

Transnational conversations about teacher identities in early childhood places and spaces: Call for alliance-building, advocacy and activism

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The professional identities of teachers are fundamental to their understanding of how to be and how to act in early childhood education and care (ECEC). Professional identities have emerged as a key consideration both in policy and scholarship as a result of growing political interest in ECEC and the work of teachers. When we first called for papers for a special issue on teacher identities, it was in the context of a global neoliberal policy-scape dominated by ideas about the social and economic benefits of investing in ECEC, as well as free-market and entrepreneurial discourses. Specifically, our intention was to engage in a collective and cross-national conversation that problematised prevailing discourses, examined intersections with local concerns and policy priorities, and their shifting and ongoing influences on professional identities. The complexities associated with neoliberal discourse in ECEC have surfaced more urgently in the context of a global Covid-19 pandemic. In many countries, ECEC teachers have been positioned as essential workers supporting ongoing economic activity during the pandemic, sometimes at the same time as schools and tertiary institutions have remained closed. ECEC work has become more entrenched in economic narratives that position the purpose of ECEC as supporting work-force participation, child

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wellbeing, and family support. These new and unexpected contexts also shape teacher identities. The tensions present in current policy constructions of teachers and intersections with emergency measures present new opportunities to govern teachers and practice in particular ways. These materialise in teachers' daily experiences, work conditions, and wellbeing. A current narrative about the pandemic includes the idea of not letting the crisis go to waste, and we agree that it is important to use this moment to re-think and problematise teacher identities across educational contexts and to encourage critical conversations about what we do, why we do it and who benefits.

This issue brings together a range of articles that examine the notion of teacher professional identities and subjectivities through various theoretical and analytical lenses (see in this issue Matapo & Teisina; Dockett & Perry; Rubin & Tily). It critically looks at the issues of teachers' work, professional identities and subjectivities within complexities and contradictions in current educational policies and practices in a range of countries, including Denmark, Ireland, Scotland, the United States, Australia and New Zealand (see in this issue Arndt et al.; McNair et al.; Westbrook & White; Rubin & Tily). Together, the articles offer a framework for considering multiple ways of being an early childhood teacher and doing 'an early childhood project' within diverse local and global contexts and thus recognise and problematise the dynamics of control, compliance and resistance involved in the identity construction processes. The transnational conversations create possibilities for re-imagining alternative ways of being and doing in ECEC that call to the fore democratic projects, pedagogies, identities, and subjectivities.

In each country, the roles and identities of ECEC teachers have emerged from and are shaped by specific histories and politics. This is reflected in the various nomenclatures used by the contributing scholars to the issue. In this editorial, we use the term ECEC teacher because it is a term commonly used in our context (Aotearoa New Zealand), sometimes problematically to refer to both qualified and unqualified individuals who work with young children. We are aware that naming is political and critical to identity. Names have the power to include, exclude and categorise and re-produce subjectivities. In this editorial, we have also used the nomenclatures consistent with each article, including teachers, practitioners, pedagogues, early childhood workers and professionals, because we are aware that these have been chosen carefully and are embedded with meanings particular to that context.

Teacher identities in theoretical places and spaces

Several articles respond to the challenge of problematising prevailing professional identities and subjectivity on a global, national, and local level. Activating critical discourse analysis, Rubin and Tily's article tackles the "issue" of teacher subjectivities by seeking to examine, illuminate, and ultimately interrupt how policy co-constitutes and contributes to the subjectivities of newly certified teachers across two contexts - New Zealand and Texas, USA. Although distinct in many ways, both contexts are notably influenced by neoliberal ideologies seeking to regulate newly certified teachers and teaching practices as they navigate the expectations and possibilities of their work contexts and curriculum demands. Binary thinking evident in both countries' policies seek to persuade that 'a good teacher' can only be produced through high levels of regulation without which they would be 'free to be bad'. By engaging a transnational conversation between the two contexts, the authors invite critical consideration of a global movement toward policies that '(de)professionalise'

newly certified teachers by measuring their success quantitatively and promoting subjectivities favouring compliance and performativity.

Matapo and Teisina engage readers, in their full capacities of being, knowing and becoming, in the process of thinking-intersubjectivity through a lens of Pacific indigenous knowledge. Through engagement with the shared cultural practice of *talanoa*, the authors challenge universal notions of subjectivity grounded in the idea of self-contained, individual, thinking selves, restrained through prescribed ethical codes underpinning neoliberal policies and practices in ECEC. Situating subjectivity within a space (*vā*) that binds the collective, Matapo and Teisina draw our attention to maintaining strong connections of the *vā*, ensuring that we look after the sacred relationships inherent in *tangata kakato*, *olaga*, agency and subjectivity.

Perry and Docket take the conversation of teacher identities into spaces of the cross-ecological alliances and professional linkages created between the ECEC and the primary school sector as they engage in an Australian transition-to-school arena. Looking at the complex intersections in boundary spaces, involving negotiation and legitimation of ECEC and primary teachers' perceived roles and identities, the article illustrates how ECEC subjectivities might be excluded from the professional network, information disregarded, and school 'readiness' practice forced into ECEC settings. The tensions between the sectors' different transition practices and teachers' subjectivities signalled opposing teachers' identities and discourses underpinning the linked ecologies framework, some reinforcing neoliberal ideologies through the children's readiness to school, while others advocated for children's wellbeing, play-based pedagogies, and equitable access to ECEC.

Teacher identities in geographical, political and professional spaces and places

Coming from different geographical, political, theoretical, and professional spaces and places, Arndt, Smith, Urban, Ellegaard, Swadener and Murray start by reminding us that the education of young children is inescapably tied to concrete situations in the here and now. The authors engage in a critical, transnational dialogue about a range of issues in ECEC in Australia, Denmark, Ireland and the United States, provoking shared thinking about 'professional teaching selves across boundaries'. For instance, the article addresses the two issues in the Danish context with implications for teachers' identities and work. The first is the ambiguity and potential impact on pedagogue autonomy, in a recent revision of the national curriculum. The revision shifts towards a more play-based curriculum, and yet with a remaining heavy emphasis on learning. The second is the development of a parent-led movement to increase child-staff ratios. Unexpectedly, this has increased recognition for the work of pedagogues but may also decrease the number of educated staff, as kindergartens seek to offset the cost through the employment of non-educated staff. The Danish situation illustrates the complexity of factors that impact teacher identities and how these play out in national contexts. Issues of the distribution of investments in ECEC in Australia and Ireland are also problematised, leaving those who work with children with precarious working conditions; their professional identities still tied up and tied down in discourses of motherhood. Besides, the article poses questions about how to transform "a profession long-oppressed by sexism, racism, classism, xenophobia, and ableism" in "revolutionary ways" to benefit diverse children and families and members of the workforce in the United States. While the issues discussed in this article are not necessarily representative of all countries, they will resonate

with many, and urgently call for “a collective approach and coherent voice to ensure systematic and equitable policy development for the future sustainability of the sector”.

Situated within the context of testing and standardisation of children’s learning, the article by McNair et al. examines practitioner agency and advocacy in Scottish early years settings. The article highlights possibilities for resistance and contestation when professional knowledge and ethics clash with government agendas. This article, which is presented from the practitioners perspective, relays the experiences and transformative outcomes of contesting the introduction of “reductionist formal ‘tick-box’ assessments”. Westbrook and White analyse the New Zealand policy landscape, focusing on the recent Early Learning Action Plan 2016-2020 and the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (1996, 2017). Examining the status of socialist, neoliberal and Te Ao Māori discourses, the analysis gives hope that the power of neoliberal discourse can be weakened by the intersection of opposing discourses. Yet, it also raises concerns, showing that while socialism and Te Ao Māori are often thought to be at mercy of neoliberalism complex interplays between the spheres of discourses exist. The article reinforces that rather than being in direct opposition to one another they can simultaneously accommodate discursive truths that have been viewed as oppositional. The malleable nature of discourses sheds light on the potential of discourses, such as neoliberalism, to corrupt alternative knowledges and discourses (e.g. Te Ao Māori discourses, indigenous knowledge), including alternative ways of being and doing, so that they fit into neoliberal frameworks/worldviews. As a result the authors call for a broader discussion on ‘multidimensional power/knowledge and discourses’.

Drawing on the diverse local and global landscapes of ECEC, our transnational conversations illustrated the power of neoliberal discourses to impose a “dictatorship of no alternatives” in education policies and practices. They might have created an impression that the neoliberal subjects and subjectivities are the only possible ways of being a teacher and doing ‘an early childhood project’ in contemporary ECEC places and spaces. Fortunately, this was not the case. The articles simultaneously gave us hope that the discourses of collectivism, collegiality, and empowerment, in which democratic education and democratic professionalism have been rooted, are still to live on and endure in some ECEC spaces and places.

Strengthening collective identities for alliance-building, advocacy and activism

Neoliberalism promotes individualistic identity negotiations, encouraging divisions between teachers and ECEC services. For this special issue, looking for ways to interrupt neoliberal subjectivities, we were particularly interested in submissions that highlighted projects of transformation and change. In addition to construing teachers as ‘agents of their learning and practices’, several articles point to spaces for resistance at the intersections of overlapping policy discourse. Contributions from Westbrook and White, Rubin and Tily, and Arndt et al. demonstrate how truths and power/knowledges are constantly shifting as discourses collide with and interanimate each other. While these interanimates call for further critical examination (White and Westbrook, for example, question how indigenous knowledges may be ‘discursively corrupted’ to fit western worldviews) they also create spaces for something different, for resistance and creative response. By undertaking a critical examination of policies positioning newly certified teachers as compliant neoliberal subjects,

Rubin and Tily, for instance, call for newly certified teachers' re-positioning as "agents of their learning and practices", rich in perspectives as they interact with the shifting contexts and navigate complex experiences. The re-positioning process holds the power to elevate collective and collegial dialogue and create possibilities for new, innovative and empowered teacher identities that can still coexist with guidelines for the profession that safeguard children and families and help them know what to expect.

For Arndt et al., rapidly changing global and local contexts produce constantly shifting (and unknowable) teacher selves. These present opportunities for re-thinking, re-questioning, and re-developing ways of being teachers. In order to undertake such work teachers must first be aware of the ways in which they are positioned through discourse, and policy developed through collective engagement and critical dialogue. Critical dialogue as a strategy for resistance is threaded through the articles that comprise this special issue. A commitment to these strategies, which often sit outside teachers' day to day work with children and families requires recognition, as McNair et al. point out, that all educational practice is political. To illustrate, McNair et al. draw on the concept of revolutionary critical pedagogy, demonstrating how teachers can be supported to deconstruct and then reconstruct oppressive policy directives, making spaces for alternative understandings and practices, in this case in relation to assessment. These scholars note how undertaking such work together can be galvanising, supporting teaching teams toward further dialogue and action. It is a strong example of a key concern in the current special issue - to ignite a sense of collective agency and advocacy, supporting local and global collective movements of resistance.

Another example comes from Matapo and Teisina who argue that Pacific identities, formed through Pacific ontologies, are already collective and relational, tied not only to each other but to the more than human world. By problematising the notion of teacher identities as individually negotiated, the article demonstrates how challenging humanist and hierarchical notions of identity opens up space for fluid and emerging subjectivities. Matapo and Teisina demonstrate how Samoan and Tongan indigenous and collective practices, including the dialogic practice of Talanoa (including honouring spaces for silences), can form a powerful response to colonising and universal notions of subjectivity and teacher identities. Their contribution provokes thinking into how different perspectives and theories, including indigenous and posthuman theories, might contribute to reimaging and collective reconstruction of teacher identities and suggests there is still much work to be done in this area.

Instead of a conclusion: A continuation of transnational conversations

Our transnational conversations are not completed. Rather, they have just started as we critically engage in dialogue about the diversity, complexities, and contradictions related to the issues of teacher work, professional identities, and subjectivities within local and global ECEC contexts. With the current COVID-19 crisis, 'literally shifting the ground of the ECEC profession', it is necessary to revisit conversations on fundamental issues of teacher identity and subjectivity. The current situation urges us to pose more critical questions about professional teaching-self, such as: What has happened with our collective selves, established in the ethics of care and encounter? How can we (re)claim a collective professional agency and professionalism, as grounded in the ethics of resistance, collegiality, community and alliance-building, trust and empowerment? What might constructions of collective subjectivities look like in the face of diverse policy constructs, both during and

after a world-wide COVID-19 pandemic? How can different perspectives and theories, including indigenous and posthuman theories support processes for reimagining and strengthening collective teacher identities? Here is hope that our transnational conversations expand beyond current educational policies and practices, available and possible constructions of subjects and subjectivities, and bring us together, across differences, to recognise and create alternative ways of being and doing, and take collaborative actions towards a socially just ECEC and the world.

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