Can we belong in a neo-liberal world? Neo-liberalism in early childhood education and care policy in Australia and New Zealand

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Abstract
Since the 1990s, neo-liberal economics has profoundly altered the nature and delivery of early childhood education and care in both Australia and New Zealand through the creation of childcare markets. Accompanying the rise of the market has been a discourse of childcare as a commodity – a commodity marketed and sold to its consumers (read parents) as a private benefit. The stratifying impact of neo-liberalism in education policy has been argued by numerous scholars of education. Arguably, in both Australia and New Zealand, early childhood education and care is more commodified and subject to the market than any other area of education. Thus, the authors consider whether early childhood education and care has shifted away from being understood as a social good, a site for social cohesion and democratic practice – all of which the authors consider to be implicated in a conceptualisation of belonging appropriate to the project of early childhood education and care. This article considers the impact of neo-liberal policies on early childhood education and care in Australia and New Zealand, especially in relation to understandings and manifestations of ‘belonging’. The authors trace the impact of neo-liberalism in early childhood education and care policy and examine the ways in which the discourse of
early childhood education and care provision has changed, both in policy and in how the market makes its appeal to parents as consumers. The authors argue that appeals to narrowly defined, individualised self-interest and advancement threaten understandings of belonging based on social solidarity and interdependence.

Keywords
Belonging, childcare, commodification, curriculum, early childhood, neo-liberal

Introduction
Several decades of neo-liberal economic reform have profoundly altered the ways in which infrastructure, including the social infrastructure of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services, is provided in nation states around the world. This article is concerned with the impact of neo-liberalism on the attainment of ‘belonging’, a key curriculum objective of Australian and New Zealand ECEC services. Australia and New Zealand provide rich contexts for considering this question. In both countries, the provision of ECEC has been subject to a profound shift from the community to becoming more commodified and subject to the market than any other area of education. In addition, New Zealand has been proclaimed to be at the forefront of neo-liberal economic reform in general (Kelsey, 1997), and Australia was an international forerunner in opening a previously non-profit childcare sector to the market under a neo-liberal-inspired microeconomic reform agenda.

A number of analyses of ECEC policy refer to the impact of neo-liberalism (e.g. see Moss, 2012; Sims, 2017). Worryingly, in many respects, the influence of neo-liberalism and its effects have assumed the status of the ‘new normal’ and, as Tronto (2017) argues, too many scholars position it as inevitable and invincible. In the realm of ECEC, neo-liberal hegemony in both Australia and New Zealand has not only normalised the dominance of the market in the provision of such services for children; it appears to have limited our capacity to consider/envision the role and positioning of ECEC in society in alternative ways. In Australia, this entrenching of the market as the primary provider of early childhood services was starkly illustrated by the collapse of the nation’s largest for-profit childcare provider, ABC Learning, in 2008. Despite this collapse costing the federal government AU$22 million in temporary bailout money, the neo-liberal trajectory for the provision of ECEC remains (Woodrow and Press, 2017). However, policy is a normative choice (Clarke, 2012). This behoves us therefore to understand the impact of policy choices and advocate alternative positions when the impacts are deleterious.

‘Belonging’ is a key concept in the early years curricula of both Australia and New Zealand. We argue that neo-liberalism is antithetical to the aspirations encompassed in the evocation of belonging in such curricula. Our discussion commences with a consideration of the ways in which ‘belonging’ might be understood both within ECEC programs and in relation to the constructs of both care and education. We follow by examining the logic of neo-liberalism, its impact on the ways in which early childhood is provided, and its consequent distortion of interdependence and concern for our collective good, which we contend are inherent to notions of belonging.

Belonging
The emphasis that Australia’s Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) places on belonging in children’s lives is signalled by its title – Belonging, Being and Becoming. The EYLF asserts that
'experiencing belonging – knowing where and with whom you belong – is integral to human existence' (DEEWR, 2009: 7). Similarly, belonging is a strand of New Zealand’s early childhood curriculum, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017), which depicts each strand as a domain of mana (‘power’, ‘prestige’ or ‘being strong’). A number of scholars have raised the need for early childhood educators, academics and researchers to develop deeper, more robust understandings of belonging than might be conjured through its initial allure (e.g. Peers and Fleer, 2014; Sumison and Wong, 2011). Belonging can be a fuzzy concept and, depending on context, can evoke meanings opposed to that presumably intended when named by early years curricula. In their theorisation of belonging, Peers and Fleer (2014) draw attention to the distinction between everyday understandings of belonging and theoretical understandings. They highlight, for instance, that an everyday usage of ‘belonging’ can be associated with ownership. In this sense, children may be said to belong to their families. Thus, by constructing the child as a belonging, the concept of belonging can efface children’s agency – a result that is in apparent contrast to the espousal of children’s agency found within ECEC literature (e.g. Carr, 2008; Dahlberg et al., 1999) and the early years curricula under examination. Others, such Schein (2009), argue that belonging can be a source of exclusion. When belonging is achieved primarily through familiarity and ‘sameness’, it can deliberately or implicitly exclude those who do not fit the mould. Yet what it means to belong is often conveyed through the sense of its contrast or its opposites – ‘disconnectedness and exclusion’ (Berry and Shipley, 2009: vii), ‘dispossession, displacement, discord, and misfit’ (Stratford, 2009: 796). Berry and Shipley write the following in their report on social capital and mental health, Longing to belong: There is a pervasive and frequently expressed perception about a sense of loss of community in Australia, together with a fear of its consequences, and a longing to belong and to reconnect with community … These concerns are not limited to Australia, but are consistent with concerns, particularly about social exclusion, across the developed world. (Berry and Shipley, 2009: vii; our emphasis) Here, belonging is linked with (re)connection and is understood in contrast to social exclusion and loss of community. What is also conveyed, especially through the use of the word ‘longing’, is that what it means to belong can be infused with emotion. ‘Longing’ denotes our desire to belong. In their interrogation of belonging in the EYLF, Sumision and Wong (2011: 37) recognise this emotional resonance – that belonging ‘speaks, almost seductively, to a deep-seated desire for connectedness’. Stratford (2009: 796) also alerts us to the role of emotion, reminding us that ‘feelings attach to places and, felt by someone, affix to how that someone is in place and belongs there’. Significantly, a similar evocation can be found in descriptions of social capital. Two key elements identified as contributing to social capital are participation – what people do – and social cohesion – what people feel (Berry and Shipley, 2009: 5). It is almost self-evident that exclusionary notions of belonging are not the intent of the EYLF or Te Whāriki, and perhaps, indeed, of ECEC more generally. As Kernan (2010) asserts, belonging and the need to belong are evident in many of the underpinning beliefs and understandings of ECEC. These can be found in the emphasis early childhood pedagogy places on relationships, fostering secure attachments and interdependence, as well as the importance that children themselves place on their friendships and being part of a group. The EYLF, for example, explicitly refers to ‘children’s interdependence with others’ and the role relationships play in creating a sense of belonging (DEEWR, 2009: 7). Significantly, the EYLF recognises the multiple spheres of belonging, asking that educators recognise that children ‘belong first to a family, a cultural group, a neighbourhood and a wider community’ (7). Likewise, a principle of Te Whāriki is that ‘[c]hildren learn through
responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places and things’ (Ministry of Education, 2017: 21). From a Māori (the indigenous people of New Zealand) perspective of relationships, ‘connections to past, present and future are integral’ (21). The ‘belonging’ strand of Te Whāriki requires ‘connecting links with the family and the wider world’ to be ‘affirmed and extended’ (32).

To these attributes we would add that achieving belonging within each early childhood program entails actively countering explicit and less visible markers of exclusion. Research by Witten et al. (2007) highlights the sense of belonging people report when they are in locations (e.g. streets, suburbs, churches and schools) where they see others like themselves. Recognising that a sense of belonging can be derived from familiarity, it is important to also acknowledge that families’ discomfort in early childhood settings can arise from their sense of difference from the other families they encounter. This may be compounded through not seeing themselves reflected in the resources, physical environment and family networks of the setting, or a sense that they need to avoid the judgement of others (Witten et al., 2007). Respectful, non-judgemental interactions, encounters and relationships that honour existing connections and create new ones are central to the project of belonging.

It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a comprehensive account of how the belonging sought by early childhood curricula can be manifest and enabled within ECEC programs. Instead, we have touched on what we surmise are central considerations for understanding belonging within the early childhood setting. These include the crucial value of relationships; interconnections with people, places and things beyond the immediate ECEC setting; and recognising the dimensions of emotion and time – connecting the past and the present.

Importantly, as the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) itself points out, belonging is also enacted within the community, and, we would argue, is facilitated more broadly within the structures of society. The achievement of belonging, as it is expressed in such curricula, is inextricable from the ECEC system in which early childhood programs are nested. In the following section, we reflect on the ways in which the ECEC system (or lack thereof) can work to facilitate or militate against the belonging of children and families.

**Care, education and belonging**

Children’s care and their education are social and cultural practices (Quaicoe, 2005). As a form of social reproduction, ECEC can be located within a set of social capacities associated with ‘birthing and raising children, caring for friends and family members, and sustaining communities more generally’ (Fraser, 2016: 99). These are activities that constitute people as ‘social beings, forming their *habitus* and the cultural ethos in which they move’ (101). Relatedly, Kemmis et al. (2014: 26) describe education as a process by which people ‘are initiated into forms of understanding, modes of action, and ways of relating to one another and the world’ – a process that is ultimately ‘oriented towards the good for each person and the good for humankind’.

Such broad social objectives are also reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Article 29 (c) of the convention states that the education of the child shall be directed to:

> The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin.

These descriptions recognise that the arrangements we make for the care and education of young children are inherently connected to the type of society we wish to live in.
ECEC settings may be the first group setting outside of family networks that young children encounter. Witten et al. (2007: 147) describe schools and early childhood settings as portals into the community that have the capacity to provide ‘the regular, mundane encounters that can build social capital’. Social capital theory places value on social networks, the ties we have with each other, and ‘the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them’ (Putnam, 2000: 19). Social capital is often described as comprising bonding ties and bridging ties. Bonding ties are inwardly focused, reinforcing the values and norms of the group. They are the ‘ties that bind’, often associated with dense social networks, kith and kin. The close bonding ties we have with family and friends help sustain us in our daily lives. Although bonding ties generate a strong sense of belonging and reciprocity, they also can be deliberately or implicitly exclusionary. Bridging ties, on the other hand, are outwardly focused and connect diverse groups together. Bridging ties are essential for individuals and groups to expand their networks – to come into contact with a diversity of ideas, values and norms. They are important for opening up opportunities, generating ‘broader identities and reciprocity’ (Putnam, 2000: 23). For social capital to be developed in ways that support the common good, both bonding and bridging ties are necessary. It is important to note that it is possible to identify bridging ties within groups and associations normally associated with generating bonding ties (Geys and Murdoch, 2010).

Advocating a conceptualisation of belonging in ECEC that is not exclusionary, and which is geared to ‘the good for each person and the good for humankind’ (Kemmis et al., 2014), requires us to attend to the way in which the early childhood system fosters the bridging ties that broaden our social networks, generate inclusive practices, and actively counter tendencies to exclusion. This is supported by Geys and Murdoch (2010), who analysed data sets concerning the presence and strength of bonding and bridging ties across the internal and external dimensions of associations in relation to their members’ civic attitudes. This analysis revealed a statistically significant reduction in association members’ feelings of insecurity, individualism and intolerance towards immigrants in associations that had bridging ties in both internal and external dimensions.

Witten et al. (2007: 141) cite Spoonley et al.’s (2005) assertion that belonging ‘is an attribute of a socially cohesive society that derives from individuals feeling part of a broader group or community’. The achievement of belonging within the confines of the specific early childhood program therefore is not enough. The external bridging ties that engender our sense of being part of a broader community are inseparable from a consideration of the purposes of the elements of both care and education in relation to society. In this light, we now outline the way in which neo-liberalism has reshaped the provision of ECEC away from an emphasis on community towards commodified, individualised and privatised offerings.

**How neo-liberalism has reshaped ECEC**

Here we outline the significant policy shifts in both Australia and New Zealand that have changed the way in which ECEC is provided and led to the commodification of the childcare sector.

In Australia, most ECEC is provided through childcare, rather than traditional preschool. While a number of states and territories do provide access to preschool education through departments of education, Australia does not have a national system of universal ECEC. In this section therefore, we focus on two significant policy interventions that have shaped Australian childcare: the introduction of the Child Care Act 1972 (Commonwealth) and the extension of fee subsidies to parents using private childcare centres in 1991.

The Child Care Act 1972 enabled the federal government to become involved in the funding and creation of childcare places. Prior to the 1970s, formal childcare provision was scarce. By the 1970s, this scarcity had become a political issue. Advocacy for government funding for childcare
places emanated from a number of different concerns – concern for the welfare of young children who were being left at home alone while their mothers worked; the demand for policies in support of women’s equality; and calls from industry for greater access to women’s labour (Brennan, 1998). A key feature of the Act, introduced under a conservative government, was its establishment of community responsibility for the provision of childcare (Brennan, 1998; Logan, 2017). The Act directed funds to the development of publicly funded, community-based, not-for-profit childcare, and the emphasis on community was reinforced by subsequent policies. For example, the Social Welfare Commission (1974: 13) asserted that ‘services should be community-based; that parents should be involved and that local governments and community groups should receive a role’. That government should support private for-profit provision was an untenable position. Even feminists within the conservative Liberal Party favoured the funding of community-based childcare as ‘a positive, constructive investment in the growth of the community’ (Mahlab, cited in Flynn, 1981). Thus, for almost two decades, federal government childcare policies built practices around families and community members participating democratically, as active participants, in the management and operation of not-for-profit services.

However, as Cox (2016) reminds us, during the 1980s, neo-liberalism had arrived as the dominant political paradigm. Its influence in Australian childcare policy was consolidated in 1991 when the Hawke–Keating Labor government (1983–1996) announced that federal government funding would be extended to parent users of private for-profit childcare providers. This announcement was made in response to a continuing unmet demand for childcare. It represented a major ideological shift from childcare as community-focused and publicly provided to childcare as a business venture. The market response was swift and overwhelming, and for-profit providers soon came to dominate childcare provision in Australia (Logan et al., 2016; Woodrow and Press, 2017).

In 1948, New Zealand’s Department of Education became responsible for funding kindergartens. At that time, kindergartens were free, sessional and community-based, catering to children aged three and four. Another community-based initiative – playcentres – was also funded at this time through annual grants. Like Australia, government funding for childcare initiatives did not commence until the early 1970s. The first government funding for childcare centres was introduced in 1973, targeted to not-for-profit centres and administered by voluntary organisations. Nevertheless, by the early 1980s, several small chains of for-profit centres were opened (May, 2001).

Public policy changes under the New Zealand Labour government (1984–1989), once more inspired by neo-liberalism, transformed its previously ‘social democratic welfare state into one shaped by New Right economic philosophies and free-market theories’ (Hamer and Loveridge, 2017). Again, like Australia, this was to alter the provision of childcare in profound ways. Firstly, in 1990, much larger amounts of government funding (bulk funding) were made available to both for-profit and community-based ECEC providers. Then, in 2005, the Labour-led government (1999–2009), after pressure from the for-profit sector, extended its proposed policy to fund ‘20 hours free ECE’ to the for-profit sector. Finally, under the National-led government (2009–2017), the final dissolution of distinctions in funding between for-profit and community-based ECEC was made. Most notably, equity funding for community-based centres in low socio-economic and isolated communities and teaching in a language other than English was opened up to for-profit centres, and ‘Targeted Assistance for Participation’ grants that could be used for capital works, including the purchase of vans, extensions for buildings and the construction of new buildings, were made available to the for-profit sector. New Zealand is perhaps the only country in the world where taxpayer funding can go into private business owners’ capital assets. The availability of generous government funding to the for-profit sector was paralleled by a huge increase in for-profit
provision of childcare – from 41% in 1992 to 67% in 2016. Home-based ECEC (family daycare) is now 88% in for-profit ownership (Ministry of Education, 2016).

Neo-liberalism has been the impetus for the privatisation of what were once publicly owned services. In relation to ECEC, it has not only changed how such services are provided; it has also altered the public discourse that surrounds them. By privileging markets over state action and individualism over considerations of society or the common good, neo-liberalism actively seeks to marginalise the role of government. In what follows, we argue that market discourses have overshadowed community discourses, distorting and undermining understandings of belonging.

**In the market we trust**

At the heart of neo-liberalism is an assumption that the market knows best and can be trusted to result in the best allocation of resources. Freedom is equated with market choice and the capacity of individuals to choose for themselves, from the market, the services they want. Thus, interference in the market is depicted as an assault on freedom (Aarons, 2008; Tronto, 2017). In lauding ‘the private, competition and inequality’ (Moss, 2012: 191), neo-liberalism eschews notions of social justice and the public good (Aarons, 2008). Profit is held up as the central marker of progress (Kim, 2015: 481), rather than democracy.

The end result for the ECEC system is ‘the commodification and privatization of what was once considered a public good’ (Woodrow and Press, 2017: 548). The result has been several interrelated impacts: the atomisation of ECEC provision; the loss of the universalist ideal in education; the erosion of the bridging ties so important to the creation of social capital that cultivate connection and belonging across social, cultural and economic divides; and the devaluing of care work.

**Atomisation and the education ideal**

Clarke (2012: 301) identifies the tendency in neo-liberal education policy to atomise educational institutions: there is ‘little or no recognition of how [educational institutions and elements] comprise larger systems or structures, or of how the meaning of each can only be understood in relation to that larger whole’. Through such individuation, systemic design and intent is lost. Included in this loss of systemic intent is an understanding of education both grounded in and as an integral contributor to democracy.

**Citizens, consumers and social capital**

Reconstructing ECEC as a business proposition changes perceptions of community and belonging. It refocuses the status of the family using the service to that of consumer, instead of citizen and member of a community (Adamson and Brennan, 2014). This focus does little to promote broader notions of social capital and its ‘conceptual cousin’, community (Putnam, 2000).

Hamer and Loveridge (2017) assert that the privatisation of ECEC in New Zealand has resulted in an inwardly focused construction of community – one understood primarily as that which exists within the setting. Whereas prior to 2008 government policy in New Zealand had espoused an explicitly outward focus for ECEC, which involved services consulting with and considering the aspirations of their communities, this is no longer an explicit expectation. In their recent single case study on notions of community in a private centre, Hamer and Loveridge (2017) found that the study’s private setting did engage in practices that focused on the needs of the families within its service, and fostered community within the centre. What was less evident, however, were bridging
ties to the external local community. The potential result of this inward focus was the risk of increasing social inequity and exclusion, especially for members of the immediate local community whose identities may not reflect the shared identity of the centre community.

An Australian study on social capital in ECEC also found that a reliance on market choice tended to lead towards a homogeneity of users within services bought from the market. Conversely, however, publicly funded preschools typically showed greater diversity in users, including across socio-economic divides. In this respect, public funding resulted in the strong bridging ties necessary for social capital (Thorpe et al., 2012).

A further impact of market discourses is the construction of childcare as a business. While not all private for-profit services are motivated by profit, a key focus of a business venture must be commercial viability. This focus provides little incentive for services to act in socially beneficial ways that encourage reciprocity and information-sharing, particularly if it threatens the commercial viability of the service. For example, it tends to reduce opportunities to share information between services and educators if they are in competition with each other for the market share, particularly if the information to be shared is considered commercial in confidence (Logan, 2017). Sandel (2009) claims that this construction undermines collective action.

In addition, the impact of neo-liberal discourses and economic pressures tends to lead to a reduction in generalised reciprocity, referred to here as a kind of community-minded give and take. As Putnam (2000: 20) explains: ‘networks of community engagement foster norms of reciprocity’. Networks of community encourage cooperation and trust for mutual benefit. In the provision of childcare services, this engagement can take many forms, such as volunteering to help manage the operation of a service, helping at working bees, and being involved in fundraising activities. These activities are valuable features of non-profit community-based organisations because they serve the interests of the organisation and promote ethical behaviours and fairness. Over several decades, at least two obvious challenges to this type of community-minded engagement in childcare are, first, increasing and often unpredictable work hours and, second, the presence of many privately owned childcare services, which are a feature of childcare markets. On average, women’s workforce participation rates, particularly mothers of young children, have increased (OECD, 2017). Increased hours in paid employment, and factors associated with the casualisation of the workforce, leave less time for parents to volunteer and contribute to the operation of children’s services. In addition, when parents pay for childcare services as a business transaction, there is little incentive to donate their leisure time to privately owned childcare businesses, unless there is a clear benefit for their investment. Hence, demographic and economic trends, and the creation of childcare markets, have downplayed opportunities for generalised reciprocity based on community engagement in childcare services. We contend that it has led to skewed understandings of belonging towards inwardly focused views of community, instead of outwardly focused notions of community and civic-mindedness.

Finally, and perhaps most obviously, neo-liberalism creates a ‘dualized organization of social reproduction’ (Fraser, 2016: 104): ‘For those that can pay, childcare is a commodity that can be bought from the market. For those who cannot pay, private solutions are to be relied upon by enlisting “family (and perhaps friends and charities)”’ (Tronto, 2017: 30). Once childcare ceases to be regarded as a community-based service for the common good and becomes conditional on the ability of families to pay, social inequalities are compounded.

**Devaluing care work**

Relatedly, neo-liberalism reorients how we think about and conceptualise the work of children’s care and education in ECEC contexts. The deliberations and machinations of the Australian
government’s Productivity Commission (2014) inquiry into childcare and early learning provide a window on this. Emerging from its many papers and recommendations is a discernible orientation to the new spirit of capitalism, to which an agile, mobile and flexible workforce is key. By prioritising women’s workforce participation as the first objective of childcare provision, the childcare ‘problem’ becomes cast as that of insufficient and inflexible places which prevent mothers from responding fully to the demands of work. In response to this problem, the draft report of the Productivity Commission (2014) called for a winding back of educator qualifications, and pushed for greater use of privatised care-work solutions such as home-based nannies. What is also undermined by this discourse is the value of the work of care and its contribution to the public good.

Related to this discourse is the devaluing of women’s labour in highly feminised workforces, such as that found in early education and care. This devaluing is evident in ongoing pressures to contain staffing costs in a context where these are already low. The cost of government subsidies to parents using childcare allows the government to argue against wage increases on the basis of affordability issues for both parents and the government. Wage compression also benefits profitability, although there is little scrutiny of the contribution of government subsidies to the growing free market of childcare – one of the many tensions in the ECEC sector which are described by Cook et al. (2017: 45) as ‘discordant logics’. The result is the exploitation of the labour of the women undertaking the work of young children’s education and care, as the recognition of the work of care and education as skilled, complex and demanding is wound back.

Although the Productivity Commission’s (2014) recommendations were, by and large, overturned by the Commission’s final report, they are worth noting for what they represent. They follow a trajectory that validates the autonomous entrepreneurial subject (the working mother) who pursues an individualised, privatised agenda (the employment of a minimally qualified nanny) to support her workforce participation – a position described by Tronto (2013: 40) as the exercise of ‘privileged irresponsibility’, and somewhat at odds with the vision of women’s social solidarity envisaged by the feminists who agitated for childcare in the 1970s (Woodrow and Press, 2017).

Such pressure on care work places at risk the important dynamic of belonging which has come to represent a significant motif in the care and education of children in the years before school, and which has primacy in the EYLF and Te Whāriki. Contemporary conceptualisations position belonging as a connection to place, culture and community, as well as a discursive resource which ‘constructs, claims, justifies and resists socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion’ (Antonisch, 2010: 644). This work recognises the existence of a politics of belonging, whilst other work invoking notions of mutuality in relations of reciprocity resonates with a feminist reconstruction of the politics of care as involving relations of interdependence (Tronto, 1993).

**Conclusion**

Neo-liberal-inspired policy reforms in Australia and New Zealand have transferred what was once an explicit community responsibility for children to the market. Although still evident in both Australian and New Zealand ECEC policy, the commitment to community is no longer a central policy commitment. Nevertheless, the concept of belonging is a central feature in the early childhood curriculum frameworks of both countries.

This article has canvassed the multiplicity of ways that belonging can be manifest within ECEC. However, it has also argued that belonging is not an objective that can be achieved solely within the boundaries of specific ECEC services, but must be located in the context of the role of ECEC as part of a civil society. This broad view of ECEC is congruent with views of education more
generally – for example, Kemmis and Smith describe teachers who adopt educational praxis as those who

are committed to demonstrating and modelling how to live well ... by relating to others well in terms of recognizing and respecting others and by ensuring that they do not cause harm or maintain social practices or structures that bring about the injustices of oppression or domination. (Kemmis and Smith, 2008: 288)

The interrelationship between community discourses and belonging is perhaps best described by what groups do to support greater levels of social cohesion. These practices promote community networks that are effective in bringing people together. They engender cooperation and collective action for the good of communities (Winter, 2000). At the heart of these practices is the construction of organisations, such as childcare services, that have strong incentives to act in socially beneficial ways.

Moss (2012: 201) urges us to resist ‘the dictatorship of the no alternative’. By placing both neoliberalism and the current positioning of ECEC in historical context, we can see that the current positioning of childcare is a construction, rather than an inevitable way of organising the provision of goods and services. Thus, its effects can be challenged and its position within society re-imagined.

There is no doubt that practices within the centre can act as resistances. However, we must reclaim the purpose of education and care more generally, and situate ECEC within the context of a society that it is worth living in, to move beyond the atomisation and individualisation of benefit, success and achievement.

**Funding**
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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