moment in time provides an opportunity to revisit, reflect, and revise their approach as their practice grows and their horizon of understanding evolves (Hall & Simeral, 2015). Thus, policymaking supports professionals in the exploration and development of their practice.

This chapter considers policymaking as an integral aspect of the professional role of ECE teachers. Firstly, I engage with the literature on leadership and collaborative practice in ECE and demonstrate why this is crucial for this sector. Next, prominent theories of policymaking are explored and interpreted from the perspective of ECE. Lastly, this chapter considers examples of wellbeing policies documented in the literature and the principles that could be applied to wellbeing policy in ECE.

Relationships and Leadership in Early Childhood Education

Zinsser et al. (2016) emphasise that relationships are one of the most important factors contributing to the wellbeing of teachers and their job satisfaction. Considering ECE teachers usually work in close proximity to one another, and are regularly communicating as they co-construct the curriculum, it makes sense that these relationships are so influential to their teaching experience (Thornton & Cherrington, 2019). A close teaching team can check in with one another, support each other's wellbeing, and create a learning community where communication moves beyond the superficial, into reflective and critical organisational culture (Bates, 2018; Stanulis et al., 2019). The collaborative nature of ECE can affect how a centre approaches organisational practices such as policymaking, as teachers often work in partnership to co-construct processes that influence the centre curriculum (Ulber & Strehmel, 2019). This is why an exploration into leadership practices in ECE precedes a discussion of policymaking in this research, as the style of leadership prevalent in this sector aims to encourage democratic participation and decision-making (Hartley, 2009) which in turn affects the process of organisational policymaking.

Given the collegial nature of the work, Heikka et al. (2019) believe that leadership in ECE is often collaborative as centres can create space for teachers to regularly engage in professional dialogue and development as they plan and implement the curriculum collectively. Grinshtain and Addi-Raccah (2020) note that when this space is made that there still may be teachers that choose or feel unable to participate for a variety of complex reasons such as perceived social or cultural capital. Additionally, Mitchell (2019) acknowledges that teachers in education and care centres may experience fewer opportunities to collaborate as a team and be included in decision-making as these centres cut labour costs and consider stakeholder perspectives. The participation of ECE teachers in organisational practice can be affected by many variables at both a personal and systemic level.

Distributed leadership is a theory commonly used to understand leadership in the ECE sector that implies a notion of democratic empowerment for teachers (Hartley, 2009). In distributed leadership positional leaders are still often employed, but all teachers are considered leaders in the curriculum and have opportunities to demonstrate leadership (Denee & Thornton, 2021). This can arise naturally in the curriculum for a teaching team with robust relationships if permitted by positional leaders, as teachers use one another's strengths (Heikka et al., 2019) to work towards a shared vision (Bakuza, 2019). Although positional leaders often bear greater responsibilities in creating change and leading policy development (Barret-Tatum & Ashworth, 2021), sharing the responsibility of these tasks helps to create a learning culture where all teachers demonstrate leadership (Braybrook, 2019). Involving teachers in leadership opportunities can improve job satisfaction and commitment, which is particularly important in a sector where retaining passionate and dedicated teachers continues to be an issue (Nordstrom & Tulibaski, 2019).

In order for distributed leadership to thrive in an ECE environment, this needs to be made a priority by positional leaders (Denee & Thornton, 2021). Distributed leadership is only possible if information and decision making is purposively shared, and positional leaders are made available to support the leadership capabilities of others (Garcia Torres, 2017). Distributed leadership is evident in an environment where all teachers are leaders, change is embraced, shared goals are discussed, and teachers hold a growth mindset, ultimately leading to the improvement of the curriculum (Ulber & Strehmel, 2019). In these environments, dialogic learning is often one of the main tools of knowledge construction (Garvey et al., 2018) where teachers co-construct learning in conversation with one another. To ensure that all perspectives are honoured in the curriculum, the collaboration between teachers requires honesty, reflection, evaluation, and dedication (Ewens, 2019). When distributed leadership is enacted in this way it enables wellbeing to flourish, as teachers have strong relationships, are given autonomy, and are encouraged to bring their strengths to the curriculum. As a collaborative leadership style is likely to affect how centres approach policymaking, a participatory and democratic approach to policymaking could empower teachers in the same way.

Muddling Through: Policymaking in Early Childhood Education

The Theories of Policymaking

Policy, like wellbeing, is a term that is difficult to define as the term is given meaning dependent on its context. Policy, generally speaking, is a procedure used to organise a process, or set an expectation through documentation (Barakos, 2016). A policy can be used in a multitude of ways, for example, to take control of a situation, to help define a discourse, to protect a group of people, to push back against an idea, or to explain an approach (Colebatch, 2009). Policies can be created on a large scale such as national or international policy, or a small scale such as in an office, or even de facto policies within a family (Spolsky, 2007). As such a broad concept that applies in so many different contexts, there are many different theories about policy and policymaking, and so this research focuses on theories that I interpret as relevant to this sector. This section explores theories of policy as text and as discourse, top-down and bottom-up policy, and the role of the individual in policy creation.

Inspired by the theories of Foucault, much of Ball's work centres around the ideas of policy as text versus policy as discourse and how this influences the application of policy. Policy as text investigates the physical iteration of a policy document; what is written in the policy, what this looks like in practice, and how it is represented or interpreted by different individuals (Ball, 2015). When policy is explored through the lens of a text, it becomes a material artefact that acts on the individuals that engage with it (Barakos, 2016). Historically, this has been the prevailing method for analysing policy, as researchers focus on what is written, rather than why the policy has been written in this way (Higgins & Goodall, 2021). To explore how a policy is formed teachers could turn to the idea of policy as discourse (Ball, 2015). In the theory of policy as discourse, the focus is not only on what the policy document says but instead on how and why it was constructed. Policy as discourse looks at the taken-for-granted assumptions society has about the world, and how these influence ways of thinking about the policy subject (Ball, 2015). Examining the discourse of a policy can clarify the intentions of those who created it, for example, when a policy is used to maintain the social order or produce certain kinds of citizens as can be the case in education (Gibbons & Tesar, 2020), or when a policy is used to empower and inspire civic participation like in hermeneutics (Wagenaar, 2007). Policy as discourse encourages individuals to reflect on how and why their perception of the policy subject were formed, and how this shapes their ability to both understand the policy and create subsequent policy moving forwards (Ball, 2015).

'Top-down' and 'bottom-up' are terms used in policy theory to clarify the position of the policymakers (Wessel-Powell et al., 2019). A top-down policy is a policy that is created and enforced by those in positions of power to those they hold dominion over, for example, policies that normalise particular perspectives or behaviours, that dictate expected practices, or that allocate roles (Gibbons & Tesar, 2020). Bottom-up policy, in contrast, is policy that is created by or with those that it directly affects, for example, teachers creating a policy for their own classroom or centre (Wessel-Powell et al., 2019). Bottom-up policy is not only documented policy but refers to the regular and purposeful practice of individuals that becomes de facto or unofficial policy (Albury, 2017). Kaplan (1994) believes that policy often works best when it is bottom-up, as it gains the perspective and insights of those who the policy affects most, and helps to validate their practice as experts on the subject. When policy is bottom-up, there is often more room for this policy to be negotiated, rather than mandated, and supports individuals to be agents or entrepreneurs of policy (Wessel-Powell et al., 2019).

Ball et al. (2011b) refer to those involved in creating or encouraging the implementation of policy as policy entrepreneurs, and those they encourage in supporting their work as policy enthusiasts. I interpret Ball et al.'s (2011b) use of entrepreneur not as the neoliberal self-maximising and autonomous individual creating business for profit, but rather as the idea of an individual with an original idea to bring to a group. These two groups of entrepreneurs and enthusiasts are often the drivers behind the implementation of policy and are not necessarily those in traditional leadership positions. Policy enthusiasts can also present as policy paragons, those who embody the policy in their practice and are often referred to as examples of good practice (Ball et al., 2011b). An individual can present as a policy paragon without believing in a policy per se, as they may feel unable to be honest about their true feelings towards the policy (Ball et al., 2011b). This contradiction between the practice of a teacher and their hidden feelings is particularly relevant in a sector like ECE where the needs of the business can sometimes come before the needs of the individual (Ewens, 2019). Lastly, those who the policy directs are referred to as policy actors, and those that the policy acts upon are policy subjects (Ball, 2015). Different kinds of policies position individuals in different policy roles, as they are often required to shift in and out of roles as they work within a bricolage of policy (Ball et al., 2011a). As policy grows and shifts as teachers interact with it over time it is often referred to as a living process (Mercer, 2021).

Policy in Early Childhood Education

As teacher wellbeing policies are a new phenomenon in ECE, I am yet to find literature that explores the process of teachers constructing their own, with the literature on the more general policymaking abilities of ECE teachers also limited. Because of this, I have had to look more widely into broader theories of policymaking and discover theories that align with what I have experienced as a teacher in ECE. The literature selected represents my understanding of policymaking in ECE as experienced through my own practice and in the policy templates used widely throughout the sector.

Whilst each centre develops policy to suit its unique needs, generally, there are similarities across the centres in teachers' approach to creating policy (Calloway et al., 2017). Often, information will be gathered about the subject of the policy, discussions will be had with those involved in the policy, and a draft will then be written and reviewed before the policy is then implemented, and later reviewed for its function (Calloway et al., 2017). Calloway et al. (2017) note that model policies and policy templates can be of great use when looking to implement policies, as often these are easily modifiable and quick to implement. In ECE the Early Childhood Council (2022), the Office of Early Childhood Education (2022b), and Childspace (2022) provide policy templates on a range of subjects, however, are all yet to produce a template on teacher wellbeing policy. This means that those wanting to implement a teacher wellbeing policy are creating the policy themselves, and whilst policy development is a regular facet of the role of an ECE teacher (Ebbeck, 1990), policy creation is far less common. Calloway et al. (2017) theorise that policy creation is uncommon in ECE for a number of reasons, including the availability of policy templates, uncertainty about how to write policy, a lack of resources, the complication of bureaucratic processes, and resistance to policy change from both teachers and leaders.

Although ECE is a sector that regularly engages in policy work, ECE teachers are unlikely to experience formal policy training, and usually learn on the job as they engage with policy (Mercer, 2021). Lindblom’s theory of incrementalism aligns most closely with what I have experienced of policymaking in ECE (Mercer, 2021). In incrementalism, untrained policymakers muddle through the policy process, relying on a combination of theory, experience, and gut feeling to create policy (Mercer, 2021; Earl & Timperley, 2009). Because of incrementalism’s experimental nature, most incremental policy involves small changes over a period of time that are unlikely to rock the boat, yet, are also capable of rapid change because of this (Mercer, 2021). In ECE, policies can be either top-down, or bottom-up depending on the type of centre, but are usually incremental in nature regardless. Shdaimah et al. (2018) believe that top-down policies are generally believed to be removed from the practice of teaching, and often do not see teachers as capable of being involved in policy creation, whereas bottom-up policies usually put the work of teachers at the heart of the policy process and can be conducted collaboratively. In bottom-up policies, teachers are more likely to use an incremental policymaking style, as they experiment with how to achieve their policy goals (Cairney & Weible, 2017).

A Hermeneutic Approach to Policymaking

Emerging out of philosophical hermeneutics is a body of research that informs the practical application of hermeneutics to policymaking. Although there is only a small amount of research on hermeneutic policymaking, with much of this research conducted two or three decades ago, the key themes have particular and ongoing relevance to the experiences of teachers working in ECE. Balfour (1994) states that policymaking from a hermeneutic perspective is an interpretive process that emphasises equitable participation, the importance of context, and co-constructing a shared perspective. In the same way that classical hermeneutics interprets text, hermeneutic policymaking interprets organisational culture as text by interpreting the meaning of actors in the construction of cultural tools such as policy (Balfour, 1994). Hermeneutic policymaking dismisses the detached view of positivistic perspectives by instead prioritising a multi-layered and dialogic view of human understanding (Wagenaar, 2007). As hermeneutic policymaking considers the varied perspectives and proposed methods of the group its purpose is not to create a clear policy solution, instead Dryzek (1982) believes that policymaking is used to explore alternative options to current practice to create beneficial change and transform practice.

Hermeneutic policymaking requires equitable participation for those that the policy affects to feel empowered to participate in sharing their perspective and contributing to exploration (Wagenaar, 2007). Wagenaar (2007) recognises that equitable participation in policymaking requires that everyone is invited to contribute, for information such as the availability of resources and related texts to be made accessible to all groups, for all perspectives to be explored, and for deliberation and consensus to reflect the shared vision of the group. In hermeneutic policymaking assumptions and traditions are a part of the fore-sight required to understand different perspectives, but do not necessarily reflect the context or diversity of the group (Balfour, 1994). Balfour (1994) believes that communication, mutuality and understanding are central to hermeneutic policymaking as these produce local and contextual knowledge that reflects the diversity of those involved in the policy. Dialogic work to understand one another’s perspective provides an opportunity to create a new horizon of understanding that recognises a shared vision and empowers policymakers (Dryzek, 1982).

Because of the emphasis on community, empowerment, and shared understandings there are no enforced methods associated with hermeneutic policymaking, but rather the key theories such as the hermeneutic circle and horizons of understanding can be used to inspire collaborative practice, local curriculums and mutual understanding as policymakers balance the varied values and interests of the community. Hermeneutic policymaking could be interpreted as a celebration of policymakers and their goals.

What Can be Learned from Implementations of Wellbeing Policy

Because contextual wellbeing policy is only beginning to gain recognition in ECE, there is limited data on the results of implementing teacher wellbeing policy in the literature. Powell and Graham (2017) highlight common themes around wellbeing policy, notably, that wellbeing policy is considered beneficial to those it affects when it is specific and that it can be considered more effective when created in collaboration, which White theorises (2016) can lead to democratic empowerment. Consistent with the research on hermeneutic policymaking, Powell and Graham (2017) emphasise the influence that participant voice, locality, and context have on the acceptance and appreciation of wellbeing policy, recognising that when policy feels relevant to those it affects it is more likely to be seen as promoting wellbeing. Cumming & Wong (2019) state that wellbeing programs "have yielded improvements such as the reduction of absenteeism and turnover… increases in employee commitment to the organisation… the competitive advantage of being an 'employer of choice'", as well as improved economic performance (p. 273), showing that not only does it benefit the wellbeing of teachers, but the overall organisation. Overall, it seems as if wellbeing policies could have a significant influence on the experiences of teachers, with Shirley (2020) seeing it as an important step toward a society that peoples policy and values the individual within the organisation.

However, Shirley (2020) does caution that a wellbeing policy should only be used if created in earnest, noting that creating a wellbeing policy as a box-ticking exercise can harm those it is supposed to support as they may find the process disempowering. Similarly, if a wellbeing policy adopts a simplistic view of wellbeing that does not recognise the perspectives of teachers and the context of their understanding there is unlikely to be a significant effect on those it supports (Shirley, 2020). Lastly, Brady and Wilson (2020) found in their research that if a wellbeing policy is either made compulsory or imposed on the personal time of teachers then it could be considered ineffective. Exploring the perspective of school teachers in England, Brady and Wilson (2020) used semi-structured interviews and focus groups to research teachers' experiences of wellbeing initiatives provided by their workplace. Brady and Wilson (2020) state that compulsory wellbeing policy was perceived by research participants to be another task added to their already heaped workload, and so was considered a stressor rather than a tool to support teachers. Whilst a wellbeing policy may be introduced with good intentions, the work of Powell and Graham (2017), Shirley (2020), and Brady and Wilson (2020) indicate that without a focus on the values and interests of those it affects and a recognition of the unique context that policy is unlikely to promote wellbeing. Authenticity, earnestness, understanding and communication seem to be key to meaningful policy implementation.

Chapter Summary

A policy can have a range of meanings or a range of purposes depending on its intended context and the way it was constructed. In ECE this could be to outline health and safety regulations, define best practice, or inform families of their responsibilities whilst enrolled at the centre, but these are only a few examples of a varied and unique approach to policy. Each centre has its own approach to policy and its own perspectives on what policies could be included in its assemblage. Whilst some centres employ a top-down approach to policy, when constructed from the bottom-up policymaking could provide teachers with an opportunity to demonstrate and build on their professional capabilities by reflecting on the quality of the curriculum, growing their own practice, and contributing to organisational development (Education Council, 2017).

Distributed leadership is a theory commonly used to interpret the collaborative practice found within ECE environments and represents a model that requires intentionality and a shift in leadership dynamics to be authentic (Heikka et al., 2019). In distributed leadership, all teachers have the potential for leadership and can be invited to contribute their strengths to the curriculum to benefit the group (Denee & Thornton, 2021). Although collaborative practice may be considered common in ECE, there still may be barriers to participation that mean not all teachers are equal contributors (Grinshtain & Addi-Raccah, 2020). The prevalence of collaborative practice in some ECE centres in turn influences how teachers may interpret other areas of the curriculum, such as the creation of policy. In a distributed leadership style, policymaking is generally conducted from the bottom-up, as those that it affects are involved in the creation of policy (Wessel-Powell et al., 2019). As these teachers usually do not have any formal policy training, teachers muddle through the policy process by relying on theory, experience, and gut feeling to inform their policy decisions (Mercer, 2021).

Hermeneutics provides another perspective on policymaking, but also has ties to bottom-up policy and incremental policymaking in the ideas of encouraging teacher participation and recognising the values and interests of teachers that contribute to their unique interpretation of the topic (Dryzek, 1982). Hermeneutic policymaking centres on the concepts of participation, communication, understanding, and context and how these influence a collaborative and empowering approach to policymaking (Wagenaar, 2007). Hermeneutic policy is an interpretive approach to policymaking that looks to facilitate beneficial change by creating a shared understanding and a vision of a context-appropriate and practical method to transform practice (Balfour, 1994).

Although teacher wellbeing policies are still new to ECE, literature that explores teacher wellbeing from across the wider education sector such as the work of Powell and Graham (2017), Shirley (2020), and Brady and Wilson (2020) demonstrate how the implementation of a teacher wellbeing policy may influence the dynamics of an ECE centre. Shirley (2020) warns that a teacher wellbeing policy that is not created sincerely and with intention is unlikely to promote wellbeing but rather could lead to wellbeing deteriorating as a result. But if teachers are able to create teacher wellbeing policy that feels relevant to the perspectives of teachers and has a practical orientation to transforming wellbeing (Wagenaar, 2007) this could result in not only improved wellbeing but increased job satisfaction and commitment (Cumming & Wong, 2019).

Hermeneutic policymaking recognises that equitable participation and democratic decision-making are more likely to lead to policy that represents a shared vision and the importance of local, multi-layered perspectives (Balfour, 1994; Wagenaar, 2007). In a sector such as ECE where teachers are working collaboratively to create policy that represents a shared philosophy of the centre curriculum (Calloway et al., 2017), hermeneutics offers an opportunity to consider how the policymaking process invites the diverse perspectives of teachers, and represents these perspectives in a collective approach (Dryzek, 1982). Despite the lull of research on hermeneutic policymaking since the early 2000s, this research appeals for a revival of the hermeneutic approach, as I believe this has the potential to contribute much to our understanding and application of leadership and policymaking in ECE.

Chapter Five: Hermeneutic Teacher Wellbeing Policy

Introduction

This chapter uses the literature explored in the dissertation thus far to imagine how an ECE centre might approach the process of creating a teacher wellbeing policy from a hermeneutic perspective. By interpreting the insights gleaned from hermeneutics as well as the literature on wellbeing, leadership, and policymaking this chapter hopes to provide new perspectives on how policymaking could be used to support teacher wellbeing. In doing so, I aim to fill a gap in the literature that recognises the values of collaborative practice that have guided the development of ECE leadership in Aotearoa New Zealand (Denee & Thornton, 2021). Teacher wellbeing policy is a tool that could spur the societal change required for the professional, political, and economic recognition of the work of ECE teachers (Soykan et al., 2019) as the wider public becomes aware of the influence wellbeing could have. This grassroots effort would not only support ECE teachers but in theory would lead to increased wellbeing in the wider community as well (White, 2016).

With such a diverse range of centres and curriculums there is never going to be one approach to creating wellbeing policy that works for all centres, this is to be expected. Although policy templates from the likes of the Early Childhood Council (2022), the Office of Early Childhood Education (2022b) or Childspace (2022) are commonly used through the sector I do not believe that they would be useful in this situation. White (2016) emphasises the importance of context to understanding wellbeing, noting that this concept is typically unique to each individual and thus needs an individualised approach. A contextual and complex approach to supporting wellbeing aligns with what I would perceive to be the core principles of hermeneutic policymaking – participation, communication, understanding and context – which suggest a path for creating policy that recognises wellbeing in relation to the specific context of the community. Thus, this chapter will explore how hermeneutics could influence the discourse of creating a wellbeing policy in an ECE centre as well as the material text of a wellbeing policy and how this influences practice (Ball, 2015), noting the two distinct phases of creation and reflection. This chapter hopes to provoke thinking about how wellbeing could be both understood and promoted through the use of policy (Smythe & Spence, 2012).

As mentioned earlier in the dissertation, this representation of my hermeneutical imagination can only consider what is known about this phenomenon in relation to this time and place (Gadamer & Dutt, 2001), with theory and practice expected to develop as time goes on. The ideas presented in this chapter demonstrate my own engagement with the hermeneutic circle of interpretation, as I cycle between the importance of each point to the greater whole of teacher wellbeing policy in ECE (Lawn, 2006). Nevertheless, the offerings in this chapter represent enduring concepts of collaborative practice for ECE centres to explore how wellbeing could be better supported within their own context.

Barriers to Participation in Policymaking

Our Code, Our Standards (Education Council, 2017) encourages all teachers to take leadership and work towards the pursuit of organisational development, regardless of whether they are in a traditional leadership position or not. Whilst this may be a reasonable expectation in some centres, research on leadership in ECE shows that this is not always the case due to issues such as a lack of priority or support provided by positional leaders (Denee & Thornton, 2021), structural issues such as a lack of time or limited professional development (Thornton & Cherrington, 2019), or contrasting perceptions of leadership (Garcia Torres, 2017). From a hermeneutic perspective, policymaking is more effective when it represents the interpretations of all that it affects, as it recognises the complexity and multi-layered nature of concepts, and prioritises democratic decision-making that represents the group understanding (Wagenaar, 2007). Ball (2015) suggests all teachers can be involved in not only policy review, but the roles of policy creation and development too. The stance outlined in *Our Code, Our Standards* (Education Council, 2017) provides a baseline for teachers to explore their professional role through policymaking as a reflection of their professional relationships and identity.

One of the consequences of neoliberal education policy in Aotearoa New Zealand is the competitive market principles that constrain ECE which makes advocating for change difficult, particularly in an education and care setting (Mitchell, 2019), as all new concepts will first be evaluated against their potential cost to the centre as a business (Brown et al., 2014). Gerritsen (2022a) voices the perspectives of teachers that struggle to ask positional leaders for funding to cover even basic resources, let alone experimental practice such as a teacher wellbeing policy. Whilst increased salaries, a larger resourcing budget, more teachers employed for better ratios, and a luxurious break room would certainly be a pleasant bonus to teachers a wellbeing policy does not need to have a large budget behind it. Instead, the research emphasises that the practices most likely to improve wellbeing are related to social and emotional development (Soykan et al., 2019; Bates, 2018; Cumming, 2017), connection, and understanding (Balfour, 1994).

Regardless, those interested in creating a wellbeing policy will likely have to ‘sell’ the policy to those in traditional leadership positions in order for the policy to be structurally supported. Whilst a policy can be created by teachers, Denee and Thornton (2021) believe that it is unlikely to create significant change without the support of those in more powerful positions that can oversee structural change. Rather than expecting a large financial investment, the largest cost to the employer will be a commitment of time to ensure that the policy is created collaboratively, honestly, and earnestly (Shirley, 2020). Cumming and Wong (2019) reiterate that whilst this requires significant effort and is unlikely to be a straightforward process that the reward is worth the investment, noting that as the wellbeing of teachers improves so could commitment to their job, economic performance, the desirability of the centre and the wellbeing of the children themselves. Ultimately, it is more cost-effective to have well teachers, rather than pay for the consequences of teachers having poor wellbeing (Cumming & Wong, 2019).

Whilst a centre may make a concerted effort to invite collaboration to policymaking so that all teachers are able to share their perspectives and feel represented by the text (Powell & Graham, 2017), Garcia Torres (2017) recognises that the perceptions of distributed practice often vary between different members of a teaching team, for example, positional leaders believing their leadership approach to be distributed, but teachers not believing it to be so. Authentically implementing distributed leadership or hermeneutic policymaking is no simple shift in practice (Denee & Thornton, 2021) but rather takes a concerted effort to become a democratic process (Hartley, 2009). Although a centre may invite their teaching team to contribute to decision-making, Grinshtain & Addi-Raccah (2020) emphasise that there are likely to be other factors that prevent staff members from sharing their perspective, for example, the cultural capital they possess in wider society, or the social capital that they wield at the centre. These influences can be mitigated, but only if positional leaders are aware and provide an equitable space for collaboration.

As mentioned in chapter four, Wagenaar (2007) recognises that participation in policymaking can only be equitable when contextual and significant information is made accessible to all groups involved. In the context of creating teacher wellbeing policy this could relate to honesty about teacher's experiences of wellbeing in the centre, the availability of resources to support wellbeing, and related texts such as other policies or parent feedback that could influence how wellbeing is approached in this space. Some of this information may be delicate, but having access to contextual information on the policy topic means that policymakers will have a more informed approach to creating policy that is more likely to create transformational change (Wagenaar, 2007; Dryzek, 1982). I envisage this in the wider sector too, as when teachers and centres share their experiences with teacher wellbeing and policymaking to the ECE community this works in solidarity by advocating for joint action and validating the experiences of those affected by the policy (Balfour, 1994). The more accessible information is on how teachers are experiencing wellbeing and wellbeing related policy in ECE, the more likely the sector is able understand the phenomenon and strengthen its approach (Balfour, 1994).

Collaborating with those that the policy affects helps ensure that the policymaking process is meaningful to the lived experiences of individuals (Wessel-Powell et al., 2019). Yet, there may be those that choose not to become involved in the policymaking process, particularly in a sector such as ECE because of minimal professional recognition. However, Andrew (2014) notes that whilst deliberate withdrawal from additional work does occur occasionally that this is not typical for most ECE teachers, as their investment into the emotional capital associated with their job inspires teachers to contribute more of their own resources to work towards best practice. To encourage this self-resourcing seems contrary to what is recommended in the research on wellbeing as this is generally seen as exploitation (Cumming, 2017), however, when grassroots policymaking is introduced by the teaching team it is precisely this enthusiasm that may influence the acceptance of the policy by the wider group (Ball, 2015). If the perspective of Andrew (2014) is an honest reflection of the sector, then it is worth considering whether all teachers in the centre feel able to contribute to the policymaking process, and what barriers might be preventing them from doing so. Do all teachers voluntarily share their perspectives in team discussions? Are those that are choosing not to contribute doing so because there is nothing they wish to share, or because they do not feel comfortable contributing to this space?

Hermeneutics could support teachers to understand that each individual could have a different interpretation of their role in leadership and contributing to policy, and may feel uncomfortable participating in a topic that requires honesty and vulnerability (Ewens, 2019). Whilst relationships bolstered by trust and mutual respect facilitate honest conversations outside of teachers' comfort zones (Thornton, 2015) it may be worth considering why others do not feel comfortable collaborating on creating a teacher wellbeing policy. This could be for a multitude of reasons; a lack of understanding or interest in the policy topic, their imagined social capital in the centre or where they believe themselves positioned in the social hierarchy (Ivana, 2017), or influences such as culture and beliefs which impact their ease in voicing their opinions (Grinshtain & Addi-Raccah, 2020). Understanding the context of another's perspective supports individuals to understand their attitude towards it and may facilitate more authentic collaboration.

The Discourse of Hermeneutic Policymaking

As established in both chapters two and four of this research, hermeneutics is a way to understand how individuals interpret texts such as documents, conversations, or organisational practices (Wagenaar, 2007). Zimmerman (2015) acknowledges that an individual understands the world in sum of a multitude of factors including their experiences, interactions with others, and the context that they live in. As individuals experience the world in different ways interpretation and understanding are likely to differ from person to person, presenting as values, interests and beliefs (Dryzek, 1982). But when hermeneutics is applied to policymaking, I see echoes of Gadamer's interest in solidarity (Lawn, 2006), as the function of hermeneutic policy shifts from understanding at an individual level to how to build group notions of togetherness, democracy and participation for creating a shared vision (Balfour, 1994).

When teachers consider that their colleagues will interpret wellbeing, policymaking, and the context of the centre from a unique perspective shaped from their personal context it makes a case for a hermeneutic approach to policymaking that balances various perspectives to create a new horizon (Dryzek, 1982). Rather than rushing into creation and implementation, hermeneutics invites teachers to revel in the process of policymaking, spending time understanding one another's perspective in order to create a policy that is meaningful for those it affects (Earl & Timperley, 2009; Ball, 2015). There is unlikely to be a definitive solution to wellbeing issues provided by policy and policymaking (Dryzek, 1982), but teachers feeling empowered by policy that recognises their worldview and the unique details that make up their context is more likely to contribute to wellbeing (Powell & Graham, 2017).

To understand the context of a policy topic, Balfour (1994) recommends considering not only the historical and local context of the topic, but the connections this topic has to other texts and how these texts influence understanding. As both a historical and local document and a text that connects to ECE teachers' understandings of wellbeing, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) shares significant similarities with key concepts of hermeneutic policymaking. *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) itself was a policy document created collaboratively with the sector to define a shared understanding of ECE in Aotearoa New Zealand, and champions relationships, community, participation, and empowerment as crucial to understanding (Te One & Ewens, 2019). Researchers such as Thornton (2015), Zinsser et al. (2016), and Garvey et al. (2018) reiterate the importance of relationships noting that the literature on leadership in ECE recognises the importance of trust, empathy, honesty, and mutual respect to teachers understanding the perspectives of their peers and the understanding of wellbeing. These connections seem to encourage hermeneutic policymaking in ECE, as opposed to commonly used policy templates.

Collaborative Policymaking and Hermeneutics

Individuals will interpret topics based on their interactions with and experiences in the world which contributes to a horizon of understanding. Central to hermeneutics is the concept of horizons, acknowledging all that one knows about a topic with fore-sight recognised as what allows an individual to see beyond their horizon (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). Whilst fore-sight provides an opportunity to grow understanding or grapple with unfamiliar ideas, bias, whilst necessary to fore-sight, can limit understanding if not recognised (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). When interacting with a new concept that challenges our horizon of understanding, such as the challenging perspective of another, hermeneutics encourages individuals to sit in and struggle through the process of understanding to forge a new horizon, attempting to look beyond assumptions or default responses (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021).

When considering the many different horizons and interpretations present in a teaching team, I was initially daunted by the idea of trying to unite these perspectives to form a collective vision. However, attempting to understand the challenging horizon of another presents an opportunity to explore these ideas together in dialogic learning, recognising similarities and differences, nuances, the shaping of these interpretations, and how this contributes to either an evolved or entirely new horizon that honours different facets of each (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). These discussions could occur between a teaching team, as teachers unpack their perspectives on wellbeing, work to understand others' interpretations, and use the richness provided by collective thinking to transform the centre consciousness (Balfour, 1994).

Rich relationships scaffold teachers to move beyond superficial conversations (Stanulis et al., 2019) to co-constructive inquiry (Langdon, 2017), where conversational partners are able to listen for not only the outer voice but the inner voice as well (Roberts, 2020). It is the variances of perspectives between the group that often provide the rich evidence required to create meaningful policy (Thornton, 2015). Overcoming potential barriers to participation and understanding one another’s interpretations of wellbeing creates space for authentic conversations about what a shared vision of wellbeing could look like in the centre, and how this could be achievable (Garvey et al., 2018). Discussions such as the teacher’s interpretations of wellbeing, their reflections on wellbeing in relation to practice, and an awareness of what contributes to wellbeing in their personal lives could be used as evidence in an incremental and hermeneutic approach to policy (Mercer, 2021). This newly constructed shared vision of wellbeing can then be used to imagine joint action to create beneficial change (Dryzek, 1982).

Rather than adhering to any theoretical purism or predetermined policy template, it is these unique contextual details that will support teachers to feel represented by the policy which in turn is likely to promote wellbeing in itself (Powell & Graham, 2017). Not only could this policymaking process produce a text that defines how teachers will be supported in this space, but the discourse of creating a teacher wellbeing policy could encourage teachers to become better attuned to one another and their unique wellbeing needs (Ball, 2015), potentially leading to teachers that are better able to support each other as a teaching team. The beauty of creating a wellbeing policy is more likely to come from the process of creating it, rather than an end policy product, as this is a highly contextualised phenomenon that needs to be handled with care in order to be beneficial.

Policy as Text: Inspiration for the Policy Document Itself

The discourse in the policymaking process is likely to affect the outcome of the written policy itself, as the position outlined in the text of a policy document can influence what practice is normalised within the centre (Barakos, 2016). The points or goals outlined in the document may define the centre's understanding of wellbeing, describe the centre's approach to supporting wellbeing, or what resources are available to teachers when experiencing illbeing (Colebatch, 2009) – this will be dependent on the centre's collective understanding of wellbeing, their unique context, and needs. As the documented policy is likely to affect the experience of teachers going forwards, collaborating to define the purpose of the policy and its intended function will affect how this policy influences the practice of teachers in future (Barakos, 2016; Dryzek, 1982).

Soykan et al. (2019) emphasise that a wellbeing policy is unlikely to fix all wellbeing related issues, but could provide the support needed for teachers to deal with stress as a challenge, rather than a threat. Although wellbeing is a complex and contextual topic, contemporary use of the word insinuates that a focus on wellbeing should go beyond the disease-model that simply seeks to remove stress (Jones et al., 2022), but instead support teachers to feel fulfilled by experiencing meaning and purpose in their role, however they may interpret this (Zelenski, 2020; Joshanloo & Jovanovic, 2020). Although it is unrealistic to expect significant monetary funding for the policy in the business model of ECE (Mitchell, 2019), if positional leaders are frank about what they are willing to contribute to support teacher wellbeing, whether the resource is time, commitment, or money then policymakers can document this expectation in the written policy. This conversation would benefit from honesty and earnestness from both sides so that there is a mutual understanding of the resources available to support teacher wellbeing. As mentioned in the section above, the policy is unlikely to have a significant effect if not supported by positional leaders (Denee & Thornton, 2021).

The Ministry of Education (2022) provides a basic outline of policymaking to guide those unfamiliar with the process which directs teachers to create a rationale and objectives for the policy, then followed by procedures which outline the practices that will achieve the policy's purpose. As emphasised in the section above, each centre's approach to policymaking and a teacher wellbeing policy specifically will be related to the team's unique understanding of wellbeing and the distinct qualities of their context. Hermeneutics does not favour one direct method for creating policy, but rather a creative process that represents the shared vision of the teaching team, the influence of the centre context, and the recognition that knowledge is multi-layered and complex (Balfour, 1994). Nevertheless, the outline provided by the Ministry of Education (2022) can be a beneficial tool to scaffold teachers through the process if unfamiliar.

To reiterate, Powell and Graham (2017) state that a policy is more likely to be beneficial if it is specific, and so clarifying the procedures outlined to achieve the intended function of the policy could assist with understanding how each procedure relates to the greater purpose of the policy and the collective understanding of the centre. If a policy is deemed inconvenient, a burden, or simply additional work Shirley (2020) suggests that this may lead teachers further towards illbeing than they were before the policy was implemented. The fine line between creating a policy that is supportive of wellbeing and a policy that is a barrier seems to rest on the teacher's interpretation of its function. Policymaking is a complex process, but hermeneutics could be the key to designing policy that promotes teacher wellbeing as it advocates for a bottom-up, dialogic, and contextual approach to supporting teachers.

Once teachers have created a shared horizon of understanding in relation to wellbeing, and the purpose of the policy, ways to promote wellbeing in the centre may naturally begin to arise whilst planning the policy text as teachers use their fore-sight to predict what could work in this space. Wellbeing is going to look different from centre to centre, but the literature on wellbeing theory in ECE provides inspiration for those looking for specific practices that would support their teaching team. The following section hopes to provoke thinking about specific practices that may promote wellbeing in an ECE context.

Taking Inspiration from Different Wellbeing Theories

The theories explored in the wellbeing chapter – positive psychology, hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing, objective and subjective wellbeing, and the suggestions offered by *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) – present different yet interrelated perspectives of how wellbeing could be supported in a teacher wellbeing policy. This section of the dissertation provides practice-focused examples of each theory to explore different procedures for promoting wellbeing, however, these are suggestions, and what works for one centre will not necessarily be relevant for another as a centre's approach to wellbeing will be unique to the shared horizon of the team. Whilst using the hermeneutic circle will support policymakers to consider how each of these theories might align with the intended purpose of their policy, the hermeneutic circle can also be used to explore how each procedure of the policy, the practice that leads to wellbeing, relates to the greater function of the policy (Lawn, 2006); whilst each point is important in its own right, it would be beneficial if it also related to the discourse of the complete text. Rather than simply adopting the strategies offered by one theory, I encourage policy writers to take inspiration from different parts of theories in the spirit of incrementalism, forging an approach that is wholly their own (Ball, 1994). Exploring the team's shared horizon of understanding on wellbeing in relation to the different theories will help centres to understand how this might apply to their context.

To summarise the positive psychology theory, wellbeing does not necessarily need to come from extreme measures, but rather by focusing on the ordinary and everyday behaviours that promote feelings of fulfilment and contentment (Zelenski, 2020). Positive psychologists believe that for many individuals wellbeing comes from experiencing positive emotions, engagement, relationships, and accomplishments (Seligman, 2011). In an ECE context, I imagine this as encouraging teachers to follow their passions, building a culture of contribution and collaboration where every voice is heard, strengthening relationships through honest and earnest interactions with regular opportunities to connect, and celebrating the learning and development of teachers' practice. Ultimately, these aspects centre around social connection, respect and inclusion which, although complex, are not expensive to consider in the curriculum. Rather than waiting for illbeing to occur, from the positive psychologist perspective, these four aspects of wellbeing could be an every day, established, and expected aspect of the curriculum (Zelenski, 2020). It may be beneficial to invite discussion on this theory with the teaching team, reflecting on moments that have brought positive emotions, engagement, relationships and accomplishments, and how these instances could be incorporated more regularly into the curriculum.

When considering eudaimonic wellbeing as opposed to hedonic wellbeing teachers are looking beyond simple measures of happiness towards a larger picture of living the good life (Thorsteinsen & Vittersø, 2020). Eudaimonic wellbeing focuses on finding fulfilment, meaning, or purpose in life through measures such as autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth and psychosocial functioning (Joshanloo & Jovanovic, 2020). In the context of ECE, a dynamic such as distributed leadership could be used to promote the autonomy and environmental mastery of teachers as they make decisions about the curriculum, construct the learning environment, show leadership, and collaborate with others towards shared goals (Heikka et al., 2019). As illustrated in the discussion of the discourse of creating a teacher wellbeing policy, enacting distributed leadership is supported by a significant commitment to make participation equitable. This may require centres to reflect on and examine power structures or barriers that prevent teachers from participating like their peers (Grinshtain & Addi-Raccah, 2020). Eudaimonic wellbeing prioritises the agency of teachers, recognising that teachers are more likely to feel committed to a space if they are able to adapt it to their own needs through meaningful changes (Nordstrom & Tulibaski, 2019), and so could be a meaningful way to support teachers wellbeing and encourage their longevity in the sector.

Objective wellbeing relates to factors that contribute to wellbeing that are easily measured by an outsider. Often, these are the structural areas that are controlled by those in traditional leadership positions, such as adequate pay, a fair workload, and a relaxing and comfortable area to have breaks in (White, 2016). Whilst these areas are touted as having a significant influence on teacher wellbeing, realistically, these are the areas that are more challenging to improve due to tight budgeting and the business model, but still need to be acknowledged all the same (Bates, 2018; Mitchell, 2019). In contrast, subjective wellbeing prioritises the experiences of the individual which, in this case, could refer to the thoughts and feelings of teachers concerning their wellbeing (White, 2016). Considering the importance of 'feelings talk' to the wellbeing curriculum in ECE and the interdependent wellbeing of children and teachers (Ministry of Education, 2017) teachers are likely to be familiar with discussing their thoughts and feelings with one another.

Rather than a totally objective document, the discourse on wellbeing demonstrates that a wellbeing policy can be 'peopled' with the emotions of teachers (Cumming & Wong, 2019), particularly in this sector that has such close ties to caregiving. Whilst behaviourist approaches can be useful for a specific purpose, teachers' thoughts and feelings could be considered justifiable indicators of wellbeing (White, 2016), with the policy specifically alluding to how the thoughts and feelings of teachers will be addressed. I interpret this as a culture of honesty, regular check-ins with one another, and positional leaders that model 'feelings talk' and are transparent with the support they are willing to provide. As with the other theories, it would be worth reflecting on whether teachers are welcomed to contribute their thoughts and feelings to the curriculum, and whether the thoughts and feelings of teachers are recognised as valid evidence of the curriculum's success.

Lastly, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) itself is probably the most accessible method for engaging with wellbeing theory as it is an embedded consideration in the everyday work of teachers. *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) builds on Durie's (1994) model of hauora and Te Whare Tapa Whā by considering wellbeing as a holistic model of health influenced by mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health. As mentioned in the wellbeing chapter earlier in this dissertation the frequent use of this kaupapa Māori model is contested as many believe it has been simplified to fit in with Western understandings of health and wellbeing (Higgins & Goodall, 2021). Nevertheless, this is a lens many teachers are likely to be familiar with, or at least the centre-specific extension offered by the curriculum, and so it could be a particularly useful tool for introducing discussions about wellbeing expectations for teachers. In the next paragraph, I use my hermeneutical imagination to interpret how the wellbeing curriculum for children could also be adapted to better support teachers.

Using *Te Whāriki* as a springboard for wellbeing practices could start with an environment that is safe, calm, and responsive for teachers to protect physical wellbeing. I interpret this as a quiet and calm place to rest on break, having teacher-sized furniture and resources that prevented teachers from straining their bodies, and giving teachers the freedom to reconstruct the environment as they see fit (Bates, 2018; Cumming & Wong, 2019). To promote the emotional development of teachers, relationships are likely to be at the heart of the curriculum, there could be regular opportunities for collaboration, and positional leaders could be available to provide support, reassurance, and professional challenges (Thornton & Cherrington, 2019). Similarly, teachers could have the opportunity to explore their practice, embracing risk, challenge, and autonomy to demonstrate leadership and professional growth whilst building on their mental wellbeing. Lastly, teachers could benefit from being free to express their identity at the centre, whether this is in the form of culture, language, or personal beliefs (Hou et al., 2021). *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) weaves concepts of different theories such as positive psychology, eudaimonic wellbeing, and objective and subjective wellbeing to recognise that wellbeing is a complex, holistic, and multifaceted process of health and happiness. The approach to wellbeing in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) recognises a holistic, interrelated approach that is only briefly summarised here. The curriculum itself could be a fantastic tool to begin an inquiry into how wellbeing is nurtured for children in the centre, and whether these same principles are being facilitated for teachers.

Implementing a Wellbeing Policy

Once a policy has been constructed that has a clear vision of what it wants to achieve, recognises the unique perspective on wellbeing of the teachers, and has achievable goals or actions to meet the vision of wellbeing articulated in the policy then this should be documented as an official text. However, Calloway et al. (2017) emphasise that the discourse on this policy is unlikely to stop when it becomes a text, but rather continues to be reflected on as teachers experience the policy and evaluate its function. Policy is a living process that shifts and changes as teachers interact with it and practice develops to ensure that it stays relevant (Mercer, 2021). Whilst this policy may represent an authentic and meaningful engagement with wellbeing at the time of creation the perspectives and needs of teachers are likely to change as time goes on (Lawn, 2006), so regular review of the policy should be conducted to ensure that it is still meeting the needs of those it affects (Calloway et al., 2017; Ball, 2015). As reflection continues and the policy evolves its content is likely to become richer and more meaningful as a guiding text.

Chapter Summary

There is never going to be one approach to creating a wellbeing policy that works for all ECE centres as the phenomenon is too contextual. Whilst policy templates are used widely throughout the sector (Calloway et al., 2017) it is simply not appropriate here as the most important aspect of creating a wellbeing policy is the process, more so than the end product. The literature on wellbeing emphasises that this is a phenomenon understood differently by each individual as a result of their past, present, and future interactions with the world around them (Hou et al., 2021; Zimmerman, 2015) and so centres could benefit from engaging with the unique perspectives on wellbeing of their teaching team in order for a policy to be authentic and meaningful to the context.

Incorporating hermeneutics into the policymaking process recognises that it is often the nuance presented in the struggle of interpreting one another's perceptions that provides the rich and meaningful context required for a policy to be authentic (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). In other words, it is the unique interpretations of each teacher that contribute to a policy that is specifically relevant to these teachers and this curriculum (Powell & Graham, 2017). Connecting with one another to understand perceptions of not only wellbeing, but policymaking, and each other's ability to contribute to the curriculum is time-consuming but supports the policy to be of benefit to teachers, rather than a burden (Shirley, 2020). These perspectives, the context of the centre, and the literature on wellbeing can be used as evidence for teachers to design policy incrementally, creating a text that meets the intended rationale (Mercer, 2021). Once this policy is created this should receive regular review to ensure that it is still meeting the needs of teachers and consequently evolving with their perspectives (Calloway et al., 2017).

Whilst change in ECE is often hindered by perceived cost to the business (Mitchell, 2019), Seligman (2011) recognises that the most influential wellbeing tools are likely to be those that do not require money but rather a commitment of time and dedication to getting it right. Despite most texts conceding the varied definition of the term, in reviewing the dominant theories of wellbeing the themes of relationships, autonomy, and agency regularly feature alongside acknowledgements that even these concepts are likely to be contextual. A wellbeing policy does not need to fix all wellbeing related issues but instead could provide teachers with the resources to meet stress as a challenge (Soykan et al., 2019). Whilst this will require a genuine earnestness from positional leaders, from an instrumental lens it is likely to be far more prosperous to have well teachers that feel supported in their role than teachers experiencing illbeing (Cumming & Wong, 2019).

Chapter Six: Hope, Commitment, and Community for a Well Society

Introduction

This research represents a snapshot of the emerging phenomenon of centre-specific teacher wellbeing policies in ECE. I am unable to find this topic explored in the research as of yet, and so this literature review used a hermeneutic process to explore a wide range of literature to better understand this phenomenon and imagine a hermeneutic method for engaging in teacher wellbeing policy in ECE. This research was conducted in solidarity with ECE teachers who are using policymaking as a tool to subvert societal perceptions of the role of teachers by advocating for their own wellbeing and instead being recognised for their complex role as teaching professionals (Mitchell et al., 2019). I hope that after this research is published interest in teachers' wellbeing only continues to grow and that teachers can begin to rely on structural support to promote wellbeing also. This chapter summarises the discourse explored thus far, examines the implications of the research, and looks towards ways this topic could be explored in future, before discussing final thoughts and closing the dissertation.

Summary of the Research

My own experiences as an ECE teacher involved burning out as a beginning teacher and frequent observations of other ECE teachers struggling with illbeing and thus choosing to leave the sector. I found these experiences concerning, particularly when coupled with nationwide reports that teachers' wellbeing was only worsening and that the sector was struggling to retain teachers as a whole (New Zealand Educational Institute, 2014). After finding strategies to support my own wellbeing whilst working in ECE, I was excited to see more frequent discussions on online forums about teachers looking to create wellbeing policies for their own centres to try and mitigate the illbeing that was widespread throughout the sector. What was lamented in these online discussions was the lack of resources to support this journey, despite both the Ministry of Education and the government's supposed desire to support teacher wellbeing. Excited by the potential of this tool to create meaningful change, I embarked on this research to hopefully fill the gap in the literature and provide ECE teachers with a practical resource to support this process (Yates, 2004).

This research used Gadamer's lens of philosophical hermeneutics to engage with the literature and imagine what teacher wellbeing policy could look like in ECE. Gadamer's theories centre around the concepts of a historically affected consciousness, horizons of understanding, the hermeneutic circle, and solidarity (Lawn, 2006). These concepts recognise that an individual interprets the world based on their experiences within it, using these interpretations to understand new experiences by relating each new concept to the greater context that surrounds it (Zimmerman, 2015). This not only helped me to navigate the literature by situating myself in it (Nixon, 2017) but supported me in engaging my hermeneutical imagination to provoke thinking about how an ECE centre could create a policy to support teacher wellbeing. This influenced the way I engaged with literature as I examined how each source contributed to the greater purpose of this research, creating a new horizon on teacher wellbeing policy that was influenced by theories from a range of contexts (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). Policymaking from a hermeneutic perspective prioritises participation, communication, understanding and context (Balfour, 1994) which align with the democratic and empowering practice envisioned in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017; Te One & Ewens, 2019).

Hou et al. (2021) state that wellbeing is a term that is understood differently by each person depending on their experiences, beliefs, and culture. Despite the variety of interpretations, White (2016) claims that wellbeing is often perceived as an ever-evolving process that lies somewhere in the domains of health, happiness, or purpose. Whilst Jones et al. (2020) found that the majority of the literature to date on teacher wellbeing in ECE examined the symptoms of the disease-model such as stress and burnout, generally, the literature is now looking beyond these symptoms to a sector where wellbeing is to be expected for teachers and supports them to find purpose and meaning through their work. The prominent theories of positive psychology, hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing, objective and subjective wellbeing, and hauora and Te Whare Tapa Whā were explored as different lenses of an interrelated concept and interpreted in relation to their relevance in ECE. The ECE curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) recognises that the wellbeing of teachers is reflected in the wellbeing of children and thus this implies that teacher wellbeing could be focused on in more depth.

Ewens (2019) maintains that society is unlikely to move beyond the historical perspective of maternalism until ECE teachers are perceived as professionals worthy of wellbeing. *Our Code, Our Standards* (Education Council, 2017) expects the same professional requirements of ECE teachers as their peers in the wider education sector, but the perceived altruism of ECE teachers is often exploited by neoliberal discourse that normalises this position to its own benefit (Gibbons, 2020; Gibbons & Tesar, 2020). Policymaking could be used as a tool to support professional status, as teachers demonstrate leadership and a commitment to organisational development (Education Council, 2017) which aligns with the professional identity and relationships expected from *Our Code, Our Standards* (Education Council, 2017). Whilst policymaking processes are unique to the needs of each centre, distributed leadership is a theory commonly used in relation to ECE to understand collaborative practice (Hartley, 2009). Distributed leadership encourages teachers and positional leaders to work together to ensure that each perspective is acknowledged and teachers are able to contribute their strengths to the curriculum (Denee & Thornton, 2021). Policy templates are used widely throughout the sector (Calloway et al., 2017), but when ECE teachers embark on policymaking they are unlikely to be trained policy professionals (Mercer, 2021). Without formal policy training policy can often be written in the spirit of incrementalism, where teachers use evidence such as past experiences, reflection, and theory to inform their approach to constructing policy (Mercer, 2021). Hermeneutic approaches to policymaking provide an opportunity to question whether participation is inclusive and decision-making is democratic, as teachers can use this approach to policymaking to create a shared vision to create beneficial change (Wagenaar, 2007).

Using the literature from the previous chapters to guide an approach to policymaking emphasises that the process for constructing a meaningful and authentic wellbeing policy is often more important than the end product. Whilst the policy as text will establish an expectation for future practice (Ball, 2015), it is the dialogic learning offered by the collaboration and reflection of creating and evaluating the policy where an understanding of the specific wellbeing needs of these teachers will be understood (Garvey et al., 2018). Engaging with the concepts of hermeneutics offers a method to create policy in a distributed fashion, prioritising participation, mutual understanding, empowerment, and democracy (Wagenaar, 2007). The hermeneutic process could support teachers to create policy that feels relevant and meaningful to the unique aspects of their context and centre identity as the interpretative methods create space for multi-layered perspectives and diverse methods to achieve policy processes (Powell & Graham, 2017; Balfour, 1994). Whilst the theories of wellbeing suggest different strategies for facilitating wellbeing in the ECE context through policy, the general themes of relationships, autonomy, and agency are seen across the literature (Seligman, 2011) demonstrating that although teachers may need to sell the policy to leaders it does not need to be expensive to implement in a business model (Mitchell, 2019).

The Implications of the Research

Although a focus on wellbeing can be seen as a frivolous exercise by wider society (Thorburn, 2020), I believe that teacher wellbeing policy could contribute to solving the systematic issues of the sector by recognising ECE teachers as professionals worthy of recognition, respect, and fair working conditions (Ewens, 2019). Although a teacher wellbeing policy is not expected to fix all wellbeing related issues, it recognises that teaching in ECE is a complex and often challenging role that requires more support than is offered at present (Mitchell et al., 2019), and shows teachers that they are valued in the centre curriculum. Zinsser et al. (2016) note that when teachers' wellbeing is made a priority that they are likely to feel more committed to their role which would not only help to address issues of teacher retention, but likely improve the quality of the curriculum and the learning of children. To me, it seems like the benefits of implementing a teacher wellbeing policy go far beyond any perceived costs of time and energy required to begin the process.

In the business model of ECE, a lack of funding or spare monetary resources often seems to be used as an excuse to not support the wellbeing of teachers (Mitchell, 2019). However, whilst greater material resourcing would no doubt be additional support in the work of teachers, this research aims to demonstrate that the greatest contributors to wellbeing in teachers are social and emotional connections, the ability to make decisions and have their voice heard, and for others to recognise their specific perspective so that they can feel connected to the identity of the centre (Seligman, 2011; Zelenski, 2020; Joshanloo & Jovanovic, 2020; White, 2016; Balfour, 1994). Wellbeing policy does not need to be expensive to implement, but rather should be created in earnest to be authentic to both the needs of the teachers and the context they are situated in (Shirley, 2020). Creating a policy in a distributed fashion can be complex, as ensuring all teachers are able to contribute equitably takes a concerted effort (Grinshtain & Addi-Raccah, 2020), but engaging those the policy affects in its contribution means that this policy is more likely to lead to wellbeing as it feels relevant and empowering for teachers (Powell & Graham, 2017; Wagenaar, 2007). When creating a teacher wellbeing policy it seems that it would be more likely that the process of creating a democratic and empowering approach to mutual understanding would promote teacher wellbeing more than the documented policy or a policy template.

When I envisage the possibilities that teacher wellbeing policy could bring, I imagine the snowball effect that flourishing wellbeing could have on wider society. For example, I imagine that when teachers' wellbeing is nurtured this could create space for teachers to find greater purpose and meaning in their work, become more committed to the future of the sector, and free teachers to focus on growing their practice and improving the curriculum for children. I imagine then that children, in turn, could experience a better-quality learning environment, have more meaningful connections, and become adults that recognise not only the effect that ECE had on their lives but how this contributed to their understanding and desire for wellbeing. Thus, these adults may then prioritise wellbeing in their own lives which overall leads to a more well society. Although this may seem like an ambitious vision of the future, one could imagine the snowball effects that a focus on teacher wellbeing could bring. Perhaps teacher wellbeing policy could be another dusting of snow that contributes to the first snowball.

The Limitations of the Research

As this research explores this phenomenon at its nascency there was limited literature related to this specific topic in the ECE context. Because of this, I used both a hermeneutical imagination and the circles of interpretation to source literature that could be adapted to my experiences working as a teacher in the ECE context (Smythe & Spence, 2012). However, without literature that examines the specific policymaking process of ECE teachers when creating a teacher wellbeing policy, I cannot be certain whether the theories or literature that I have examined are relevant to what is occurring in centres. As further research is conducted on this topic researchers will be better able to understand the policymaking process of teachers, but at this moment I can only assume based on related literature and the hermeneutic circle. Regardless, I hope that teachers find the general themes explored in this dissertation relevant to their exploration of teacher wellbeing policy.

Additionally, as I used my own experiences as an ECE teacher to navigate the literature this research is heavily influenced by my own bias towards the sector (Tshuma, 2021), as I specifically selected literature that I felt aligned with the ECE context. It is possible that there will be readers that disagree with my lens on the topic, but I feel that the broad range of literature selected contributes to some measure of reliability in the data, with my prejudice used as fore-sight to demonstrate its relevance to the ECE sector (Lawn, 2006). Whilst this research is biased based on my experiences working in the sector, I hope that this bias is understood in terms of solidarity with other ECE teachers (Lawn, 2006), and that this was used to bridge the gap between top-down educational policy in Aotearoa New Zealand and the reality of practice.

Possibilities for Future Research

This research was initially designed with empirical methods, as I felt it was important to work in partnership with ECE teachers that had implemented a teacher wellbeing policy to capture the unique perspectives of these leaders in the sector. I wanted to create research that looked at wellbeing in the specific context of the environment, and capture how ECE teachers were transforming wellbeing despite continued systemic issues. However, as I approached centres to participate in the research it quickly became apparent that centres either did not have a teacher wellbeing policy yet, or did but were unable to take on any additional work as they were struggling to stay open with COVID-19 in the winter months. The sector is still struggling in the wake of COVID-19 which seems to have further contributed to the worsening wellbeing of ECE teachers which means that, understandably, centres seem to be less likely to participate in research at present. However, I believe that this topic would benefit from the voices of ECE teachers that are experiencing this phenomenon themselves, recognising their position as leaders within the sector and advocates for political change. I suggest further phenomenological research about how teachers are creating wellbeing policy that is unique to their specific needs and their centre context, noting the specifics of how teachers were involved in the discourse of creating policy, and how the policy has subsequently influenced their curriculum since. I believe that if teachers were able to see how others have initiated this process within their own centre that it would provide practical examples that could inspire change in other contexts. Phenomenology would recognise how the teacher wellbeing policy is a representation of the interpretations of those teachers, and the influence of the centre context on its construction (Lawn, 2006). I believe that these small details are integral to the quality and relevance of a teacher wellbeing policy.

Final Thoughts

> Education imagined in the light of Gadamer’s thinking would be lifelong, humanistic, dialogical, differentiated and civic. It would value the arts and humanities and include within science education a consideration of the implications of scientific and technological progress for human wellbeing and the sustainability of the planet. It would prioritise face to face interaction and the quality of relationships between teachers and students and between students. (Nixon, 2017, p. 64).

Advocating for the wellbeing of ECE teachers sometimes feels like shouting under an avalanche, but, it seems a new day is dawning and with it the recognition of additional wellbeing support required for ECE teachers. Wellbeing is an enduring topic, despite society and experiences in society changing over time (Yates, 2004), but it still seems as elusive a construct as in the literature of old (Osei Aboagye et al., 2018). What struck me about my engagement with the literature was the prevalence of topics such as relationships, autonomy, and agency as pivotal factors that contribute to wellbeing (Seligman, 2011). Whilst I had initially engaged in this research thinking of material and structural supports required to make a significant change, what seems to be most gravely required is connection, trust in one another, and the ability for teachers to have power over their own experiences (Joshanloo & Jovanovic, 2020) which slowly seems to be seeping out of the sector as the business model takes over (Mitchell, 2019). The revitalisation of hermeneutic policymaking could be used to support the democratic, empowering and participatory policymaking required in a wellbeing context. I believe that ECE teachers are worthy of more as professionals in the education sector and that a focus on ECE teacher wellbeing is long overdue.

I would like to give thanks to the teachers leading this change in the sector that have inspired this research and continue to advocate for better wellbeing in ECE. Whilst I hope that this research makes some contribution to the desired social and political change (Soykan et al., 2019), I recognise that these strategies only capture a snapshot of this phenomenon as it evolves. I encourage ECE teachers to become involved with policymaking in their own context, as we work in solidarity with one another to improve the quality of the sector. “Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, engari he toa takitini – my strength is not mine alone, it comes from the group” (Morrison, 2011, p. 237).

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