TEACHER PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES IN ECE: COMPLEXITIES AND CONTRADICTIONS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, the landscape of Aotearoa New Zealand ECE policies has notably transformed, and been the object of much scholarly discussion (Duhn, 2010; May & Mitchell, 2008; Mitchell, 2017; Smith & May, 2018). Changes within the policy directives have shifted views of the purpose of ECE and been a powerful catalyst for constructions of teachers’ professional identities. Interestingly, only a few studies (Farquhar, 2010; Warren, 2013) have touched on how teachers’ identities have been produced through multiple discourses (e.g. authority discourse of qualifications, professionalism) in the New Zealand ECE. On a global scale, however, it has been signaled that impacts of contemporary policy directives (e.g. corporatisation) on teachers’ identities may stay hidden (Press & Woodrow, 2009), and yet teacher identity is one of the key aspects in introducing and sustaining policy, a policy change and an improvement (Sumson, 2007). Contributing to this research area, my doctoral study examines how teachers’ professional identities have been constructed in response to competing and confronting discourses in the New Zealand ECE over the last two decades. Through an analysis of some key policy documents, and collective and individual interviews with teachers, professional leaders and managers from both community-owned and for-profit services, the study reveals the powerful impacts of shifting policies and institutional practices on teachers’ identities specifically, and professionalism and the teaching profession generally. It adds to scholarship about how contemporary early childhood discourses may weaken capacity for strengthening advocate-activist teachers’ identities, which are both a priority and necessity at times when the market drives teachers’ work, forcing them to favour for-profit interests over the wellbeing of children, families, and community. The study offers some strategies that various stakeholders (e.g. the state, educational institutions, policy makers, teachers) may wish to consider to bring a much needed social change in the form of a more democratic, more plural, more just, and less unequal ECE in Aotearoa New Zealand.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

GOALS
An examination of discursive constructions of teachers’ professional identities

CONCEPTS
Discourse analysis
Professionalism, New Zealand ECE
Poststructuralism

RESEARCH QUESTION
How have teachers’ professional identities been constructed in the New Zealand ECE from 1996 to 2016?

METHODS
A discourse-analysis approach
Focus group and individual interviews
Policy documents

VALIDITY
Crystallisation
Peer debriefing
Self-reflexivity and participants’ reviews

REFERENCES

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study found that the New Zealand ECE has been torn between tensions created through an interplay of the four divergent and opposing discursive windows (see Figure 2). Discursive windows of enterprise, economic investment and vulnerability have promoted competition, individualism, entrepreneurship and social-intervention emphases in the sector, and frequently overpowered discourses of collectivism, collegiality, and empowerment, in which democratic education and professionalism have been rooted. Through a constant struggle to resolve tensions among the confronting and yet simultaneously coexisting interests and priorities in ECE, teachers need to constantly re-invent their professional identities. Three prevailing identity constructions were identified in the New Zealand ECE - activist-advocate teachers, teachers-entrepreneurs, and teachers-saviors. The identity constructions revealed the complexities and contradictions of teachers’ work, as a negotiating act of juggling between diverse, and often confronting needs, interests, priorities and emphases of the state, the sector, local communities, and their own personal-professional-political stances.

4. CONCLUDING QUESTION

How can we reinforce the advocate-activist teachers’ identities and the advocate-activist teaching profession at a time in which competition, individualism and loyalty to the organisational principles drive teachers’ work, forcing them to choose enterprise interests over the wellbeing of children, families and community?

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