The policy-research-practice triangle in New Zealand early childhood education: Complexities, impossibilities and silences

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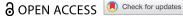Olivera Kamenarac [a], Kiri Gould [b] and Parisa Tadi [c]

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ABSTRACT

Inspired by the New Zealand Association for Research in Education (NZARE) Conference 2022, entitled 'The Mighty Triangle: The strength of the research-policy-practice triangle for addressing local, national, and global challenges' (https://www.nzare.org.nz/events/te-aonui-the-mighty-triangle/), this article examines some of the relational complexities and specificities within the Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood education and care policy-research-practice triangle. This article problematises the notion of the 'mighty' triangle as a 'durable' structure by examining how each corner, side and angle is produced in the context of prevailing global neoliberal discourses. We argue that making sense of the complex dynamics within the Aotearoa ECE policy-research-practice triangle requires understanding the politics, relationships and dynamics of conflict and the struggle of those, directly and indirectly, involved in (and excluded) and influenced by the triangle. Therefore, the article critically engages with the 'impossibilities' and complexities of the ECE policy-research-practice triangle and takes a closer look at those impacted and/or marginalised by 'beautiful durable structures' of ECE triangle politics, particularly the voices of teachers.

Setting the scene: Aotearoa education context

The historical colonial context of Aotearoa New Zealand (hereafter, Aotearoa) provides a starting point for any critical examination of policy, research and practice and its shaping of all involved. Aotearoa is a settler colonial state founded on Te Tiriti o Waitangi, an agreement document central to understanding the nation's colonial history, settler-indigenous relations and bicultural context. Te Tiriti o Waitangi, a treaty, was first signed in 1840 between the tangata whenua (Māori, people of the land, the indigenous people) and the British Crown to establish the country's political organisation (Orange 2011). Te Tiriti o Waitangi set the foundation for Māori and Pākehā (i.e. New Zealanders of non-

Māori ancestry) to 'live together in a spirit of partnership and the acceptance of obligations for participation and protection' (Ministry of Education 2017a, p. 3). Given its constitutional significance, Te Tiriti o Waitangi has specific implications for bicultural early childhood education (ECE) policy, research and practice. It requires all involved to develop clarity of purpose and a shared vision embedded in the treaty's values and principles and aspire to ongoing, sustained commitment towards equitable outcomes for all treaty partners. However, past and present educational policy, research and practice have failed to fully embrace the treaty's values, principles and obligations (Orange 2011; Ritchie, Skerrett, and Rau 2014), and settler colonialism and neo-colonial practices are still felt today (Ritchie, Skerrett, and Rau 2014).

Neo-colonialism is further entangled with neoliberalism, whose pervasive and insidious influence is felt globally in all areas of life including ECE. Robert-Holmes and Moss (2021) summarise the devasting impact of neoliberalism across contexts through the marketisation of ECE, the cynical images of children, families and teachers it produces, and the managerial modes of governance it prefers that emphasise measurement and performance. Put forward as 'the way[s] the world operates', as 'if there is no alternative' (Sims and Hui 2017, p. 10), neoliberalism reconceptualises all human transactions as being primarily economic in nature and collapses all aspects of life – the social and the political, into the economic realm. As a result, previously celebrated values promoting the social fabrics of life, such as solidarity, notions of a public good, collective advocacy and compassion, have been replaced to fit the purpose of education as a commodity and promote individualism, competitiveness and money-making. As Stewart and Roberts (2015, p. 239) recognise, education in Aotearoa demonstrates 'multiple neoliberalisms, each with their own distinctive features'. Neoliberalisms in ECE in Aotearoa have been introduced at different times, in piecemeal ways and intersect with other discourses but as we discuss in this article reflect the global trends of markets and managerialism. Neoliberal ideas are pervasive and significantly shape the sector here, but they are also contested, including in key texts, traditional teaching values that influence practice and in ECE scholarship. These competing influences in triangle politics create meaningful cracks and opportunities for alternative triangle structures.

Complex discursive assemblages and power relations within the ECE policy-research-practice triangle

Discourses of neoliberalisms and neo-colonialisms, along with multiple other discourses, have profoundly shaped ECE policy, research and practice in Aotearoa contributing to a dynamic and complex relationship between the sides of the triangle. In architecture, the triangle is considered the strongest shape, able to withstand tremendous pressure and provides support to make 'beautiful and durable structures' (https://sciencemadefun.net/blog/triangles-the-strongest-shape/). We argue that the triangle also creates strong boundaries, delimiting (but not deleting) the possibilities for different kinds of arrangements and possibilities. This article examines some of the relational complexities and specificities of the Aotearoa ECE policy-research-practice triangle as a way of illustrating the vulnerabilities of the triangle metaphor. It problematises the notion of 'durable' structures produced in the context of prevailing neoliberal discourses, which are now deeply entrenched in how each side, corner and angle triangle is understood and

interpreted. Further, we pay attention to the ways in which teachers become entangled in the complex assemblages of the discourses and power relations that point to both impositions and opportunities for them to organise their work and understand their professional identities.

The article consists of three main parts, each concentrating on one side of the triangle. While each triangle side is discussed separately and may allude to a linear relationship, the authors acknowledge that the nature of triangular relationships is complex and fluid, with messy and less transparent boundaries between the sides.

We argue that triangle sides are in a complex interplay, each possibly informing, influencing and supporting as much as constraining and challenging the other(s). Campbell-Barr, Parker-Rees, and Leeson (2015) argue that the interplay of the different angles of the triangle can take different forms, and the shape of the triangle can also vary as the importance attached to each corner of the triangle varies and is influenced by prevailing social and political contexts.

O'Neill (2023) asserts that a simple two-dimensional closed triangle figure may not be sufficient to capture the complexities and dynamics generated within the triangle interplay. Instead, O'Neill (2023) envisions a three-dimensional triangle structure with 'multiple impossibilities' to capture the complexities and 'impossibilities' within the research-practice-policy triangle. Building on this idea, we theorise the policy, research and practice triangle as an assemblage of discourse shaping subjects, objects and actions with their own forces and complex dynamics that can powerfully construct realities in ECE. We also examine the notion of 'impossibilities' alluding to existing (still unresolved) contradictions between/within/across the policy-research-practice triangle. We argue that structural 'impossibilities' are (re)produced through complexities and dynamics generated through an interplay of the triangle sides as much as they are outcomes of what the triangle dynamics and interplays make (im)possible within a given context and time. Hence, examining discursive assemblages within the triangle and looking at its complexities and 'impossibilities', we open dialogue about the vulnerability of the simple two-dimensional closed policy, research and practice and create space for alternatives.

Policy

ECE policies embody views about the purpose of early education and care, ideas about society and its citizens (particularly children, families and teachers), the country's economy and the relations between these. ECE policies are made to suit the political ideology of the country and the political parties in power and are continuously amended to ensure they continue to meet the prevailing political objectives and vision for the future society (Campbell-Barr, Parker-Rees, and Leeson 2015). While evaluation, monitoring and change of the existing ECE policies and development of new policies can be and often are informed by research and practice, national-level policies arguably hold the most power to guide and define research and practice and impact the landscape of teachers' work. For this reason, not all research and voices will be heard in the construction of policy. Research findings that suit the prevailing political ideology are more likely to come to inform and justify policies, while research evidence and voices from practice, especially those with varying and opposing views, may be overlooked (Alcock 2004).

In Aotearoa ECE, despite the years of research critiquing the damaging impacts of neoliberal policies and academics, union activists and teachers arguing for ECE as a public good (Beynen 2023; Kamenarac 2019; Mitchell 2013; Walters 2021), policies have been rationalised by economic reasoning. Policymakers, captured by human capital and social investment discourses, see ECE as a smart investment for 'producing success downstream: in school, in the workforce, and in other aspects of life' (Heckman, 2011, p. 125). As a result, ECE in Aotearoa has followed global trends receiving unprecedented government attention. However, defining the purposes of ECE in this way delimits alternative views of ECE. Policy solutions to quality and provision also take up neoliberal logic. The influence of human capital theory (HCT) and discourse threads through each section of this article as its influences on policy, research and practice are profound.

Another visible signpost of the powerful impacts of neoliberal policies in Aotearoa is the continued financialisaton of the ECE sector. The country's governments have never been providers of ECE services. Instead, Aotearoa ECE is a mix of community-based and privately owned services. Policy has enabled for-profit small ECE businesses and large corporations to buy, sell and manage an increasing number of services (Mitchell 2019). According to the Ministry of Education classification of a service 'authority' (i.e. the ownership of a service a child is enrolled in), community-based ECE services can be 'an incorporated society, a charitable, statutory, or community trust, or owned by a community organisation', and as such are 'prohibited from making and distributing financial gains to their members' (Ministry of Education 2023, para. 8). On the contrary, privately owned ECE services are owned by 'a private company, publicly listed company, private trust, partnership, or an individual', which all are allowed to 'make financial gains and distribute these to their members' (Ministry of Education 2023, para. 12).

Despite these essential operational differences, the government funding scheme is equitably accessible to all community-owned and privately owned services (including those run as for-profit entities), provided they meet the regulatory standards and licensing criteria (Ministry of Education 2021; New Zealand Government 2023). According to the ECE Funding Handbook (MoE, n.d.), services are not allowed to charge parents fees for the hours funded through the government subsidy. However, parents can still be asked for voluntary donations and optional charges, which they may *choose* to make for a specific purpose. While the funding regulations might intend to advance the sector, ECE has been 'advertised' as 'a growing business sector [...] backed by government funding' (OneRoof 2020, paras 2–4), and 'increasingly rendered into a commodity for sale' (Gallagher 2017, 15). Investors have been encouraged to establish publicly listed ECE companies and are compelled to act in the interest of their shareholders and profit, and use 'loopholes' in the system to secure financial gains (see Beynen 2023), often to the detriment of children, families and teachers (Mitchell 2019). This situation has contributed to ECE in Aotearoa being one of the least affordable in the OECD (OECD, 2020) and to issues of over and under supply in some areas (Mitchell 2019). The damaging impacts of neoliberal, market-driven ECE policies came to the fore during the COVID-19 pandemic when some companies found a way to turn the Government's funding boosts, allocated for the increase of the lowest-paid ECE teachers' wages, into their 'healthy profits' (Duff 2023; Walters 2021).

Neoliberal policies have not only altered the nature and delivery of ECE but also shifted the view of the purpose of ECE away from the idea of education as a public

good for all children, families, teachers and communities (Kamenarac and Gould 2021; Simon et al. 2022, UWU, 2021; Vandenbroeck, Lehrer, and Mitchell 2022). With 71% of ECE provision in private ownership and 22 439 teachers out of 32 985 working in the private sector Ministry of Education, 2022a a rise in individual employment contracts and the weakening of unionised teachers' voices are evident (Kamenarac 2022). Opportunities for collective advocacy, transformative praxis and cross-sector dialogue on the issues of common concern have diminished, with divisions and competition among settings and teachers intensifying (Gould, Boyd, and Tesar 2023; Kamenarac and Gould 2021). As Press et al. (2018, 334) point out, the marketisation of ECE erodes the 'bridging ties so important to the creation of social capital, that cultivate connection and belonging across social, cultural and economic divides'. In relation to teachers, neoliberal discourses reinforce multiple expectations and responsibilities, evident in the growing performative and regulatory expectations teachers are accountable for (discussed later) as well as the increasing managerial notions and processes that shape ECE organisations (Gibson, McArdle, and Hatcher 2015; Sims and Hui 2017).

Simultaneously, there are ECE policies in Aotearoa that exist in tension with neoliberal realities. The early childhood curriculum framework *Te Whāriki. He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa* (MoE, 2017b); *Tātiako: Cultural competencies for teachers of Māori learners* (Ministry of Education 2011), and *Tapasā - Cultural competencies framework for teachers of Pacific learners* (Ministry of Education 2018 are such examples. Included in these documents are discourses of culturally reciprocal, responsive, collaborative and respectful relationships and the collective good; consistent with the treaty's obligations and values. These policies strongly focus on promoting and protecting Māori worldviews, Māori language and tikanga, Pacific languages and cultures[1] and honouring all ethnic-specific identities in Aotearoa. These policies can potentially act as:

> resistors, providing a firm starting place for challenging and refusing neoliberalism hegemony, subjects and subjectivity and reinforcing ways of being and doing an ECE project that is in opposition to the narratives of individualisation, competition, market and profit-making. (Kamenarac 2022, 5)

Consistent with Tesar's (2015) observation of *Te Whāriki* witnessing and resisting neoliberal discourses, we argue that *Tātiako*, and *Tapasā* also 'witness' the country's neoliberal and neo-colonial discourses. However, while teachers experience the tensions between policy expectations in their daily lives, the extent to which they can and do 'work the cracks' (Arndt et al. 2018, 111) created by them and the difference this makes to children and families is largely unrecognised. The loss of collective cross-sector collaboration and advocacy means that opportunities to share their small, everyday resistances and to build momentum towards collective forms of political and ethical agency are weakened.

As an assemblage of discourses, we argue that the influence of Aotearoa ECE policy in the triangle is complex, powerful and undoubtedly vulnerable. ECE policies can 'resist' the wide impacts of neoliberal and economic interests in ECE. Yet, given the strength of 'masculinist neo-liberal reforms' (Osgood 2006, 7), policy in the triangle simultaneously 'witnesses' neoliberal emphasis, encourages competitive entrepreneurialism among the

investors and service owners, squeezing out spaces for alternative voices from ECE practice (a predominantly female workforce) and research.

Research

In the triangle, research can inform and evaluate policy and practice and as is discussed below, is expected to provide a foundation for initial teacher education (ITE) programmes (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand 2019). Which research comes to influence policy, which research is ignored and what kinds of research are funded are critical issues. Historically, policy documents that laid the framework for the contemporary Aotearoa ECE sector, have been supported and legitimated through the strategic use of both local and international research to create strong social and, increasingly, economic arguments for government support of ECE, the market model of provision and for what kind of ECE and teachers are desirable (Lange 1988; Ministry of Education 2019; Ministry of Education [MoE] 2002). In this section, we focus on how neoliberal discourses construct the role of research in the triangle, implicating teacher education, teachers' work and the opportunities for teachers' voices to be heard in the research space.

International research and scholarship influence policy and practices in the sector. As mentioned above, international research, informed by ideas about the development of human capital through an economic lens, has influenced the policy and provision of ECE in Aotearoa. As a totalising narrative, the sway and implications of HCT have been critiqued in the ECE scholarship for over a decade Dahlberg et al. (2005); Roberts-Holmes, and Moss (2021); Stuart (2013), (2018) with uneven impacts on policy. Successive governments have also ignored the mounting local and international empirical evidence about the failures of privatisation to ensure high-quality ECE and equitable access for all children and families (Cleveland 2015; Mitchell et al. 2016; Simon et al. 2022; UWU 2021). Research also points to the challenges teachers face in a privatised landscape and critically examines the teaching subjectivities produced as a result (Duhn 2010; Gould 2021; Kamenarac 2019). Captured by the promises of HCT, successive Governments have shown little interest in researching how economic narratives impact quality and equity in ECE or in comparing market approaches to other ways of organising the sector. Subsequent research blind spots destabilise the metaphor of the 'mighty triangle' and delimit important dialogue between ECE policy, research and practice.

National research has also had a significant impact in defining normalised practices and the purposes of ECE specific to Aotearoa. For example, Carr's (2001) work on narrative assessment has significantly shaped understandings of the purposes and practices of assessment in ECE settings in ways that resist measurement and standardisation. National research can also support resistance by providing meaningful local alternatives. A growing body of work by Māori and Pacific scholars, such as Rameka et al. (2015, 2017), Rameka et al., (2022) and Tagoilelagi-Leota et al, (2022) bring different assemblages and are significant counters to dominant discourses.

The extent to which local research can inform and challenge understandings in policy and practice is, however, partly dependent on how research is valued, supported and positioned at a national level. Currently, a lack of ECE research and restrictions for projects that manage to find funding further complicates the triangle. A practical example of this hurdle is TLRI (Teaching and Learning Research Initiative,

http://www.tlri.org.nz/). TRLI is one of the few sources of government research funding available for collaborative research between academics and teachers and, as such, is both valued and highly competitive. The scholarship highlighted in the previous paragraph are all TRLI projects. However, only a few projects get funded each year and these must show relevance to TLRI's five principles which include: addressing themes of strategic importance to education in Aotearoa; building on established international and local research evidence and being forward-looking; focusing on the work of teachers in student learning; and being useful in practice. There are no guarantees that ECE-focused projects will be included in the mix each year. (For example, in the 2022 TRLI round, no ECE projects received new funding).

Research also comes to inform and support practice through Initial Teacher Education (ITE). An important aspect of this discussion is to examine the declining role of Universities in Aotearoa ECE ITE and the implications of this to the ways research, policy and practice interact in the triangle. Before we continue, we outline the Aotearoa ECE ITE context, which especially has been impacted by a market approach to tertiary education, allowing for the proliferation and competitive provision of ECE qualifications. In Aotearoa, enrolments in ECE ITE in Universities have rapidly declined in the past 5 years (Ministry of Education, 2022b), although, at the national level, enrolments in ECE ITE programmes are slowly increasing. In 2021, only 21% of students entering ITE were enrolled in universities, 14% at polytechnics and 65% at private training establishments (Ministry of Education, 2022b). The number of ECE students at universities is likely to be smaller in subsequent years as universities suspend or cancel their undergraduate ITE ECE degrees due to a lack of enrolments. For instance, two authors of this article work in Universities that have recently suspended their undergraduate three-year Bachelor of Teaching ECE programmes due to financially viability. Paradoxically, the ECE sector is experiencing a chronic teacher shortage, which has become a key policy (Ministry of Education 2019) and public concern (Ministry of Education 2019; Nicol-Williams, 2022).

The axing of ECE programmes at universities can be interpreted as a purely economic decision by institutions that are also increasingly subject to managerial and neoliberal discourses. However, applying a business model to decision-making about which qualifications and courses can be sustained may reinforce polarisation and hierarchisation between sectors, within the teaching profession because ITE at the compulsory school level (primary and secondary education) still primarily occurs at the University level.

University academic workers and teacher-educators are expected to be research active and to engage in research that informs their teaching while also remaining 'free' to challenge prevailing, taken-for-granted assumptions and offer alternative proposals of ECE and the world. While research and professional institutions (e.g. Universities, the Teaching Council of Aotearoa, hereafter the Teaching Council) publicly speak about the need for 'supporting the development of a research base for the professional practices of teaching that is home-grown, fit-for-purpose and intentionally designed to address urgent questions for [Aotearoa] education and society' (Gunn et al., 2021, p. 3), the current state of ECE ITE may make the pursuit of research-informed ITE more difficult. Consequently, the distance across the education sector and between student-teachers, research and researchers will increase and the range of voices heard in research and policy decrease.

The place of ECE ITE within the triangle structures needs to be further considered in relation to the role of the Teaching Council as a professional regulatory body working 'for' and 'with registered and certificated teachers' (Teaching Council 2023, para. 3). The Council aims to 'ensure quality teaching and high standards by registering teachers, setting and maintaining professional standards and ensuring teachers are competent and fit to practice' (Teaching Council 2023, para. 1). Among its many roles, the Council (2023, para. 7) also accredits ECE ITE providers' programmes to ensure teacher graduates are suitable and suitably prepared to meet and maintain professional standards for the complex role of being a teacher. The interaction between the Council and ITE, as Couch et al. (2022, p. 1) rightfully point out, involves 'a delicate balancing act between the professional expectations of a regulatory body and the academic freedom of ITE providers'.

However, the Council has expressed a concern that 'student teachers are getting too much academic knowledge without the practical capability to teach' (Teaching Council, 2022, p. 7). Assuming that 'theory and practice are distinctive and separable' within ITE (Couch, Devine, and Stewart 2022, p. 2) increases chances for accrediting ITE programmes unable to provide students with robust theoretical, philosophical and ideological bases necessary to inform and examine their practice and challenge practices maintaining the status quo. As Couch et al. (2022, p. 2) propose, the solution for bringing a balance between the professional expectations of a regulatory body and the academic freedom of ITE providers 'isn't to argue for more theory, or more practice, [or more research] but rather to continually seek out ways in which each [research, theory and practice] informs the other'. In addition to balancing research and practice, we further argue for the importance of universities in challenging and critiquing ideas from both research and practice and offering alternatives. Such endeavours are particularly important in the time of neoliberalism, where educational spaces (such as ECE settings and universities) may operate in such ways that prepare ECE teachers to thrive in neoliberal environments rather than encouraging and expecting them to contest and examine critically ideas in practices and research and offer alternatives.

Considering the ongoing imbalances between research, practice and policy, we argue that the role of ECE ITE at universities is vital. As Apple at el. (2022, p. 249) affirms, 'the job of the university is not . . . . to confuse education with training, nor it is the job of the university to only educate students for the workforce'. Instead, the role of universities is 'to build a bridge between its faculty, citizens, students, and administrators and the larger world' (Apple et al., 2022, p. 249). Taking from Gunn et al. (2021), we put forward that a central task of any university-based education, including ECE ITE, is to support students to be curious (and critical) about research in its broadest sense, to use research to inform their understandings of the world and apply these in their lives as much as in teaching practice. For this to occur, in our view, ECE ITE, wherever it takes place, should be research-informed, support student-teachers to engage critically with the world and make informed judgements about the value and relevance of policy-research-practice in their local specific ECE contexts.

Practice

In this section, we pay attention to the complex nature of triangular relationships and how it impacts ECE practice, teachers' work and identities. Historically, the ECE sector and teachers have played an important role in policy development. For instance, the first national ECE curriculum framework *Te Whāriki* (1996, p. 7), was built on 'experience of curriculum development within the different early childhood services [i.e. ECE practice], together with findings in research, international literature and the shared knowledge and agreed understandings that have emerged in New Zealand over the past two decades' (MoE, 1996, p. 7). The curriculum development included extensive consultations with teachers and services, which allowed for feedback on the curriculum draft document and wide acceptance across the sector. While *Te Whāriki* (1996) was an example of practice informing policy development, the consultation rounds with the sector have recently become shorter (Ministry of Education 2017a), lowering the chance for diverse voices to inform policy development.

At the same time, pressure from policies to regulate and control teachers and their work in the name of 'ensuring quality and learning outcomes' seems to grow. A persistent policy agenda to professionalise and govern the sector has seen a focus on qualifications, intensification of professional registration processes and a proliferation of professional codes and standards (Education Council 2017; Ministry of Education 2011, 2018). The increasing visibility of an audit culture is evident as the 'standards for ethical behaviour' and 'the expectations of effective teaching practice' are more tightly defined for teachers (Education Council 2017, p. 1). Regardless of their value, these kinds of governing technologies are reductive in nature and unlikely to capture the multi-dimensional complexities of teaching in diverse communities (Clarke 2013). Persistently positioning teachers as the answer to quality ECE obscures the ways in which other policy commitments (such as the marketisation of the sector) may also impact quality and come to shape teachers' work and professional identities.

The language of compliance, accountability and achievement goes hand in hand with the HCT. As an example, a key role of the Education Review Office (ERO), the government's external evaluation agency, is to inform and facilitate improvement in ECE services (ERO 2021). However, as ERO's website describes, 'reviews in early learning services are focused on accountability (including compliance with regulatory requirements), education improvement, and knowledge generation (where education is translated into achievement)' (ERO 2021, p. 10). Such statements reiterate concerns that teachers are primarily viewed as producers of human capital, and by extension, children are positioned as primarily the targets of investment (Stuart 2018).

Human capital discourses also emphasise an evidence-based approach to policy and practice. Biesta (2017) links the focus on evidence-based practice to the rise of neoliberal forms of governance in education, questioning how the focus on standardised, evidence-based practice undermines teachers' own professional knowledge, local experiences and contextual judgements. Coupled with the lack of opportunities for collaboration between teachers and researchers which builds sector capacity for inquiry-based practice, teaching risks becoming a practical and technical endeavour. Supporting ECE teachers to position and see themselves as valuable contributors in the research and policy space, able to examine,

experiment with and share what works in their local specific ECE contexts with policymakers seems crucial for balancing the uneven power research-practice-policy dynamic.

Tensions among ECE practice, policy and research, created through the prevalence of neoliberal discourses, have opened up new subjectivities for teachers, including as 'investment brokers', 'technicians', 'compliant employees' and 'business managers' accountable not only for the educational achievement of children but also for ECE companies' economic success (Gibson, McArdle, and Hatcher 2015; Gould 2021; Kamenarac 2019). Delaune (2017) points to ways in which HCT draws teachers and children further into a relationship with measurement and accountability. Delaune (2017) questions how these relations compete with and ultimately undermine alternative ways of understanding the purposes of ECE, including the promotion of democratic discourses and indigenous perspectives also evident in policies. Through the focus on monitoring and measuring teachers' work and practice, they become indirectly viewed as 'answerable' for aspects of quality that ensure their service is eligible for government funding. Consequently, many teachers are subject to both governments' policy objectives and to the objectives of the ECE business, requiring innovation and compromise as they navigate the mixed market ECE system in which managerialism, performativity and/or for-profit interests all impose on their work.

In Aotearoa, the concern about the impacts of neoliberal forms of governance and identity constructions is highly relevant given the parallel existence of alternate policies and discourses Ministry of Education (2011, 2017a, 2017b, 2018), including those that promote forms of participatory democracy in ECE and call for collaboration between children, families and local communities in the development of localised ECE curriculum frameworks. With the emphasis on ECE practices built on collective voices, knowledges and experiences, these alternative policies and discourses challenge standardised, evidence-based practice that has reduced the complexity and specificity of learning and teaching in vastly diverse Aotearoa ECE contexts.

One example of transformational movement is Kōhanga Reo,[2] a movement offering a Māori immersion environment for children and families, that remains critical to the revitalisation of Māori tino-rangatiratanga (self-determination) and symbolises Māori resistance to dominant Western ideologies. By keeping traditional knowledges and values at the forefront of decision-making in ECE, Kōhanga Reo continues to push-back against neoliberal influences (McMillan, 2020), despite ongoing struggles for recognition within the New Zealand ECE system.

Finally, neoliberal discourses have reinforced individualist identities and an anti-collectivist culture in ECE, delimiting opportunities for re-imagining alternative identities, purposes and practices in ECE. As well as making teachers and services compete over government funding and children's enrolments, neoliberal policies promote a discourse of autonomous individualism for teachers as they navigate an uneven and competitive landscape, responsible for their own employment situations and career development. In these contexts, it is difficult for teachers to come together as a collective. Neoliberal and neo-colonial ideologies driving decisions on which research comes to inform policy and how policy is developed further diminish the sector's collective voice, including opportunities for relationships and support between the academics who undertake research and the teachers who work in the sector.

To resist and reject such ideologies and create alternative directions in ECE policy, research and practice, scholars (Apple et al. 2022; Kamenarac and Gould 2021) advocate for alliance-building in the sector and projects that strengthen the sector's collective voice and capacity, including teacher unionism. Such projects would include space for examining the role ECE in preserving and expanding participatory democracy and social justice for *all* through education and could contest and inform the policies and policymakers that shape the sector. For this to happen, as Apple et al. (2022) put forward, all teachers involved in education need to commit to working together on educational issues and taking collective actions with communities, activists and those whose voices have been marginalised and silenced in the policy-research-practice triangle, as much as in society generally. The integration of such commitments needs to become core principles of ECE practice, as much as of research and policy.

Concluding thoughts

This article has examined the complexities, contradictions and specificities of some of the current realities constructed within and through the ECE policy-research-practice triangle to illuminate some of the 'impossibilities', messy politics and fluid relationships among the sides of the triangle in ECE. We acknowledge that the triangle politics construed here are some of many configurations.

We view the policy, research and practice triangle as an assemblage of discourses, subjects, objects and actions that powerfully re-produce realities in ECE. Shedding light on the inherent impossibilities within these assemblages possibly introduces diverse perspectives and avenues for action. By illuminating the discourses that set boundaries between the sides of the triangle and define what and who matters, we were able to unearth not only (im)possibilities but also vulnerabilities within the triangle structures, creating space for critical dialogue among those involved in and excluded from the triangle. Our stance encourages the triangle sides not merely to inform but also to challenge one another, thereby pointing to multiple impossibilities within the triangle dynamic. Our argument advocates for strengthening collective voices and fostering collaborative actions with communities, especially with those who have been excluded by the existing 'durable' triangle structures, and thus becoming response-able *to* and *within*, not just *for* what happens in ECE policy, research and practice spaces. Not acknowledged voices within the current structure (i.e. voices of teachers, children, local iwi, hapū and more) could also be recognised if the 'impossibilities' inherent in the existing structures are subjected to open and critical discussions. By examining the connectedness, contradictions and complexities within the ECE research, policy and practice triangle and identifying cracks in the existing structures, the creation of multiple fresh possibilities could be encouraged.

Notes

1. Approximately 8% of the New Zealand population identify as being of Pacific Island origin. New Zealand has long standing cultural, economic and political ties with Pacific Islands and has special responsabilties towards its former Pacific Colonies including the Cook Islands, Niue, Tokelau and Western Samoa. In a 2021 speech New Zealand's Foreign Minister Nanaia

Mahuta summed up New Zealand's connection and responsability to the Pacific, 'Our connection to the Pacific is reflected through language, peoples, ocean, history, culture, politics, and shared interests. Together, we share kaitiaki [guardianship] responsibilities for Te Moananui-a-Kiwa – the Blue Ocean Continent. This concept is enduring and inter-generational' (Mahuta, 2021, para 5).

2. See: https://www.kohanga.ac.nz/en/

Disclosure statement

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