Editorial

Multiple Perspectives on Early Childhood Education

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As a multiple perspectives issue, finding a common link (apart from early childhood education) is not easy. However, it may be suggested that a link can be found in policy. At one level, policy can be regarded as no more than a statement of government intent in regard to a particular issue. Thus, policy may show the way or describe the intended course of action, defining what is appropriate in a given set of circumstances.

However, a more textured approach to policy recognises that, due to its definitive nature and likely influence, policy reveals an uneven power relationship in which the policy-maker appears to set the agenda. Frequently policy appears in written form, and thus is a text. Questions related to the authorship of policy text, and the intended audience of that text in turn prompt questions about meaning, clarification and interpretation. As policy is likely to prescribe the potential behaviour and action of those who are affected by the policy, it is also important to consider the shift from policy as text to policy as enacted in the words, thoughts and behaviour of the people affected by that text. Policy is thus is much more than a statement of required actions in a particular context given specific circumstances.

The late John Codd (2005) suggested that policy refers to sets of political decisions that use power to preserve or alter the nature of educational institutions or their practices. Bell and Stevenson (2006) suggested that policy states what is to be done, who will benefit and why, and who will pay. In regard to analysing and understanding the formulation of policy, Bell and Stevenson argued that the first important consideration should be the socio-political environment. This draws the researcher to consider the dominant discourse of the day, and to ask whose interests are being served. These discourses and interests are obvious at both global and national levels. Asking what the government of the day has in mind for schools thus requires a consideration of not only what is taking place nationally, but internationally too.

One such international trend since the 1980s has been the increasing dominance of neoliberal discourses in education. One such discourse is that of human capital theory (HCT). Bell and Stevenson defined human capital as the “sum of education and skill that can be used to produce wealth” (2006, p. 42). HCT in educational policy–making reflects a technical-rationalist notion that investment in education will guarantee economic success for both the individual and the nation. This thinking has been considerably helped by the link created between human capital and economic development by the World Bank (1999; 2003; 2010) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (1996; 2010a; 2010b). Unsurprisingly, forces that operate globally thus shape education policy at a national level.
The papers presented in this issue of *He Kupu* each reflect elements of the policy tensions just outlined. Juliette Smeed has written on the unlikely topic of 'nonsense'. Smeed has correctly identified that 'nonsense' is a sophisticated form of language play and notes its use in the New Zealand early childhood curriculum document, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). This document, as a national curriculum statement, is a policy text. The implementation of this curriculum document rests heavily on the readers and users of that policy text, and to the extent that nonsense is acknowledged in *Te Whāriki*, it behoves early childhood practitioners and theorists alike to take seriously ways to acknowledge and bring to life nonsense as a valuable educative tool. Smeed’s argument serves as a counter to the techno–rationalist promotion of the development of human capital for economic purposes, a global and national influence that can be felt down to the level of the early childhood centre.

Lata Rana’s discussion points to the various manifestations of globalisation, and the tensions that exist between global priorities and national responses to those priorities, which do not always correlate. Global priorities have included the promotion of neoliberal economic imperatives (articulated, for example, through HCT) by international organisations such as the World Bank. Rana has demonstrated how these perspectives have drilled down to the level of early childhood education, inevitably impacting on the New Zealand early childhood sector.

A notable focus for contemporary education policy is the place of information communication technology (ICT) in education—indeed, the previous edition of this journal was devoted to a consideration of the relationship between knowledge, learning and ICT in early childhood education. Education policy in a postindustrial knowledge age must consider innovation and digital technology (Bolstad & Gilbert, 2008). Thus, Mark Bassett’s article that ponders the support Web 2.0 tools could give early childhood student teachers in developing their academic literacy and skills is timely. Bassett argues that teacher educators should recognise not only that many of their students lack some conventional reading skills because they are members of a screen–based generation, but that it is precisely interactive screen–based technology which may hold the key to developing some of the absent skills.

The Commentary pages of this edition are unique because they reflect two contributions from New Zealand Tertiary College students. Charlotte White comments on the increased participation rates of infants and toddlers in early childhood education, and considers the impact of these increases on children, families, teachers and wider society. White notes that, while the provision of early childhood services to young children allows parents and caregivers to return to work, there are possibly significant costs surrounding health and attachment issues. White challenges her readers and political policy–makers to consider whether these costs perhaps outweigh the benefits.

Finally, Sarah McKenzie, a postgraduate student at New Zealand Tertiary College, analyses the various ways of developing effective and authentic leadership. In particular, McKenzie considers the debate over whether such leadership can be developed through preparation and professional learning programmes, or whether many leadership qualities are inherent. She probes these issues in the context of leadership in the New Zealand early childhood sector, where policy–makers have been inconsistent in providing opportunities
for developing leadership. McKenzie opts for a mixed model approach but argues that sustainable learning organisations in the early childhood sector are supported by particular leadership practices.

The contributors to this edition are warmly congratulated on their papers. The following edition of He Kupu will be a special edition focussing on policy in early childhood education, and will be edited by Dr Chris Naughton.

References


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