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Problematizing Constructions of 'Expert Teachers' and 'Vulnerable Children' in New Zealand Early Childhood

Over the last two decades, early childhood education (ECE) has come to the top of the political agenda in New Zealand and internationally. The interest of governments and policy-makers in ECE has been driven by the thinking that an 'investment' in ECE is a key to a country's future social and economic development (Heckman 2000). Through an interplay of the existing early childhood discourses and emerging economic discourses, the contexts in which early childhood teachers understand and undertake their work and view themselves as professionals have, thus rapidly changed (Penn 2013; Brown et al. 2018; Pupala, Kascak, and Tesar 2016).

This article problematizes constructions of 'expert teachers' and 'vulnerable children', which emerged through an interplay of discourses of social intervention, economic investment and vulnerability in New Zealand ECE. It argues that the identity constructions on offer have a powerful potential to reinforce social-interventionist and neoliberal narratives in ECE, and move its purpose away from the idea of collective democracy (Dewey 1976).

Keywords: teacher identities; New Zealand early childhood education; early childhood policies and politics; discourses of vulnerability; poststructural perspectives

Introduction

Over the last decade, a number of studies have considered how a purpose of early childhood education (ECE), teachers' work and identities have been transformed through multiple discourses driving a country's education policies (Pupala, Kascak, and Tesar 2016; Androusou and Tsafos 2018; Gibson 2015). While the changing landscape of New Zealand ECE policies has been well documented (May 2019), only a few

studies have touched on issues associated with the policies' impacts on teachers' professional identities (Dalli 2012; Warren 2013).

This article examines the constructions of 'expert teachers' and 'vulnerable children', which emerged through economic and social-intervention approaches to ECE reinforced by the Fifth National Government of New Zealand. It argues that such approaches created a fertile ground for some children to be positioned as disempowered subjects, who need 'fixing' to become 'productive citizens' - the successful future earners and consumers of society. On the other side, the economic and social-intervention discourses construed teachers as 'experts' with 'professional' knowledge and agency to direct 'vulnerable' children and families towards the 'productive' ways of being and living in society. By critically looking at the construction of 'expert teachers' and 'vulnerable children', the article troubles teaching practices that have reinforced a view of ECE as a place for 'fixing vulnerability', narrowing its purpose to boosting the country's economic growth.

The article draws on my recent study on how teachers' professional identities have been (re)constructed in the rapidly changing context of New Zealand ECE policies and practices over the last two decades (Kamenarac 2019). It utilises a discourse-analysis approach to examine one group interview transcript with five managers and one director of early childhood centres, in which the construction of 'expert teachers' and 'vulnerable children' was produced.

The key theoretical concepts in the article - language, discourse and identities, are informed by the ideas of feminist poststructuralists, especially by Weedon (1997), Bacchi (1999; Bacchi and Goodwin 2016) and Baxter (2003). From a poststructuralist stance, discourse exists both in written and spoken language (i.e. an interview transcript), and individuals are never outside of discursive practices, but always subject

to them (Baxter 2016). Language is, thus the place (i.e. the location) where the subjects' ways of knowing the world and being in the world, subjectivities and identities, are discursively constructed (Weedon 1997).

Under the poststructuralist theoretical framework, identities are viewed as multiple, complex and continuously changing entities that are produced through a range of discourses (Osgood 2012; Gibson 2015), and encompass shifting subject positions (Zembylas 2003). The subjects (i.e. teachers) construct their professional selves through an active engagement with discourses through which they are shaped and in which they are positioned. As teachers' professional identities "stand at the core of the teaching profession", identity constructions thus offer a powerful framework for teachers to produce their ideas of "how to be", "how to act" and "how to understand their work and their place [subject positioning in ECE] and in society" (Sachs 2005, 15).

To set the ground for the exploration of teachers' work and professional identities, next I outline the context of New Zealand ECE. Precisely, I focus on four discursive windows: democracy, enterprise, vulnerability and economic investment, which have simultaneously shaped teachers' work and enabled the construction of 'expert teachers' and 'vulnerable children' in ECE.

Discursive Windows of New Zealand ECE: Democracy, Enterprise, Economic Investment and Vulnerability

New Zealand ECE has been shaped by multiple discourses underpinning the country's historical, socio-cultural and economic contexts and political directives. According to discourse analysis of policy documents guiding New Zealand ECE (Table 1), my primary study (Kamenarac 2019) showed that the sector had been torn between tensions created through an interplay of the four prevailing discursive windows: democracy, enterprise, vulnerability and economic investment. The discursive windows

concurrently overlapped, complemented and confronted one another and produced multiple views of the purpose of ECE (Kamenarac 2019). The discourses also offered a framework for teachers' understanding of who they are as professionals, how they are supposed to work and position themselves and others (i.e. children, families) to align with an ECE purpose.

The discursive windows of democracy informed policy directives advocating for ECE as the universal right of a child to access and participate in quality ECE. Of particular importance was, for instance, the policy initiative that provided free of charge 20 hours of quality ECE service to *all* three and four-year-olds, making ECE more affordable and accessible for many families (Ministry of Education 2016). Additionally, the Early Childhood Curriculum Te Whāriki (1996; 2017) has promoted high-quality ECE as the universal right of a child and advocated for holistic learning and development through the engagement and contribution of *all* children, families/whānau and the local community in ECE (Carr and May 2000).

Under the democratic discursive windows, the purpose of ECE was associated with the idea of collective democracy - “a way of personal life controlled not merely by faith in human nature in general but by faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action if proper conditions are furnished” (Dewey 1976, 3). The idea of collective democracy in ECE rested on teaching and learning as a collaborative workshop (Kamenarac 2019), in which “the expression of differences is not only a right of the other persons but a means of enriching one's own life-experience” (Dewey 1976, 4). On this premise, ECE services become a force of empowerment of an entire community, and a democratic space in which capacity of all stakeholders (i.e. the state's citizens) are considered to contribute to individual and collective (societal) development if proper conditions are supplied.

Over time, the democratic discursive windows have been, however, overpowered by the policy directives grounded in discourses of enterprise, economic investment and vulnerability. Such directives led to severe budget cuts, with no differentials in funding between "privately-owned" and "community-based" ECE servicesⁱ (Mitchell 2017; May 2019). The neo-liberal ideals, the philosophy of individualism, competition and a free market, hence became main discourses dictating quality standards and priorities in ECE (Kamenarac 2019).

Under the discursive window of enterprise, economic investment and vulnerability, the policy directives focused on "priority learners", who were missing out on attending ECE (Ministry of Education 2011; Smith and May 2018), and "vulnerable children", who were identified as being "at significant risk of harm to their well-being now and into the future" (Ministry of Social Development 2012, 6). The targeted and interventionist policy directives were rationalised with the disturbing statistics of vulnerability (i.e. poverty, abuse, neglect, leaving school early) in lives of New Zealand children and youth (Ministry of Social Development 2011; UNICEF 2012). In 2020, New Zealand Census showed that 1 in 5 children in New Zealand lives in poverty, equating to approximately 235,400 children living in a household experiencing material hardship (Stats NZ Tauranga Aotearoa 2020).

The serious social problems inevitably reinforced the interventionist approaches to ECE, associating its primary purpose with reducing child vulnerability and improving the country's economic development. The country's determination to ensure "the safety and long-term well-being of our most at-risk children and young people" was further cemented by the establishment of "a dedicated child-centred" Ministry of *Vulnerable Children* in April 2017ⁱⁱ (Tolley 2016, paras 13, 16 emphasis added). Nevertheless, the Ministry's targeted support to vulnerable groups of children was in opposition to the

existing research (Child Poverty Action Group 2013; Perry 2017), and the earlier submissions by 80 key New Zealand organisations and child advocates (UNICEF NZ 2012), which urged the Government to take an inclusive approach to redress social inequalities and ensure better care for *all* children.

By intensifying economic and social interventionist approaches, the discursive windows of enterprise, economic investment and vulnerability weakened the democratic purpose of ECE established in faith in the capabilities of each country's citizen. By applying, what Moss (2014, 14, 3) termed "the correct human technologies", ECE became a place for producing "high returns" that lead to the "improved education, employment and earnings and reduced social problems". By passing its duties onto ECE, the Government ignored its responsibility for undertaking collective, systematic and comprehensive measures to prevent and improve circumstances causing the vulnerability in the first place. Instead, ECE services and teachers were expected to put their 'professional' knowledge and agency in practice to 'fix' societal issues and, thus 'save' the country's economic success by 'educating' 'vulnerable' children and families.

Methodology

The data examined in this article originates from my recent study on how teachers' professional identities have been (re)constructed in response to shifting discourses in New Zealand ECE (Kamenarac 2019). The study was undertaken with the University of Waikato Faculty of Education's research ethics approval, following ethical guidelines for gaining the participants' informed consent and respecting their rights and privacy (Hays and Singh 2012).

The primary study was completed in 2018, and consisted of three different sets of dataⁱⁱⁱ including:

- (1) eight legislated policy documents and additional resources developed and implemented in New Zealand ECE over the last two decades (first data set; Table 1);
- (2) five focus-group interview transcripts with ECE participants (24) in teaching and managerial/leadership positions (the second data set; Table 2); and
- (3) individual interview transcripts with eight selected participants from the focus-group interviews (the third data set; Table 3).

This article examines specifically one focus group interview transcript with participants in a managerial/leadership position (in text, FG3). The interview data was chosen deliberately for the examination because of the participants' active engagement with discourses of vulnerability in ECE. Unlike other group interviews, this focus group data reinforced a view of children as 'vulnerable' and teachers as 'experts' in their practice and thus, set the ground for robust discussions on these two identity constructions.

While the first data set was not investigated in-depth in this article, the analysis of the policy documents, however, informed the earlier section on the New Zealand ECE context. Additionally, the policy analysis inspired the development of textual materials (i.e. booklets) used to provoke the focus group interviews (the second data set).

Furthermore, the policy analysis informed the group interview questions and set a tone for group discussions (Kamenarac 2019).

Before unpacking identity constructions produced through the group interview with centre managers and a centre director, I offer background information of the participants and explain an approach taken in the data analysis.

Research participants and settings

General and specific criteria were applied in the selection of the group interview participants. The criteria enabled access to participants with diverse characteristics and a gathering of informed and multiple perspectives of the research phenomena (Marshall and Rossman 2011, Kamenarac 2019). The primary study involved 14 early childhood teachers and 10 participants in a managerial/leadership position (Table 2). The participants were all qualified and fully registered teachers in teacher-led ECE services^{iv} (Education in New Zealand 2018), with most of them (14) working between 16 and 25 years in the sector.

This article examines data from one focus-group interview with six participants, all were females and in a managerial/leadership position. Five participants were centre managers of private-for-profit ECE centres, while one participant was a director of community-owned ECE centres. The centre managers worked between 6 and 10 years in ECE, and up to three years in the managerial role. The centre director was more than 30 years in ECE and 15 years in the leadership (director) role.

The centre managers each worked in multiple ECE settings located in low socioeconomic communities in urban areas in New Zealand, while the centre director managed several settings located in low and a few in mid socioeconomic status communities. Given the similarities, professional experiences of the centre managers and the centre director were associated with discourses of vulnerability, which shaped both living circumstances of children, and families they worked with and their institutional contexts. Their individual and group accounts thus differed from perspectives and experiences of participants from other group discussions, especially those working in affluent communities. As a result, the group discussion data allowed exploration into the constructions of ‘expert’ teachers and ‘vulnerable’ children, which

did not emerge in other groups' conversations. While this article focuses on these particular constructions of teachers and children, it is, however, essential to note that such constructions must not be considered as the only ways of being a teacher and a child in ECE settings located in socioeconomic status communities.

Data Analysis

The study applied a discourse-analysis approach to examining the textual data. The data were treated as discourse; a corpus of statements/language constructions used to locate and constitute the subjects (e.g. teachers, children) and objects of which they speak (i.e. identities, a purpose of ECE). The transcript text was, thus viewed as a constitutive force that produced ways of seeing a purpose of ECE (e.g. preventing vulnerability), doing ECE (e.g. teaching "vulnerable" children), and being an early childhood teacher (e.g. an "expert").

The discourse-analysis approach was developed and utilised for the specific purpose of the primary research (Kamenarac Forthcoming). Four interconnected analytic steps - identification, description, interpretation and problematisation were in the core of the analysis approach, each informing and overlapping with one another. The first analytical step, identification included a critical re-reading of the texts to identify discourses associated with teachers. The questions guiding the re-reading were informed by Bacchi's (1999) What is the Problem? Approach, and sought to address: What is the main topic of discussion (a problem) about teachers in the ECE policies/practice, and what discourses underpin the problem representation? The second analytical step, description investigated a location of teachers in the identified discourses (i.e. subject position). It utilised the Subject Positioning Tool (Kamenarac Forthcoming) to examine what teachers were expected to be like and do in the discourse(s) shaping a purpose of ECE.

The step interpretation investigated the available ways of being a teacher (i.e. identity constructions), and questioned: What identity constructions do teachers take up as their own, and why not others? This step utilised the Identity Construction Tool, which complemented the Subject Positioning Tool, with the difference that identity constructions were a broader category than subject positions (Kamenarac Forthcoming). The final step, problematisation, applied the critical lens of the What is the Problem? Approach (Bacchi 1999) to question how and why particular identities were legitimised in ECE policies and practice, and why not others? This step problematised available identity constructions and questioned what was left unproblematic in views of teachers and a purpose of ECE on offer.

The use of discourse-analysis approach was a good fit for the study's purpose because it allowed an examination into multiple discourses producing particular ways of being a teacher in ECE. It enabled a critical look at what "possibilities of sense-making [were] available within the discourses within a particular sense-making community" (Davies 2004, 4–5). However, the taken approach was not set out to discover 'truths' ('real facts') about the subjects (teachers, children) and their subjectivities. Instead, it focuses on an action orientation of language as a discourse to constitute the subjects and subjectivities in particular ways in specific contexts and times.

Limitations and the issue of validity

Given the study's poststructuralist orientation, the discourse-analysis approach and the small set of examined data, I resist any claim that my research is neutral (Lather 2000) and readings of data are objective. Hence, several strategies (e.g. crystallisation, participants' reflections, peer debriefing, and self-reflexivity) were applied to address possible validity 'threads' and enhance the study's trustworthiness (Tracy 2010).

Findings

Next, I explore one group interview data with five centre managers and one centre director, all managing ECE settings in low socioeconomic status communities. The findings illustrate how the language of vulnerability was transmitted from economic and social-interventionist policy directives into practices of some ECE settings, allowing some groups of children to subscribe to the category 'vulnerable'. The collective term 'vulnerable' was used in some participants' talks to describe not only difficult living circumstances of some children and families (i.e. poverty), but also "challenging behaviours in families" (e.g. substance abuse, domestic violence), which were perceived as causing "vulnerability for a child and the entire family" (FG3 860-876).

While illustrating possible roles of teachers in 'extremely vulnerable contexts', the finding sections problematise the constructions of children as 'vulnerable' and teachers as 'experts'. I argue that such identity constructions may narrow a purpose of ECE to social and economic intervention that is done *to* 'vulnerable' children, instead of with them, in the hope of (re)shaping their future.

Teaching 'vulnerable children' what is 'right' and 'wrong'

In the group discussion (in text, FG3), the centre managers and the centre director were invited to reflect on policy directives influencing teachers' work and identities. Centre managers interpreted the social-intervention, and economic emphases in ECE as a sign that the Government "is aware of vulnerability [that] has been in society for a long time" and "finally recognises what teachers have been doing" in this space (FG3 879-890). The Government's agenda to increase the ECE participation of 'vulnerable children' was praised as a strategy towards supporting teachers in the 'extremely vulnerable communities' and acknowledging their expertise for working with 'vulnerable children and families'.

Given the praised expertise, the centre managers described teachers in 'extremely vulnerable' communities' as 'experts in their own contexts' (FG3 860-876). For some centre managers, such positioning meant that "sometimes teachers need to teach children what is right and wrong as their families may not do so" (FG3 964-997). To set a scene for the construction of 'teachers as experts', centre managers shared the following example:

We got one little boy that just continually escapes from the centre [to goes back home]. One day he climbed to a driveway to his dad's house. His dad returned from jail to home on that day. The little boy escaped to see his dad I told his dad that we need to follow up this event face-to-face. I explained to him what had happened. The dad was stoned for a starter, and then he told [me] "He came home, so it is all fine". Then, he went inside. We got a back story that the dad was in jail for beating up the mum.... [Centre managers provided detailed background information about the family, which remains confidential]. You know that this child is surrounded by this atmosphere at home, and you hear all these stories... Sometimes you need to teach children what is right and wrong because their families may not do so. (FG3 997-1014)

Drawing on discourses of vulnerability in describing some children and families, the construct of 'expert teachers' was further justified through multiple examples of teachers "working in the extremely vulnerable environments", "meeting vulnerable families and hearing their background stories" and "having open and honest relationships with them" (FG3: 997-1018). By locating teachers in the authority discourses, because of their "professional knowledge, experiences and agency", teachers in "extremely vulnerable context' were viewed as those who "*know* the situation [the child is living in] and what is happening there" (FG3: 1000-1003, emphasis added). At the same time, parents with 'challenging behaviours' were, however, grounded in vulnerability discourses and perceived as not capable of participating in and contributing to their children's learning and development.

The interplay between the discourses of vulnerability and the authority discourses thus created opportunities for some teachers to be and act as ‘experts’ who can teach children and families what is ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, from their personal-professional viewpoints, rather than working *with* them. Such positioning of teachers implied possible ‘deficit imageries’ (Bishop 2003) that may be held of ‘vulnerable’ children and families in some institutional contexts and teaching practices. The deficit imageries tend to hinder a team-work approach and power-sharing relationships with *all* children and families, which are a foundation for democratic and collaborative practices in ECE (Ministry of Education 2017).

Next, I explore an opposing view of ‘expert teachers’ and ‘vulnerable children’ by the centre director, who viewed teachers as ‘never experts’ in any context.

Challenging constructions of 'expert teachers' and 'vulnerable children'

While the centre managers approved of 'expert teachers' in the 'extremely vulnerable contexts', the centre director openly criticised any possibility for teachers to be and act as 'experts'. She argued that teachers "are never experts in teaching and relationships with children and families, no matter their circumstances" (FG3 1031-1039). She warned that viewing children as 'vulnerable' and teachers as 'experts' enables "victimising of the vulnerable children and families" (FG3 1031-1039), which she illustrated as follows.

I worked in a kindergarten in a very low socioeconomic community years ago. There were many children and families living in poverty, with all sorts of issues involved. [The centre director listed issues like those that other participants described as "the extremely vulnerable".] One day, a teacher said to me "You know, the trouble with you is that you do not have any expectation from these children". I listened to her, and it was like being hit by a fist. After some time, I realised that she was right. I felt so sorry for those vulnerable children. I have got

myself tied up in the whole world of being sorry and seeing them as being victims. It didn't do them any favours at all. I realised that as a teacher, I need to have expectations from all children and believe in their capability. They all have their strengths that we need to recognise, and they all matter... (FG3 1039-1055)

The example on offer alluded that the 'deficit imageries' of some children, combined with the reinforced care *for* them, may force teachers to lose the vision for *all* children as capable and competent beings (Ministry of Education 2017), and thus position some as 'victims' [i.e. disempowered subjects] with no agency in their lives. Moreover, it implied that the construction of teachers as 'an expert' was not needed in ECE practices where parents and children were not located in and produced through discourses of vulnerability. Instead, teachers were 'never experts', while *all* parents were regarded as capable of participating in and contributing to their children's learning and development.

Next, I explore how the construct of teachers as 'an expert' was reclaimed after being challenged by the perspective of teachers as 'never experts'.

Reclaiming the power of 'expert teachers' in ECE

After hearing the centre director's opposing views of teachers, the centre managers slightly modified their earlier statements by saying that "[p]erhaps, [they] cannot say what is right and wrong" (FG3 1000-1015, emphasis added). Yet, they also justified why teachers' 'sometimes' need to be and act as the 'experts' in 'extremely vulnerable contexts' as follows:

.... but in a way, we have to be up there to direct that child down a different path. Because we know that he is in the culture of a gang ... [Participants continued to talk about families' "challenging behaviours and the vulnerability of children"]. It is where the little one will go to if we [teachers] don't do anything (FG3 1000-1015)

... The more they are in the centre with us, the more we can teach them socially acceptable behaviours. The more they are out of the centre, the more they are learning other behaviours. (FG3 1017-1019)

Although moderating their statements (*perhaps the teacher cannot say*), the 'expert' positioning was further rationalised with comments that the teachers "know" the child's situation and thus, "have to be there" to "direct the child to a different path" (FG3 1000-1026). The positioning of 'expert teachers' was further fuelled with a concern that "when parents are caught up in that circle of vulnerability, their children became caught up as well, and then their children", so "it became their normal way of life" (FG3 1221-1225). As the 'vulnerability' was perceived as 'a permanent condition' that cannot be transformed by the 'vulnerable', the construction of 'expert teachers' became necessitated to assist "vulnerable children in moving to a new lifestyle" that is "normal in our society" (FG3 1328-1329).

In summary, the group interview illustrated the power of discourses of vulnerability and authority to produce and legitimise an 'expert' positioning of teachers in 'vulnerable', contexts', but not in others. By reinforcing deficit ways of thinking of some children and families and construing teachers as 'experts', the findings implied that some institutional practices might validate the view of ECE as a social and economic intervention, prevailing in policy directives of that time.

Discussion: Problematizing some identities and ECE practices in 'the extremely vulnerable contexts'

The construction of 'expert teachers' and 'vulnerable children' on offer poses many critical questions about teachers' work and a purpose of ECE in New Zealand and beyond. Importantly, it provokes teachers to consider if/how they may have given voice to discourses of vulnerability in a way that promotes the neoliberal and interventionist

framing of ECE as "a vehicle for producing successful earners and consumers in the future.

Under the framework of 'expert teachers' and 'vulnerable children', as the findings alluded, a primary purpose of ECE moved from providing education and care to *all* children, no matter their family circumstances, towards 'saving' the 'vulnerable' (Kamenarac 2019). The latter perspective masks the fact that teachers alone cannot address issues of structural vulnerability (e.g. poverty) without the determination of the Government to put in place measures (e.g. redistributive taxation, proactive labour and housing policies) to reduce causes of the vulnerability in society (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009).

By taking up the 'expert' positioning in 'extremely vulnerable' communities, instead of viewing teaching as a complex, ongoing, multi-dimensional negotiation with *all* children, families and communities, teachers seemed to promote ECE as a set of social interventions that are "done to young children [instead of with] in the hope of (re)shaping their future" (Penn 2013, 13). Such teaching leaves no opportunity for the 'vulnerable' to respond to their learning and, for teachers to learn from their responses and experiences.

Social-interventionist and economic approaches to ECE also increase the risk of homogenising some groups of children and families to meet the norms of the dominant population. In this way, vulnerability becomes their personal and individual 'failure', rather than a temporary condition they live in. Consequently, factors causing hardship in people's lives and affecting their ability to adequately care for their children become ignored. By treating issues of vulnerability as an individual rather than a collective responsibility, the country reinforces the neoliberal form of governance that separates "the individual, breaks his links with others, splits up community life, forces the

individual back on himself, and ties him to his own [disempowered] identity in a constraining way" (Foucault 1982, 781). Such governance perpetuates and deepens the existing social issues, strengthening uneven power-sharing relationships between the powerless (the 'vulnerable') and the powerful ('experts').

By dictating the economic and social interventionist ideas in ECE, the country manages the 'conduct of conduct' (Burchell, Davidson, and Foucault 2008) among citizens, enabling and supporting teachers to normalise lives of some and deciding for others a sort of life they may live. The purpose of such ECE is to reproduce 'normal', 'productive citizens' that govern themselves by so that the "state remains strong despite appearing to dissolve" (Dahlberg and Moss 2005, 133).

Given the impacts of economic and social interventionist discourses on teachers' work and identities, it is necessary to problematise the construction of 'expert teachers' and 'vulnerable children', and the purpose of ECE associated to 'fixing' vulnerability and 'saving the vulnerable'. The problematisation needs to start with respect for diverse and adverse life experiences and openness to understanding diversity and adversity in society. In ECE specifically, it requires teachers to apply professional ['expert'] knowledge and agency to recognise the life experiences, capacities and agency of all, including 'vulnerable' children, families and communities, and support them to engage with the available support systems and recourses to make changes they wish in their lives. By focusing on the life experiences and capabilities of children and families, teachers would be able to re-position children and families as "active [and capable participants] in the construction [...] of their own social lives, the lives of those around them, and of the societies in which they live" (James and Prout 2015, 7). To do so, teachers need to shift the deficit imageries of the 'vulnerable' to the ideas of resilience and possibility when assisting children and families to overcome a current hardship.

Such shift necessitates a change in mindset so that teachers perceive parents and their children as "people with promise" rather than "families at risk" (Biddulph, Biddulph, and Biddulph 2003, 171).

By building the critical mentality and capacities in their work, teachers are likely to rethink their practices and engage with discourses that narrow the purpose of ECE, their work and identities. Through professional development focused on the capacity building, teachers can be equipped to actively search for ways of deliberately countering, resisting, and altering discourses that define ECE as a place for 'saving the vulnerable' and producing 'successful earners and consumers'. Finally, by insisting that issues associated with socioeconomic vulnerability are not individual, but a shared responsibility, teachers, are likely to re-position themselves in ways that reinforce more democratic, social just and equitable ECE policies and practices.

Conclusion

This article examined the constructions of 'expert teachers' and 'vulnerable' children, which emerged through economic and socio-interventionist emphases in New Zealand ECE. The identity constructions revealed the powerful potential of discourses of vulnerability to position some children and families as disempowered subjects in ECE while strengthening teachers' 'expertise' and agency in 'saving' the 'vulnerable' in society. Drawing on one group interview with centre managers and a director, I maintained that the constructions of 'expert teachers' reinforced the existing social intervention and neoliberal discourses that framed ECE as a tool for 'fixing' vulnerability and producing 'future productive citizens'. The identity construction also weakened teachers' capacity to recognise life experiences, agency and capability of *all* children and families to make changes in their lives. It blurred their vision for a more democratic and socially just ECE and society.

Along with illustrating the power of discourses to narrow teachers' work and identities, this article provokes the ECE community to see discourses as "a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposite strategy" (Foucault 1998, 101). It invites the ECE community to take a collective venture in engaging with *all* children and families, as equitable and active agents in their own lives and in society. On this ground, the ECE community can be strengthened to actively search for strategies that reinforce the idea of collective democracy in ECE, and strengthen the faith in capacities of *all* citizens to contribute to their individual and societal development if proper conditions are supplied.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Table 1. List of Analysed Policy Documents

Title/Publication date	Document type
Early Childhood Curriculum Framework Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education 1996)	Policy document
Pathways to the Future-Ngā Huarahi Arataki. A 10-year strategic plan for early childhood education (Ministry of Education 2002)	Policy document
Kei Tua o te Pae. Assessments for learning: Early Childhood Exemplars. Books 1-20 (Carr, Lee, and Jones 2004-2009)	Professional resource
Ngā Arohaehae Whai Hua: Self-review guidelines for Early Childhood Education (Ministry of Education 2008)	Professional resource
Registered Teacher Criteria (Teachers Council 2010)	Legislated policy document
Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations 2008 (New Zealand Government 2013)	Legislated regulations
Vulnerable Children Act (New Zealand Government 2014)	Legislated act
Vulnerable Children Act 2014: A practical guide for Early Childhood Education Services, Ngā Kōhanga Reo, Playgroups, Schools and Kura (Ministry of Education 2014)	Supplementary resource

Table 1. Focus group participants background information

Participants	KT (n=6)	ECT (n=8)	PL (n=5)	ECM (n=5)
Service ownership	Community (6)	Community (5) Private for-profit (3)	Community (5)	Community (1) Private for-profit (4)
Current working position	Head Teacher (6)	Teacher (5) Head Teacher (3)	Professional Leader (5)	Centre Manager (4) Centre Director (1)
Years of Teaching Experience				
6 – 10		1		3
11 - 15	1	1	1	1
16 - 20	2	3		
21 - 25	2	2	3	
26 – 30	1	1		
35 - 40			1	1
Years of managerial/advisory/leadership experience				
2 - 5			3	3
6 - 10			2	1
11 - 15				1
Gender	Female (6)	Female (8)	Female (4) Male (1)	Female (5)
Ethnicity	Māori (1) Pākehā (5)	Indian (1) Māori (1) Pākehā (6)	Pākehā (4) Māori (1)	Pākehā (3) South African (1) Māori (1)

Table 3. Information on interview participants

Participants	KT (n=2)	ECT (n=3)	PL (n=1)	ECM (n=2)
Service ownership	Community (2)	Community (2) Private for-profit (1)	Community	Community (1) Private for-profit (1)
Current working position	Head Teachers	Teacher	Professional Leader	Centre Manager (1) Centre Director (1)
Years of Teaching Experience				
6 - 10		1		1
16 - 20	1	1		
21 - 25	1		1	
26 - 30		1		
35 - 40				1
Years of managerial/advisory/leadership experience				
2 - 5				1
6 - 10			1	
11 - 15				1
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female
Ethnicity	Māori (1) Pākehā (1)	Pākehā (3)	Pākehā	Pākehā (1) Māori (1)

ⁱ One of the main distinctions between "privately owned" and "community-based" services is in use of funding - private services are able to make financial gains and distribute these to their members, while community-based services may charge fees, but are prohibited from

making financial gains that are distributed to their members (Education Counts 2018, Mitchell 2017; Mitchell 2015).

- ii In December 2017, the Ministry for Vulnerable Children was renamed, with the word ‘vulnerable’ being dropped. The Minister for Children, Tracey Martin, commented that labelling children as “vulnerable” was “stigmatising, impacting negatively on both children and the Ministry's workers” (Cheng 2017, paras 5–6).
- iii The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in the University of Waikato Research Commons at [[link to be included after review](#)].
- iv Educational programmes in teacher-led services is overseen by a registered and qualified teacher, and the services are required to meet set registered teacher qualification criteria (New Zealand Government, 2017).