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Children's interests and early childhood curriculum: A critical analysis of the relationship between research, policy, and practice.

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Abstract

Policy makers have a powerful influence on educational practice. When such bodies are vague about the evidence base for their policies they may uncritically rely on outdated theories, beliefs, and selective research evidence. A tension may then exist where practitioners become undermined as agents in curricular decision-making. Practitioners may aim to provide curriculum and pedagogy aligned with contemporary knowledge, but are also bound to the policy bodies who hold persuasive power. In England and Aotearoa New Zealand, two particular organisations in each country have most influence on early childhood education. Focused on the notion of children's interests, this article questions the basis for the key curricular policy, accompanying advice and guidance, and evaluation standards of these organisations. We do so having discussed children's interests from historical and contemporary research perspectives. We then trace and critique ways children's interests present in significant policy documents. We suggest that both policy and practice adopt contemporary perspectives of children's interests and move towards a middle space between curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived (Aoki, 2005). Such a space provides a way forward for ongoing curriculum conversations about children's interests.

Introduction

Calls for policy and practice to be research-informed have grown in the past 50 years, along with recognition of the value of research-practice partnerships in informing both (Coburn & Penuel, 2016). Given the powerful influence policy organisations have on early childhood education (ECE), what might happen for practitioners¹ when research and theory used by policy makers appears to be vague, outdated, or ambiguous? This article is a comparative piece involving research, practice, and policy from England and Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ), focused on the notion of children's interests as a longstanding basis for ECE. We first offer traditional and contemporary perspectives of children's interests. The substance of our article then analyses two major policy organisations' presentation of children's interests, showing these have a largely outdated basis (England) and an inexplicit and confusing basis (NZ). We therefore argue that policy makers are currently out-of-step with research on children's interests as a key motivator for learning. Given the power of these bodies with

¹ We use the term practitioners throughout our article to reflect that, in keeping with most international policy, neither England nor NZ requires early childhood services to be fully staffed by those with teaching qualifications. The documents we refer to use various nomenclature such as educators, kaiako, adults, and childminders. In itself, this nomenclature could be viewed as undermining the professional knowledge and decision making of those responsible for educating young children.

regard to funding and evaluating ECE services for the quality of the education provided for children, practitioners are caught in a dilemma between policy drivers and contemporary research in their curricular decision-making.

Proposing a way forward we move away from longstanding and narrow understandings of children's interests. Drawing on our own contemporary research, we contend that children's interests as a term needs to be understood and interpreted thoughtfully to account for ways interests are stimulated by experiences with people, places, and things in families, communities, cultures, and educational settings. Such interpretations enable creation of a more multifaceted and balanced curriculum than narrow and outdated notions of interests that persist in policy. Consequently, it behoves policy makers and curriculum evaluators to be up-to-date in their knowledge and practice to match what qualified practitioners have studied. We locate children's interests in the middle space between "curriculum as plan" and "curriculum as lived" in Aoki's (2005) scholarship on curriculum. First then we briefly overview the longstanding basis for understanding children's interests, followed by an overview of key insights arising from our body of research.

Early childhood education: Philosophy, theory, evidence, and practice

At the heart of education lies the goal of transformation for individuals, societies and cultures (Wells, 1999). What motivates learners to engage in education and transform their lives and communities? How might a response to this vital question be reflected and enabled in curricular policy?

With the laudable aim of giving children a good start to life, decisions about what, and how, young children should learn are prominent topics of international debate. Curriculum decision-making occurs in particular social, political, cultural, and economic contexts. Western ECE has long been based on philosophy and practice built around the notion of child-centredness. Child-centredness has commonly been interpreted as play and learning that is child-initiated and interests-led (Ang, 2016). This framing of child-centredness has played a pivotal role in understanding early childhood as a distinctive period of human development in which first-hand experience, play, and exploration are positioned as foundational principles for learning (Wood, 2023).

Nevertheless, there are limitations to understanding children's interests through a purely child-centred lens. First, this interpretation focuses on individualistic notions of child development rather than on the central role of relationships and interactions in learning. Second, child-centredness has traditionally been informed by developmental psychology, a theory that has had a strong hold on ECE (Wood, 2020), and has been used to convey notions of a universal child associated with developmental milestones, thus concealing the ways in which learning is situated within children's diverse social and cultural experiences.

Dewey (1913) first drew attention to the phenomenon of interest in learning. Dewey identified the strong motivational power of interest, linking this with positive emotions,

learning, engagement, effort and achievement. Associated with developmental psychology for several decades, interest was defined as an object, activity, action, or event. As a result, much research about children under 5 years in homes and ECE settings, using observations and parent interviews (e.g., Cremin & Slatter, 2004; Renninger & Wozniak, 1985), defined children's interests as activities or objects in the play environment (e.g., playdough, blocks, dolls, trains, trucks). Findings became one circular justification for the long-held activity focus of provision of a wide range of play-based experiences in ECE.

Equating children's interests in such a simple way with play activities has been questioned by more recent research based on sociocultural theories that highlight the roles of participation in culture as influencing children's interests (Rogoff et al., 2018), and reducing distinctions between informal and formal learning (Rogoff et al., 2016). A sociocultural orientation of education is informed by Vygotsky's (1987) ideas about the dialectical relationship between everyday and academic knowledge. From this perspective, children build knowledge and understanding when there is a reciprocal relationship between informal learning at home and curriculum decision-making and experiences in ECE settings (Gomes & Fler, 2017). Viewed as such, children's interests enable practitioners to recognise and respond to the cultural repertoires (Rogoff et al., 2015) that influence children's identity construction and learning dispositions. In this way, interests afford potential for children to connect their learning across various contexts, leading to deeper understandings.

Contemporary research on children's interests

Supporting this position, we have contributed to a contemporary body of international research that highlights building curriculum upon children's interests stimulated by and developed in their families and communities (e.g., Chesworth, 2016; Hedges & Cooper, 2016; Hedges, Cullen & Jordan, 2011). Our research has involved partnerships between practitioners and researchers, and collaboration with children and families. This has enabled us to generate deep insights into children's interests, informed by the perspectives of all those who participate in everyday social and cultural practices in homes, and educational and cultural settings. This body of research offers a counterpoint to an individualistic child-centred perspective of ways interests are understood. Shifting the focus from activities to how children's interests are sparked through participation in sociocultural experiences highlights the pivotal role that practitioners play in building upon the deep interests that children bring from home and also in offering a range of experiences to stimulate new interests. This brings a deeper lens to understanding the reasons why children choose particular play experiences in ECE, as they use objects to represent experiences of interest to them rather than the interest being the object per se.

Our research has applied and extended the concept of funds of knowledge (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005) to provide a conceptual framework for understanding and responding to children's interests. Funds of knowledge is informed by sociocultural theory and starts with

a tenet that all families, regardless of social or economic circumstances, have historically and culturally accumulated valuable knowledge, skills, resources, and approaches to learning (Moll et al., 1992). Applying a funds of knowledge lens has enabled us to illuminate how children build and sustain interests through their participation in home and community activities, including the languages, beliefs and values that mediate these activities (Hedges et al., 2011). Situating children's interests within the cultural repertoires of practice (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003) that build funds of knowledge can consequently inform learning experiences that have meaning and relevance for children's lives (Chesworth, 2014). This view also clarifies more fundamentally the decision-making that ought to shape practitioner provision of play materials and planned activities in ECE to enable children to re-create and extend understandings of experiences of interest to them (Hedges, 2022).

While early research into funds of knowledge focused primarily on multi-generational family activity, more recent studies have acknowledged a broader range of experiences that stimulate interests, including children's engagement with popular culture (Hedges, 2011; Chesworth, 2016), digital media (Poole, 2017), and interactions with practitioners and peers (Hedges, et al., 2011). Funds of knowledge that carry particular meaning for children; that is, are of interest, have recently been conceptualised as funds of identity (Esteban-Guitart, 2016; Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014) and extended into ECE (Hedges, 2020, 2022). Funds of identity provides a particularly helpful lens for illuminating how children's interests contribute to their sense of themselves as capable members of social and cultural communities.

Children's interests have also been conceptualised as representing children's curiosities and inquiries (Hedges, 2022; Hedges & Cooper, 2016). Practitioners have been encouraged to consider children's fundamental inquiry questions as ways to show the extent and depth of interests, and therefore their potential for meaningful learning that connects with curricular and societal goals. Connecting with ideas about identity an overarching question is proposed as "How can I build personal, learner, and cultural identities as I participate in interesting, fulfilling, and meaningful activities with my family, community and culture?" Seven questions of importance to children derive from this fundamental inquiry and serve to categorise and explain children's interests, expressed as follows:

- What can I do, now that I am bigger, that the older children do?
- What do intelligent, caring and responsible adults do?
- How can I make special connections with people I know?
- How can I make and communicate meaning?
- How can I understand the world I live in?
- How can I develop my physical and emotional wellbeing?
- How can I express my creativity?

Taken together, funds of knowledge, funds of identity and children’s fundamental inquiries provide a valuable conceptual framework for generating in-depth understandings of children’s interests (Chesworth & Hedges, 2023). To interpret children’s interests in these ways requires deep, recursive assessment practices and multi-layered understandings to develop over time in order to get to know children well. Such understandings enable ECE practitioners to construct a curriculum that builds children’s knowledge and understanding in the context of providing planned and responsive experiences that have meaning and relevance for children.

Method and contexts

Having established shifts in theory and research-based understandings of the longstanding concept of children’s interests, we now turn our attention to a critical analysis of national policy in our countries. There are many approaches to policy analysis (Young & Diem, 2017) that draw on notions of discourses that are shaped by power, and that therefore reify certain understandings and positions in the resulting texts (Taylor et al., 1997). We used text analysis methods (Goldman & Wiley, 2011) to locate and identify use of the word “interests” in selected documents. We did not include use of the word when considerations of “best interests” or “societal interests” were indicated, focusing in on use of “children’s interests” in relation to curriculum design, planning, assessment, and implementation.

In each country there two organisations that determine policy. In England, these are the Department for Education (DfE) who produce the statutory framework for the early years, and the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) who undertake evaluations of settings that receive government funding. In NZ, the two equivalent policy bodies are the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Education Review Office (ERO). We selected the curricular document for each country: in England the 0-5 Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS, DfE, 2021), and in NZ Te Whāriki (MoE, 2017). We also selected a recent significant document produced by the evaluation bodies. In England this is Ofsted’s most recently published document “Best Start in Life part 1: Setting the scene” (BSiL, Ofsted, 2022), framed as a research review. In NZ we analysed the document with the criteria by which early childhood settings are evaluated “Te Ara Poutama: Indicators of quality for early childhood education - what matters” (ERO, 2020).

Children’s interests in national policy: England and New Zealand

We now discuss how children’s interests are described and accounted for in the policies and guidance produced by these organisations. During this discussion, we consider the visibility and currency of the evidence base used to inform the positioning of children’s interests in policy narratives. We begin with a brief overview of our respective curricular documents. This contextualises ways children’s interests are then presented in these policy documents. Subsequently we analyse the two evaluation bodies’ understandings of children’s interests and ways these might influence practice.

Curricular policy and guidance

The EYFS (DfE, 2021) is the statutory framework that sets out the standards for learning, development, and care for children from birth to five in England. It has been updated frequently in minor ways since its inception in 2008. The framework is for all early years providers, including government funded schools and early years settings, independent schools, private nurseries, and home-based childminders. The EYFS includes four guiding principles: that every child is a unique child; the importance of positive relationships; the role of enabling environments with teaching and support from adults; and, the importance of learning and development, recognising that children develop and learn at different rates. The statutory learning and development requirements comprise seven Areas of Learning and Development that include seventeen Early Learning Goals (ELGs), which “summarise the knowledge, skills and understanding that all young children should have gained” (p. 7) by the end of the EYFS.

The EYFS sets out broad educational programmes for each Area of Learning and Development and explicitly states that the ELGs should not be used as curriculum per se. However, the English educational system is driven by a powerful assessment regime in which practitioners and providers are held accountable for learners’ progress towards statutory outcomes. The EYFS includes three statutory assessment points: a progress check at age two, assessment at the start of the reception year (the first year of statutory school), and, assessment at the end of the EYFS. Taken together, these assessments have become tools to monitor progress against the ELGs and to measure school readiness (Kay, 2022). As a result, the ELGs act as powerful influences upon curriculum and pedagogical decision-making, particular in the reception year. Findings from a national review of practice in the reception year indicated that pedagogy was “becoming more instructional, teacher directed and narrowly focussed on Literacy and Mathematics learning, with a loss of play and more individualised, creative approaches” (Pascal et al., 2017 p. 27). This issue has been the subject of intense debate and critique (see for example Wood, 2020), including how children’s authentic interests can be valued in a system that privileges narrow and standardised learning outcomes (see, for example, Chesworth, 2019).

Te Whāriki (MOE, 2017) is the bicultural early childhood curriculum document for NZ similarly mandated for use by all providers of ECE no matter the type of setting. It is the only update to the document first published in 1996. As a somewhat literal translation, a whāriki is a mat for all to stand on. The aspiration statement of Te Whāriki positions children as confident and capable learners. Te Whāriki has four principles: empowerment (in Māori, whakamana), partnerships with families and communities (whānau tangata), relationships (ngā hononga), holistic development (kotahitanga); and five strands: wellbeing (mana atua), belonging (mana whenua), contribution (mana tangata), communication (mana reo), and exploration (mana aotūroa). The Māori word mana present throughout Te Whāriki incorporates concepts of strength, prestige, reputation, and integrity. Each strand has a number of related goals that lead to twenty holistic outcomes that incorporate knowledge,

skills, attitudes, dispositions, and working theories. A rider for all the outcomes is that these are developed “over time and with encouragement” (p. 24).

In Te Whāriki the word curriculum” is interpreted broadly to:

include all the experiences, activities and events, both direct and indirect, that occur within the ECE setting. It provides a framework of principles, strands, goals and learning outcomes that foregrounds the mana of the child and the importance of respectful, reciprocal and responsive relationships. This framework provides a basis for each setting to weave a local curriculum that reflects its own distinctive character and values. (p. 7)

“Planning involves deliberate decision making about the priorities for learning that have been identified by the kaiako, parents, whānau and community of the ECE service” (p. 65). Such definitions of curriculum and planning mean that children’s interests are one source of curriculum, alongside other planned and spontaneous curriculum that arise from practitioners’ assessment and planning practices.

There is no reference to research in the statutory framework for either country. The EYFS has ostensibly been informed by government funded reviews and research. However, the use of findings arising from these sources to inform policy change has been critiqued as selective (Wood, 2020). In NZ it has long been a criticism that footnotes identifying the research basis for the content of Te Whāriki were removed from the 1993 draft and were not been included in either the 1996 - or 2017 - document (Te One, 2013). This oversight leaves implementation open to multiple understandings and interpretations, and risks practitioners being unable to distinguish and locate current theory and research to inform their practice. We now analyse the presence and understandings of children’s interests in each of these documents.

Children’s interests in the EYFS

In the EYFS children’s interests are addressed in the third of four overarching principles: “children learn and develop well in enabling environments with teaching and support from adults, who respond to their individual interests and needs and help them to build their learning over time” (DfE, 2021 p. 6).

Reference is also made to children’s interests in the Learning and Development considerations in point 1:11:

“Practitioners must consider the individual needs, interests, and development of each child in their care, and must use this information to plan a challenging and enjoyable experience for each child in all areas of learning and development” (p. 15); and in point 1:14:

“Practitioners must stimulate children’s interests, responding to each child’s emerging needs and guiding their development through warm, positive interactions coupled with secure routines for play and learning” (p. 16).

Taken together, these statements offer a superficial and confusing interpretation of interests, and how they relate to the similarly vague references to children's needs, learning, and development. It is not clear what stimulating children's interests means or looks like in practice yet its association with "guiding" children's development is indicative of the enduring influence of developmental psychology with ECE policy and practice in England. From this perspective, the EYFS frames children's interests in terms of individualistic and naturalistic developmental processes rather than as being co-constructed through participating in social and cultural practices. Without further augmentation, the EYFS appears to perpetuate the longstanding positioning of interests in ECE and offers no clarity or exemplification about how children's interests might inform practitioners' pedagogical and curriculum decision-making.

Moreover, as noted earlier, the EYFS is situated within a national context in which educational agendas are driven by standards and accountability narratives. This creates internal tensions whereby the EYFS espouses the primacy of the "unique child" whilst simultaneously reinforcing the use of interests to fuel children's progress towards normatively-defined developmental goals. In practice, this means that educational agendas associated with preparing children for school are likely to be privileged over recognising and responding to children's motivations to understand the world, make sense of their encounters and build identities as they participate in experiences that have relevance and meaning to their lives. Just as Wood (2014) has drawn attention to the dangers of "taming" play to address narrow educational agendas, we suggest that there are similar perils when children's interests are shoehorned into school readiness priorities with undue attention to the complexity and diversity of young children's ways of learning and expressing what they know.

Children's interests in Te Whāriki

In Te Whāriki (MoE, 2017) the term children's interests is used in ways that appear to reflect both longstanding and contemporary research. However, without accompanying research-based footnotes or separately commissioned papers, key statements such as the following lack depth and/or are confusing.

With regard to planning curriculum: "Kaiako observe and value children as individuals. Their interests, enthusiasms, preferences, temperaments and abilities provide the starting point for day-to-day planning" (p. 40). This statement could be read as a developmental perspective with the focus on individuals, and that planning starts from observing interests rather than a balance of stimulating and responding to interests inherent in contemporary research.

The statement "Kaiako plan experiences, resources, events and longer-term investigations that build on and extend children's interests" (p. 50) could be read as being responsive to

children's curiosities and inquiries, but is inexplicit about these as a source for investigations.

With regard to the origin of children's interests:

The family and community/whānau tangata principle means that parents and whānau will be included in discussions about their children's progress and achievements... contribute knowledge of their children's capabilities at home and in other settings and will be seen as 'experts' on their children's interests. (p. 64)

Without using the term, this statement reflects the primacy of funds of knowledge in stimulating children's experiences, and that practitioners need family support to recognise these. It overlooks the research that shows families may not recognise, or not be forthcoming about, their expertise. Practitioners need to engage with families using specific and sensitive approaches to locate such sources of children's interests (see Lovatt et al., 2017).

Elsewhere, with regard to the holistic outcomes children are expected to develop there is an expectation that practitioners will deliver on the broad definition of curriculum in Te Whāriki that aligns with contemporary perspectives of interests: "Learning dispositions support children to develop, refine and extend working theories as they revisit interests and engage in new experiences" (p. 23).

These important statements require a solid foundation of research-based professional knowledge in order for practitioners to understand, plan, and enact curriculum that is meaningful and promotes learning. Recent graduates may have learned about contemporary conceptualising of children's interests. However, it is some time since the MoE commissioned any literature review to support practitioners to have currency on any topic.

Instead, the MoE has created a website that offers curricular implementation guidance for practitioners (see <https://tewhariki.tki.org.nz>). The positive aspects of this site are its accessibility to practitioners and the potential to be a repository of useful material and practice exemplars. However, the site is difficult to navigate in relation to locating coherent material on key aspects such as curriculum planning, and piecemeal in coverage. One risky starting point appeared to be a lot of schooling-based material that is slowly being adapted. Overall, it is low-level in the type and amount of material. It appears to be catering for those working in the role of educators without being qualified, and so is of limited use to qualified practitioners seeking to validate and extend their understandings. It is also quickly becoming dated. Without sufficient investment in the site, and contributions of the wide range of scholars whose work explores elements of Te Whāriki, practitioners risk being left confused about important aspects of curriculum, such as children's interests, the focus of this article.

Evaluation bodies' standards and expectations

In England, Ofsted's primary remit is to inspect, judge, and report on the quality of government funded education settings. In recent years, the influence of Ofsted has been intensified via the publication of reports and reviews that are used to convey its position on what constitutes quality learning and teaching. Similarly, as the statutory body that determines the continuation of funding through evaluating and rating services in NZ, ERO has extensive influence on the day-to-day practices of early childhood services. Arguably then, both Ofsted and ERO have more sway on everyday practice than the EYFS or Te Whāriki that set out the statutory requirements.

Children's interests and Ofsted

As noted, Ofsted's most recently published document is "Best Start in Life part 1: setting the scene" (BSiL, Ofsted, 2022). The document is framed as a research review that is intended to "support early years practitioners to raise the quality of early years education in the pre-school age range, from birth to 4 years" (n.p.). Ofsted justified the selection of research evidence cited in the review as follows: "When selecting literature, we draw on research that aligns with the criteria for high-quality education, published in our education inspection framework" (n.p.).

As such, the research and other evidence cited in BSiL has been explicitly selected as a means of self-affirmation to justify Ofsted's stance upon what constitutes quality in ECE. Much of this evidence base comprises publications by Ofsted, the DfE and other governmental bodies. As Wood (2019) has argued with regard to Ofsted's previous reviews, "It is here that we discern a 'circular discourse' whereby policy-led evidence is derived from related policy frameworks and approved research, and is used uncritically to reinforce the Ofsted narrative" (p. 790). Thus, Ofsted have used the BSiL review as a means to construct a particular version of quality that reifies what they expect to see in their inspection visits to ECE settings.

This 2022 review is the first publication in a planned series of Ofsted early years reviews. This initial review focuses upon Ofsted's stance on curriculum and pedagogy. As shown next, BSiL has much to say about children's interests and their relationship to curriculum. However, the review provides no references to research to inform, justify, or contextualise their assertions. In what follows, we locate and discuss how children's interests are constructed in BSiL.

The first mention of children's interests is in the following statement:

If practitioners know all of the children well, they are more likely to be aware of the knowledge the children have brought from home or other settings, and the interests they have already formed. If practitioners know the children's starting points, this will help them to consider what knowledge each child needs to acquire to reach the ambitious end points of the curriculum (n.p.)

In this paragraph, Ofsted position interests as starting points for practitioners to identify the knowledge that children need to acquire as “end points”. Using Aoki’s (2005) ideas, this stance emphasises the curriculum-as-plan and conveys a linear, production-line model of knowledge generation. In this way, BSiL reinforces Ofsted’s views of quality education by foregrounding the teaching of core knowledge associated with preparing children for school. There does not appear to be any acknowledgement of the curriculum-as-lived and the multiple ways in which children’s interests afford potential for building diverse forms of knowledge, skills, and understanding. Practitioners, then, are reduced to curriculum deliverers in an educational model that discourages the “multifarious and diverse curriculum” (Magrini, 2015, p. 287) that comprises practitioners’ and children’s lives and the interests that arise from them.

The review goes on to state Ofsted’s stance on families and children’s interests:

Some children will have come from homes where they have not had the opportunity to explore and develop their interests. It does children a disservice to plan learning that is based only on their pre-existing interests and does not give them the chance to develop new ones (n.p.)

A deficit perspective of families informs this overarching premise. This is in direct opposition to the body of research that has used funds of knowledge to view children and their families in terms of resources and strengths, and no recognition of the international scholarly work that contests such deficit framings of households. It completely overlooks the multiple ways in which everyday household tasks, activities, and relationships can stimulate children’s interests.

Furthermore, we are concerned that this paragraph perpetuates a fundamental misunderstanding of interests as a fixed and predetermined phenomenon. In contrast, contemporary research illuminates the potential of a relational pedagogy whereby practitioners and children participate in communities of learning in which interests connect, interact, and evolve in a dynamic approach to curriculum making. Children bring together their funds of knowledge from families in their peer cultures (Chesworth, 2016) and peers’ and practitioners’ interests and experiences are further sources of funds of knowledge (Hedges et al., 2011). To assume that an interests-informed curriculum denies children the opportunity to build new interests is both misinformed and misinforming.

The BSiL goes on to say:

It is important to ensure that all children have the opportunity to really develop and talk about a full range of interests. This is because some may have been encouraged to develop an interest in books but not sport; others may have been taken to art galleries and given support to draw and paint but have not experienced much music. In their setting, this might mean that these children are keen to take part in book-related activities or seek out the painting table, but do not choose active play or explore music-

making. The consequence of planning based purely on a child's interests is that the curriculum begins to narrow for them at a very young age. (n.p.)

We agree that children should have the opportunity to develop and talk about a full range of interests; indeed, this premise lies at the heart of the research projects within which we have collaborated with practitioners, children, and families in England and NZ. However, the remainder of the paragraph conforms to an activity-based interpretation of interests that has been contested in contemporary research. Framing interests in terms of activity choices trivialises children's intentions and reflects Hedges' (2022) point that interests in ECE have been "ill-defined, under-theorised, and taken-for-granted" (p. 42).

Furthermore, the association made between interests and a narrow curriculum does not reflect sociocultural research into children's interests whereby the curriculum is understood to be a dynamic co-creation that draws upon multiple relationships and experiences as motivations and springboards for knowledge construction. To suggest that children will not be stimulated by new relationships and experiences in ECE settings shows ignorance of the ways children learn and interact with others, as well as a narrow understanding of interests.

BSiL concludes with a summary that claims to draw together the findings from the research review to identify some characteristics of high quality curriculum and pedagogy in the early years. The summary includes recognition that "Practitioners consider a child's interests when choosing activities and they expand children's interests, to make progress in all areas of learning" (n.p.). While we welcome seeing interests mentioned here, this point appears tokenistic and suggestive of the superficial and uncritical interpretations of interests (Hedges, 2022) that we have critiqued earlier. It also suggests that interests be hijacked and used for pre-determined educational purposes, rather than a promising way to work towards outcomes for learning (Wood, 2014).

Children's interests and ERO

ERO (2020) outlines that settings create curriculum around the question of "what matters most?" to children, families and communities. This question in its widest sense potentially has good fit with an interests-based curriculum. What matters most is responsive to both stimulating new interests and being responsive to new and expanding interests and inquiries.

In the same document, ERO has a complex series of recently updated indicators used during evaluation visits. These indicators have been influenced by research insofar as selected researchers were invited to present to staff and write background papers (see <https://ero.govt.nz/how-ero-reviews/early-childhood-services/akarangi-quality-evaluation/te-ara-poutama-indicators-of-quality-for-early-childhood-education-what-matters>) that shifted emphases from the previous to the current indicators. So, for example, where the concept of funds of knowledge appeared in the previous indicators as

an important source of children's interests, this is no longer the case, leaving practitioners to interpret the term children's interests without any guidance.

In this key document, there are only two references to children's interests. The first is under the indicator of "Children's learning and development is supported through intentional and culturally responsive pedagogy" (p. 11) and reads as "Kaiako thoughtfully and intentionally make links across time, place and activities by revisiting children's experiences, ideas and interests" (p. 11). The second falls within the indicator of "Leaders and kaiako work collaboratively to develop the professional knowledge and expertise to design and implement a responsive and rich curriculum for all children" (p. 24) reading as "Leaders and kaiako have the professional knowledge, including subject content knowledge, to respond meaningfully to children's interests and inquiries and to support development of their understandings, working theories and dispositions" (p. 24)

These statements are promising in relation to understanding children's interests as developing over time and involving multiple activities across different places. It is also positive in its indication that there is an onus on practitioners to extend children's interests and build their understandings. However, in suggesting only responses to interests, rather than stimulating these, there remains a risk of narrow understandings.

Like Ofsted, ERO writes its own reports on various topics. These also have a dearth of research-based references to justify them as rigorous or current. Within these there appears to be confusion about understandings of interests. For example, a 2016 publication about planning curriculum noted that:

In designing [their] curriculum, services should respond to parents' aspirations; children's language culture and identity; their strengths and interests; current research and practice; and the aspects of learning that sit within the strands of Te Whāriki. Children's interests are a key source for curriculum design. Practitioners observe children's emerging interests and use these as a platform to support and extend children's ongoing learning. (p. 11)

A related example from one service includes the following reference to children's interests:

The service is very responsive to the needs and interests of individual children. All children have individual development goals set with input from parents and whānau (sic) and all practitioners at the service through observations during play. Goals are worked on through the child's interests. Learning stories are linked to children's progress with the goals, and they note their new and emerging interests. (p. 13)

This example does not make explicit how children's interests are to be understood and therefore assessed, and reflects the developmental, individualistic understandings we have critiqued in our research.

Without guidance about how children’s interests might be understood, we wonder what knowledge are ERO reviewers drawing when they make judgements in 2023 such as:

The service’s curriculum is child-led and responsive to children’s interests, strengths, and capabilities. Practitioners foster a learning environment that encourages children to follow their curiosities and to apply their own ideas and understandings in making sense of their experiences. <https://ero.govt.nz/institution/20485/tots-corner>

Using the terms “child-led” and “responsive”, and phrases such as “their [children’s] own ideas” reads suspiciously as relying on outdated understandings of child-centredness and children’s interests (Ang, 2016; Hedges, 2022). Yet, this particular service is strongly rooted in philosophies that promote curiosity and inquiry, and so may in practice follow deeper and more contemporary understandings of children’s interests. This kind of confusion may be typical of the tensions practitioners negotiate as they grapple with the requirements of this body alongside following contemporary research-based understandings of interests and curriculum.

In summary, policy documents in both countries acknowledge the centrality of children’s interests in ECE curriculum but reflect simplistic and at times ambiguous and confusing interpretations that do not align with contemporary research. In England, DfE and Ofsted narratives are reflective of the inherent tensions between an alleged focus on the “unique child” and the intensification of standardised assessment policies and a tightly sequenced curriculum. In NZ, both the MoE and ERO allude to valuing children’s interests yet most of their material, like that in England, is selective or lacks currency. Recently educated practitioners, and those undertaking high quality professional learning that includes postgraduate study, may have more current understandings of concepts such as children’s interests.

What does this mean for evidence-informed policy and practice?

Through our analysis, we have argued that statutory frameworks and regulatory bodies in England and NZ run a risk of reinforcing enduring and perfunctory interpretations of children’s interests and their relationship with curriculum and pedagogy. In both countries, key policy and regulatory documents draw on research that is outdated, selective and in some cases non-existent. As a result, policy narratives lag behind research and practice understandings of an important concept that underpins curriculum.

This is a matter of concern because national policy bodies in both countries enact persuasive power over what practitioners know and do. Without a policy framing informed by contemporary research, there is a risk that children’s interests will be interpreted through an outdated binary framing of ECE in which teacher-led and play-based practices are positioned as opposing and mutually exclusive approaches (Wood, 2014). Framed as such, policy narratives tether children’s interests into one of two camps: either, to a teacher-led model in which interests are hijacked for the delivery of narrowly defined

curriculum outcomes; or, to a play-based model associated with laissez-faire, individualised, and narrow activity-based interpretations of interests.

Neither of these positions align with the research we have outlined in this article that involves practitioners engaging deeply with children's interests inspired by all aspects of their everyday lives, and to build children's knowledge and understanding through moment-by-moment responses as well as through their longer-term curriculum planning. This involves practitioners being responsive to the cultural interests that children bring from home and community experiences as well as offering experiences within the setting as a springboard for building new interests.

We argue that a curriculum that foregrounds interests has much in common with Aoki's (2005) scholarship on curriculum, wherein academic content is positioned in relation - rather than in opposition - to the lived experiences of children and practitioners. Aoki argued that occupying the middle space between curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived is a process in which the teacher becomes "involved with his [or her] students, enters into their world as he [or she] allows them to enter his and engages himself with students mutually in action-reflection oriented activities" (p. 131).

Aoki argues that this middle space is where practitioners and children engage in situational-praxis through which the learning outcomes set out in a curriculum framework are placed in conversation with the multiple lived experiences of the ECE community. We conclude that curriculum is a balanced and complex process led by both practitioners and children. We suggest that teacher agency is a prerequisite of situational-praxis. Such agency requires that practitioners have access to research evidence that enables them to articulate and enact curriculum and pedagogy in order to recognise and build upon children's interests while also understanding the role and place of their own and societal interests in the balancing act that is curriculum.

In this conceptualisation, curriculum is a constantly unfolding process in which children's and practitioners' interests intersect and interweave with the values and priorities that are set out in national policy frameworks (Hedges, 2022). Central to Aoki's viewpoint is the notion of a humanising education wherein the curriculum is constructed not only from national policy frameworks but also in response to the many "layered voices" (Aoki, 2005, p. 229) of practitioners and children. Hence, Aoki would encourage us to recognise that practitioners' day-to-day curriculum decision making sits in the middle space between curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived.

Drawing attention to this middle space illuminates the complex work that practitioners do as they interweave the societal priorities inscribed in policy agendas with children's diverse and dynamic interests. This work requires that ECE practitioners have professional expertise and the capacity to mobilise this expertise in their daily practice with children and families. Guided by Priestley et al. (2015), we frame such expertise in terms of the accumulated

repertoires that comprise practitioners' knowledge, skills, beliefs, and values, and enable them to exercise agency in their curriculum and pedagogical decision-making. For this to occur, we argue that practitioners need access to research that can inform and enable them to articulate how, and why, interests are used in their curricular and pedagogical decision-making. This articulation may need to extend to speaking back to policy makers and evaluators.

Conclusion

Our article has focused on the notion of children's interests as a longstanding key source of ECE curriculum. We have considered whether or not policy makers in England and NZ use contemporary research to inform the positioning of children's interests within curriculum frameworks, guidance, and evaluation indicators. In short, while there are glimpses of valuing current research, we have shown ways historical views of this notion endure and remain reified in policy. Our analysis of significant policy documents suggests that policy makers risk being outdated and unclear in the views of children's interests they promulgate. In turn, this creates problems and tensions for the ways practitioners are challenged to understand and enact curriculum.

We have pushed back on policy narratives that reinforce outdated individualistic child-centred and activity-based interpretations of interests, particularly in England. We have offered contemporary and culturally-grounded understandings of children's interests, with some indication these may be present but confused alongside each other in NZ policy. Recently-qualified practitioners or postgraduate students may have been exposed to recent ideas, enabling them to create many justified sources of curriculum from all the layered voices Aoki (2005) described as contributing to curriculum decision making.

Given policy makers calls for evidence-based practice, particularly evidence that comes from researchers partnering with practitioners, we implore policy makers to engage more deeply with researchers and practitioners too rather than simply wield a heavy and selective influence from their positions of power. Bridging a research-policy-practice gap here can only occur when policy bodies welcome research input, take time to be familiar with contemporary theory and research that includes contributions from a wide range of scholars, and make those contributions clear and accessible to practitioners. Only then can ECE have the potential to be transformative, interests serve as a strong motivation for learning, practitioners have agency in their curricular decision-making, and children provided with the balanced curriculum and positive start to life all stakeholders wish for them.

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