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THE AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE: A COLLABORATIVE AND DEMOCRATIC SPACE AND PLACE FOR ALL MEMBERS OF THE LEARNING COMMUNITY

Abstract: This article draws on the author's doctoral research study that investigated how teachers' professional identities have been re-constructed in response to shifting discourses in early childhood education and care (ECEC) policies and practices in Aotearoa New Zealand over the last three decades. For the purpose of this article, the author shares a small piece of discourse-analysis of significant New Zealand's policies, including Early Childhood Curriculum FrameworkTe Whāriki,Kei Tua o te Pae. Assessments for learning: Early childhood exemplars. Book 1-20, and Ngā Arohaehae Whai Hua: Self-review Guidelines for Early Childhood Education. The author argues that the policy documents constructed the Aotearoa New Zealand ECEC as a collaborative and democratic space and place for all members of the learning community (that is, the children, families/whānau[1], ECEC staff, local community, and others associated with an early childhood setting). The article explores the concepts underpinning the policy documents (e.g. reciprocal and responsive relationships), which have promoted ethics of care and ethics of encounter in the learning community, and set a foundation for collaborative and democratic teaching and learning practices in the Aotearoa New Zealand ECEC.

Key words:the curriculum Te Whāriki, discourse-analysis, ethics of care, ethics of encounter

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1 *Whānau* has meaning of extended family in te reo; the language of Māori, the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Setting the Context – The Aotearoa New Zealand Early Childhood Education and Care

The Aotearoa New Zealand ECEC has been described as 'a paradigm of diversity' (Smith & May, 2006). It encompasses various types of services, including both centre- and home-based programmes. To distinguish how early childhood services (ECSs) operate and are funded, there has been a recent classification of parent/whānau-led and teacher-led services (Ministry of Education, 2014).

Parent/whānau-led services are managed by parents and *whānau*, and include licensed services, such as playcentres, kōhanga reo and certificated playgroups (Ministry of Education, 2009b). Parent/whānau-led services cater for children from birth to school age[2], and focus on children's learning, parents/whānau involvement and education (Ministry of Education, 2009b). Kōhanga reo provide services with total immersion in te reo and tikanga Māori environment, fostering the language, cultural identity and self-determination of Māori (Ministry of Education, 2009b). Similarly, Pasifika playgroups and centres have a language and culture basis, offering a service in Pasifika languages, and maintaining Pasifika cultures (Ministry of Education, 2009b).

The educational programme in teacher-led services is overseen by registered and qualified teachers. The services need to meet set registered teacher qualification criteria(New Zealand Government, 2017). Teacher-led services include kindergartens, ECE centres (childcare) and home-based services (family daycare), which predominantly cater for children from birth to five years, offering all-day sessions and/or flexible-hour programmes (Ministry of Education, 2009d).

In 2013, Aotearoa New Zealand was ranked in the top third of OECD countries, with 96 percent of children starting school having attended ECEC(Education Counts, 2014). Internationally, the ECEC sectorhas been regarded for its high-quality teaching, learning and assessment practices. The development of the first world bicultural early childhood curriculum framework *Te Whāriki*(1996)[3]and the professional resources - *Kei Tua o te Pae. Assessments for learning: Early childhood exemplars. Book 1-20*(Ministry of Education, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2009a), *Te*

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2 In Aotearoa New Zealand children can start school on the day they turn five years old. However, all children *must* be enrolled in school or in home education by their sixth birthday(Education in New Zealand, 2019).

3 It is important to note that after shaping early learning in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally for the past 20 years, *Te Whāriki*(1996)was recently updated to better reflect the 21st century context children living in, and align with contemporary ECEC policies and practices (Ministry of Education, 2017b). The updated curriculum has a stronger focus on bicultural practice, local priorities and interests, and promotes the importance of language, culture, and identity, and the inclusion of all children (Ministry of Education, 2017c). As the core curriculum aspirations, principles and strands remained unchanged, in this article I refer to the first published curriculum.

Whatu Pōkeka: Kaupapa Māori Assessment for Learning(Ministry of Education, 2009c), and *Ngā Arohaehae Whai Hua: Self-review Guidelines for Early Childhood Education* (Ministry of Education, 2008), have significantly contributed to the prestigious status of the country's ECEC as an advanced and competent system.

Very different from a traditional curriculum, teaching and assessment practices, *Te Whāriki* (1996)and the professional resourcesprioritised a holistic approach to learning and development and emphasised learning dispositions and working theories as learning outcomes (Nuttall, 2013). This meant that early learning focused not on discrete domains of knowledge but on a child's attitudes, skills and competences which combine together to form a working theory, and help the child develop learning dispositions, as a foundation for life-long learning (Carr & Lee, 2012). With their indicative rather than definite outcomes, the curriculum and the professional resourcesasked teachers to develop individual curriculum programmes (whāriki) and assessment practices,which are appropriate and culturally responsive to the specific needs and interests of children, families and community they work with.

The competency-basedlearner-centred curriculum and the innovative professional resources, among other qualities, made Aotearoa New Zealand a leader in ECEC innovation. As Moss (2008) highlighted, the New Zealand ECEC became a "surprising exception" to the general picture of ECEC, by successfully confronting the divided education and care system and superiority of "technical practice" (p. 7). Moreover, Moss (2008) described the New Zealand ECECas "education-in-its-broadest-sense"(pp. 7–8), with learning and care interconnected with many other purposes beyond education (i.e. diversity, biculturalism, democracy, social justice).

Given the worldwide significance of the Aotearoa New Zealand ECEC, this article discusses the constructions of democratic and collaborative spaces and places in the contexts of the curriculum framework *Te Whāriki* (1996) and the two professional resources: *the Assessment for Learning, Book 1-20* (Ministry of Education, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2009a) and *the Self-review* (Ministry of Education, 2008). The author takes a critical look at some of the main concepts, which enabled the democratic and collaborative spaces and places in ECEC, and reinforced active engagements of diverse members of the learning communities into the lives of ECSs. Before starting off the discussion, I outline the curriculum principles and strands, which set a basis for the constructions of a democratic and collaborative ECEC in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Weaving a *whāriki*: A mat for all to stand on

The curriculum T*e Whāriki* (1996)was developed by education academics Helen May and Margaret Carr, in partnership with Māori academics Tamati and Tilly Reedy. The purpose of the document is to offer a *framework* for consistent individual curriculum programmes for all licenced ECSs in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The bicultural curriculum emphasises that all ECSs should provide children with opportunities to develop knowledge and an understanding of the cultural heritages of both partners to Te Tiriti o Waitangi[4]. The bicultural partnership is reflected in the curriculum text and structure, with the curriculum principles and strands being expressed in both the Māori and English languages. These are not, however, an exact translation of the other, but rather complementary domains, which acceptable cross-cultural structure and equivalence were discussed and transacted early in the curriculum development process (Carr & May, 2000).

The curriculum metaphor *whāriki* envisages "a mat for all to stand on" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 11). As *Figure 1* illustrates, at the heart of *whāriki*are four curriculum principles, which are interwoven with five curriculum strands. The *whāriki* symbolises that weaving a mat is almost always done collaboratively (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 11). Therefore, the role of all adults in ECEC; including teachers (i.e. *kaiako*[5]), parents/whānau, others;is to weave together with children the curriculum principles and strands, and create a local curriculum for their individual setting (Ministry of Education, 2017a). This means that although the curriculum principles and strands are common to all licenced ECSs, the ways in which they are put into practice may differ from service to service, depending on their cultural, organisational, philosophical, structural and other differences (Ministry of Education, 1996).

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4 The understanding of bicultural context of the Aotearoa New Zealand ECEC is grounded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi, a treaty, first signed in 1840, between the tangata whenua (people of the land, the indigenous people; Māori) and the British Crown to establish the political organisation of the country (Orange, 1987). Te Tiriti o Waitangi set the foundation upon which Māori and Pākehā (New Zealanders of non-Māori ancestry) would build their relationship in a commitment to "live together in a spirit of partnership and the acceptance of obligations for participation and protection" (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 3).

5 In te reo, *kaiako* means being both a teacher and a learner, which aligns with the philosophy of *ako*, emphasising that teaching and learning is always a reciprocal process (Ministry of Education, 2005).

Figure 1: *Curriculum principles and strands* (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 13)
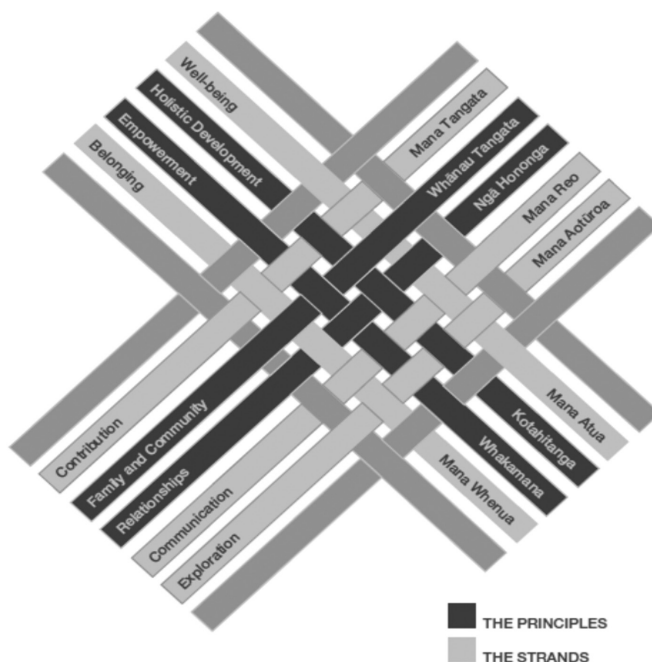
The curriculum's principles are:

- Empowerment – *Whakamana*. The early childhood curriculum "empowers the child to learn and grow";
- Holistic development – *Kotahitanga*. The curriculum "reflects the holistic way children learn and grow";
- Family and community – *Whānau tangata*. "The wider world of family and community is an integral part of the curriculum";
- Relationships – *Ngā Hononga*. "Children learn through responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places and things". (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 14)

The curriculum strands arose from the principles, setting goals for essential areas of learning, development and care. The strands are couched as domains of *mana*[6] – the power that a child brings with them –and include:

- Well-being – *Mana Atua*, stating that "[t]he health and well-being of the child are protected and nurtured";

6 In Māori tradition children are viewed as being born with immense potential; "inherently competent, capable and rich, complete and gifted no matter what their age or ability" (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 12). Quality early learning helps children "begin to realise that potential and build a strong foundation for later learning and for life" (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 2).

- Belonging – *Mana Whenua*, requiring that "[c]hildren and their families feel a sense of belonging";
- Contribution – *Mana Tangata*, advocating for "equitable" learning opportunities for each child and that "each child's contribution is valued";
- Communication – *Mana Reo*, emphasising that "[t]he language and symbols of [children's] own and other cultures are promoted and protected";
- Exploration – *Mana Aoturoa*, promoting that "[t]he child learns through active exploration of the environment" (Ministry of Education, 1996, pp. 15–16).

Together, the principles and strands articulate the vision for all children from birth to school age to

be able to grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to the world. (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9)

This vision clearly articulates a philosophy of high quality education and care and the purpose of ECEC in the bicultural and multicultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand. It is grounded in discourses of democratic education as the universal right of a child to the high quality ECSs, and the engagement and contribution of each member of the learning community (that is, the children, families/whānau, ECEC staff, and members of a local community).

The curriculum aspirations, principles and strands set cornerstone for the *Assessment for Learning* (2004, 2005, 2007, 2009a) and the *Self-review* (2008), to which I refer collectively as the professional resources. *Assessment for Learning* (2004, 2005, 2007, 2009a) included a series of 20 exemplar books, which aimed to transform teachers' accounts of assessment from checking to see whether children acquired "skills for school", to establishing "learning places for children and to document the learning in them" (Carr, 2001, p. 1). On the other side, the *Self-review* (2008) was created to help ECSs and teachers consider what high quality ECEC looks like and how their might evolve. Both professional resources were not, however meant to be prescribed approaches of learning and assessment. They were developed to offer diverse opportunities for members of the learning community to engage in a dialogue about teaching, learning and assessment practices in their individual ECSs, and then work jointly towards improvements.

By taking a broad collaborative approach and being inclusive of all diversity, *Te Whāriki* (1996) and the professional recourses became a key means for embracing the diverse ECSs, pedagogical and cultural perspectives in ECEC. Moreover, they have played an important role in constructing ECEC as a democratic and collaborative place and space, which respects and actively engages knowledges, skills and perspectives of diverse members of the learning community.

Discourse-analysis approach

This article utilizes a discourse-analysis approach, which was developed by the author for the specific purpose of her doctoral research (Kamenarac, 2019a). The approach was located within a conceptual and theoretical framework of post-structural discursive studies, while its development was inspired by the work of Weedon (1997), Bacchi, (1999; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016), and Baxter (2003, 2016).

Of a particular importance for the understanding of the discourse-analysis approach is the poststructuralist notion of language, as a site for the construction and contestation of social meanings and social realities (Weedon, 1997). Accordingly, the written language (i.e. texts of policy documents) does not simply name and reflect things, as they already exist. The language rather has power to create meanings to social reality and shape how we act on and talk about particular subjects (e.g. children, teachers) and topics (e.g. the purpose of ECEC). Importantly, language can create ways of seeing the world and ways of being particular kinds of subject ('a provisional being') in the world (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Given the power of language, the texts of policy documents were treated as discourse, which can propose how we should create early childhood spaces and places and engage with children, teachers and other members of the learning community in ECEC.

By applying discourse-analysis approach, the research focus moves from *what* 'really' happened to *how* the accounts of the research phenomena (e.g. early childhood spaces and places) were discursively constructed and what their function was in a broader social context. The discourse-approach included four analytic steps (i.e. identification, description, identification and problematisation), which enabled a critical exploration into discursive constructions of early childhood spaces and places in the selected policy documents. The analytic steps were accompanied by two analytic tools (i.e. the *Subject Positioning Tool* and the *Identity Construction Tool*), which investigated how and why the subjects (e.g. members of the learning community in ECEC) were positioned and constructed in a particular way in the policy texts. Furthermore, the analytic steps and tools were supported by a framework with questions, which aimed to provoke a critical thinking around how and why early childhood spaces and places were constructed in a particular way in the New Zealand ECEC context. (For more information about the applied discourse-analysis approach see Kamenarac, 2019a, 2019b).

In the section following, I share the discourse analysis of the early childhood curriculum and the professional resources. The attention is taken to concepts of reciprocal and responsive relationships, underpinning the construction of the New Zealand ECEC as a place of democratic and collaborative teaching and learning practices.

Constructing collaborative and democratic spaces and placesin ECEC

The construction of ECEC as a collaborative space of learning, development and care in its broadest sense emerged through the discourse-analysis of *Te Whāriki* (1996), and the professional resources: the *Assessments for Learning*, Book 1-20 (2004, 2005, 2007, 2009a) and *Self-review* (2008). The policy documents argued for ECEC as a place for fostering children's learning, development and care as a whole through the active participation, contribution, and shared responsibilities of all members of the learning community.

As grounded in discourses of collaborative and democratic education, the policy texts construed ECEC institutions as an environment of dialogue, collective decision-making, diverse socio-cultural and educational worldviews, and collaborative teaching and learning practices. Hence, democratic discourses were associated with certain qualities and values – cooperation, "conjoint communicated experience", sharing of common interests, respect for differences, individual freedom, the common good, and collective decision-making - as "a way of life"(Dewey, 1916, p. 87), both individual and collective within the learning community.

In constructing ECEC as a collaborative and democratic place and space, *Te Whāriki* (1996)defines curriculum as "the sum of the total experiences, activities, and events" fostering children's learning, development and care (p. 10). This definition highlights that a curriculum is not a set of prescribed aims and contents, but is rather 'everything' that happens in an ECEC setting (Ritchie, 2003).

The curriculum text further emphasizes "the critical role of reciprocal and responsive relationships ... with people, places and things" and "socially and culturally mediated learning" in ECEC (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 10). This means that children,teachers, parents and other adults engaged in the learning community are required to explore and create collaboratively what counts as teaching, learning and knowledge in their own contexts, and based on that co-construct their individualwhāriki, following the main curriculum principles and strands.

The curriculum principles and strands focus on the empowerment, well-being, belonging, participation and contribution of child, family and community (Ministry of Education, 1996). They advocate for the integration of education and care in their broadest senses and the child-centred, holistic, collective and democratic teaching and learning practices in ECEC. The term holistic in the curriculum text means "tending, as in nature, to form a unity made up of other 'wholes', where the new unity is more than the sum of the parts, and in which each element affects, and is affected by, each other element" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 99). This requires all aspects of children's cognitive, social, cultural,

physical, emotional, and spiritual learning and development to be reflected and interwoven in curriculum practices.

To make this possible, ECEC needs to create "a responsive, stable, safe environment" in which the "inner well-being", "sense of self-worth", "identity", "confidence" and "enjoyment" of a child are nurtured through the "consistent warm relationships", "encouragement" and "acceptance" of all "people, places and things" (Ministry of Education, 1996, pp. 43–46). Such view of ECEC is established on the belief that only by making "a strong connection and consistency among all the aspects of the child's world" and by building a collaborative teaching and learning community can ECEC practice support and ensure "the unity" of children's learning and development and care (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 42).

As emerging from the curriculum principles and strands, the professional resources: *Self-review* (2008) and *Assessment for Learning*, *Books 1-20* (2004, 2005, 2007, 2009a) continued to strengthen the notions of reciprocal and responsive (collaborative) relationships, as a foundation of a collaborative and democratic teaching and learning. The *Self-review* (2008), thusdescribed collaborative and responsive relationships through the concepts of *raranga*[7] and whanaungatanga[8], which were grounded in Māori worldviews of "unity and togetherness"; "weaving together children, their families, whānau, and communities into the life of [ECEC] services" (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 49). Based on this, the collaborative and reciprocal relationships were reinforced as being "a source of learning, empowerment, and identity for all of us [referring to the members of the learning community]" (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 39).

By highlighting "the co-operative nature of learning", the *Self-review* furthermore explained "strong relationships, based on respect, reciprocity, trust" and commitment and care for one another are a basis for a collaborative learning community in ECEC: "'*whakawhanaungatanga*'–which in te reo means "an environment of trust and reciprocity" (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 39). To build such an environment members of the learning community are required to critically reflect and act upon ethical principles of justice (e.g. How are processes fair for everyone?), autonomy (e.g. In what ways do we ensure that our process enables important issues to be raised?), responsible care (e.g. What are our moral, legal, and social responsibilities as advocates for children in our review?), and truth (e.g. How do we ensure that we gather, analyse, and report the outcomes

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7 *Raranga*is the art of weaving, which was originally used to make practical items for survival, like rope, fishing nets, and baskets (Moorfield, 2011). In an education context, it emphasises the importance of every member of the learning community to be engaged in 'weaving' collaboratively teaching, learning and assessment processes.

8 In te reo Māori whanaungatanga means relationships, kinship, sense of family connection through shared experiences and working together which provides people with a sense of belonging. (Moorfield, 2011). In an educational context, it requires each individual to contribute to the collective process of teaching and learning.

of our review truthfully whilst doing no harm?) (Ministry of Education, 2008).

Moreover, acting ethically in the learning community requires a critical consideration of relationship factors. These factors are related to questions about culture (e.g. What is our service culture, and how does it influence our review?), gender and age (e.g. Who will be involved based on gender or age, and why?), ethnicity (e.g. What do we know about ethnic groups in our services, and how do we work appropriately with them?), community (e.g. What are our unique relationship obligations within our local community?), and geographic location (e.g. What are the unique aspects of our location that might influence our review?). In this sense, ethics in the learning community are concerned with "the attention we give to the people" and with "the implications of everyone's actions on others, *now and in the future*" (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 45, emphasis added). Accordingly, *all* involved in ECEC were ethically obliged to accept that it was "*everybody's obligation* to respect others' rights and act towards them with dignity" (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 45).Therefore, "*at all times*" all needed to "seek to ensure that everyone is safe", and "the well-being and rights of each member must be respectfully considered"(Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 45, emphasis added).

Established in the discourses of ethically responsive and reciprocal relationships, ECEC becomes a place and space where each member of the learning community is committed to listening, "caring, sharing, respecting, helping, relieving, reciprocating, balancing, nurturing, and guardianship" (Hirini 1997, as cited in Ministry of Education, 2008). Such ECEC empowers the members of the learning community to work with an ethics of care and ethics of encounter (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005), with everyone being entitled to care and everyone being ethically obliged to demonstrate care.

An ethics of care focuses on and values a relationship with the Other based on responsibility and the recognition of differences. An ethics of care necessitates the capacity of everyone in the learning community to deal with "diversity and alterity, with the fact that subjects [the Others] are different and in this sense both "strange and knowledgeable" to each other" (Sevenhuijsen, 1998, p. 60). Furthermore, an ethics of encounter ask members of the learning community to think of the "Other whom I cannot grasp", and treat the diversity and alterity of the "Other" with respect rather than "make the 'Other' into the Same" (Dahlberg, 2003, p. 270). To do so, members of the learning community need to be open to the Other, reinforcing communication, interpretation and dialogue in their working together (Sevenhuijsen, 1998).

In advocating for ECEC as a collaborative and democratic place and space for all members of the learning community, *Assessment for Learning*, Book 1-20 (2004, 2005, 2007, 2009a) further emphasised the need for recognising and deal-

ing with diversity and alterity within the learning community. The assessment books highlighted that members of the learning community "bring different and sometimes conflicting viewpoints about appropriate objectives and goals for the child and ways to help the child achieve them" (Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 9). To find a common ground, they need to be aware that collaborative and democratic teaching and learning practices are "*not a matter of 'either/or'*" but rather "of communication, integration, and accommodation, allowing *all* participants' voices (those conflicting included) to be heard" and listened to (Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 6). It conveyed a belief that in so doing ECEC establishes itself as a collaborative and democratic place and space, in which each member of the learning community is committed to listening, understanding and treating the diversity and alterity of other members with respect and dignity.

Taken together, the analysis of the curriculum and the professional resources texts implied that the Aotearoa New Zealand ECEC has been construed as a place of democratic and collaborative teaching and learning practices, which are co-constructed through dialogue, caring, sharing, respecting, reciprocating, and balancing differences among members of the learning community. Members of the learning communities are expected to work with and act according to an ethics of care and ethics of the encounter, and thus encourage the perspectives of the Others to be integrated in their collaborative and democratic teaching and learning practices.

The constructions of ECEC as a collaborative place and space for all members of the learning community were grounded in the discourses of democratic education and collaborative teaching and learning, which promote an environment of trust, collaboration and reciprocity and shared responsibilities in ECEC. Being engaged in a democratic and collaborative endeavour, members of the learning community (e.g. children, families, whānau, community members, ECEC staff and teachers) – were construed in the texts as equitable partners, who were ethically obliged to actively contribute to quality teaching and learning practices.

Conclusion

Drawing on discourse analysis of the significant policy documents in the New Zealand ECEC, this article discussed the construction of the Aotearoa New Zealand ECEC as a collaborative and democratic space and place for all members of the learning community. The policy analysis highlighted the importance of the active engagement, participation and contribution of all members of the learning community in weaving together a whāriki and contributing to all aspects of children's cognitive, social, cultural, physical, emotional, and spiritual develop-

ment.By supporting the collective and democratic teaching and learning of children, families and communities, an ECEC was viewed in the policy texts as "a public space where citizens encounter each other" and/or as "a social institution expressing the community's responsibility to its children" (Moss, 2010, p. 15, emphasis added). Accordingly, ECEC institution becomes as a form of social life, in which interests and worldviews of members of the learning community are "mutually interpenetrating", and where their shared common interests, "conjoined communicated experience" (Dewey, 1916, p. 87) and collective decision-making set a foundation for collaborative and democratic teaching and learning practices. Such construction of ECEC reflects the qualities of democratic education and the value of pedagogies drawing on the cultural capital and worldviews of the diverse children, families and communities living in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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