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Curriculum in early childhood education: Global policy discourses and country-level responses in Aotearoa New Zealand and England

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Abstract

In early childhood education (ECE), global policy discourses influence national policy frameworks for curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practices. Although aspects of these discourses travel across national boundaries via policy borrowing, we argue that consideration is needed of the cultural–historical evolution of country-level systems, their epistemological foundations and different goals or aspirations. We combine a cultural–historical perspective with critical policy text analysis to examine two curricular frameworks—England's Early Years Foundation Stage and Aotearoa New Zealand's Te Whāriki. Both nations share similar historical influences and time-frame for the development of ECE policies from the 1990s, but with different local responses, principles and values. Three questions about curriculum inform our policy text analysis: how are children positioned and understood; what knowledge is valued and what outcomes are valued? The analysis indicates similar influences and discourses, but with dissimilar responses to these questions and distinctive ways of understanding curriculum in each country. We argue that although global discourses promote generic policy drivers and goals, country-level policy responses need to be understood genealogically and locally in relation to cultures, contexts and values. Taking a global–local approach to policy analysis also raises critical questions about the opportunities and

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limitations of policy borrowing across international contexts and the importance of contextualisation.

KEYWORDS

early childhood curriculum, England, New Zealand, policy borrowing

INTRODUCTION

Providing legislated frameworks for early childhood education (ECE) is a key strategy for achieving global and national policy goals that contribute to wider social and economic change. This strategy places the curriculum, or educational programme, as a driver for raising standards and improving the outcomes and life chances for children. This paper contributes to understanding the interplay between global policy discourses and their touchdown at country-level with regard to both cultural–historical contexts and contemporary debates about the different purposes that the curriculum aims to accomplish. Our focus is on two ECE policy frameworks that provide contrasting orientations to how curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are understood: the Early Years Foundation Stage in England ([EYFS], DfE, 2023a) and Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) in Aotearoa New Zealand.

International debates in England and New Zealand (Gunn & Nuttall, 2019), in China (Yang & Li, 2019a, 2019b) and countries in the global north and south (Mueller & File, 2020) position curriculum as a site for struggle in ECE. Historically, educational programmes and curriculum frameworks were designed to guide practice, drawing on eclectic interpretations of theory, philosophy, research, beliefs and ideologies. In contemporary policy reform movements, curriculum remains a site of struggle. Wood and Hedges (2016) traced historical and contemporary influences on ECE in New Zealand and England and identified the statutory curriculum documents as the site through which content, coherence and control are being articulated, reinforced by systems of accountability and inspection. Their analysis juxtaposes global policy drivers with contrasting ontological, epistemological and cultural–historical orientations in country-level systems and considers the wider socio-political and economic contexts within which the ECE curriculum is positioned.

The political nature of ECE is thus evidenced in both the international scope of policy drivers and the national/local scope of government interventions. Policy borrowing is an outcome of global discourses that highlight the dual influence of ECE on individual achievement and national economic success and competitiveness. Policy reform has provoked new debates about the relationships between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment and the desired outcomes for children. Consequently, the work that curriculum has to accomplish has intensified, reflecting global–local goals such as: improving quality and raising standards across the sector; changing cultural aspirations; ameliorating historical marginalization of communities; ensuring continuity with compulsory education; and, incorporating children's rights. Asking critical questions about curriculum addresses debates about these different purposes and goals.

Building on these concerns, we argue that combining a genealogical perspective and critical policy analysis reveals contrasting global policy discourses and local responses. Global discourses have the positive effect of foregrounding the importance of high quality provision for children and families. Cross-country dialogue is important for sharing processes and practices for advocacy and addressing global concerns such as equity and diversity, schoolification of ECE and school readiness. However, as Bautista et al. (2021) have argued, attention must be paid to the borrowing and lending contexts. Policy borrowing is often informed by neo-liberal economic theories and new public management strategies

that identify problems and propose solutions, but without the necessary attention to system-wide reform (Cameron & Moss, 2020). From this perspective, curriculum innovation may be claimed when countries borrow from ECE policy frameworks and approaches, as a response to global discourses about 'what works'. Such discourses incorporate hegemonic constructs regarding economic growth and competitiveness that may be in tension with country-level values and principles for ECE and with cultural genealogy as we will show later.

Academic scholars have also promoted cross-country borrowing of curricular policies and practices. For example, Cameron and Moss (2020) provide an incisive analysis of the origins and effects of contemporary crises in ECE in England. Recommendations for transformative change draw, for example, on the Nordic model of funding and pedagogy and on the principles and practices of Te Whāriki and Reggio Emilia that underpin context-specific pedagogy and culturally relevant assessment practices.

From a critical perspective, curriculum theorists have proposed that policy borrowing may be recommended, or occur, without a clear justification of what aspects are being borrowed, for what purposes and with what implications for local contexts, cultures and diversities. Focusing on play as a core element of ECE provision, Bautista et al. (2021) compare policy and practice in India, Mainland China and Hong Kong and Singapore and Hong Kong (Bautista et al., 2021) Both studies highlight problems with the influence of predominantly Western policies, discourses and theories on defining and justifying play in the context of different systems, with unique characteristics. Bautista et al. (2021) argue for third spaces of curriculum and pedagogical hybridity informed by glocal perspectives that can be mutually transformative. Similarly, Yang and Li (2019a, 2019b) argue for acknowledging the role of local cultures in curriculum development in Hong Kong, both as a push-back against dominant western discourses and former colonial influences and the top-down discourses that may be embedded in outcomes-led national policies. Taking a critical and radical perspective, Mueller and File argue for centring social justice and democratic participatory approaches that 'disrupt the current contexts of radical standardization, marketization, commodification, accountability and curriculum as a product that shape teaching and learning in the current political context' (2020, p. ix).

We argue that policy borrowing across jurisdictions can be a positive outcome of global reform in ECE, but can also be problematic in terms of processes and effects. Problems or omissions in one country cannot be solved or ameliorated by adopting or adapting ideas, values and approaches from another country. This is pertinent to the ECE curriculum because it constitutes a site for decisions about content, coherence and control, incorporating statements of intention and implementation that are grounded in cultural–historical values and contemporary challenges particular to individual nations or regions. Moreover, country-level systems of regulation, inspection and accountability may also advise or require that particular practices should be adopted as a means for securing the desired outcomes, in turn, having implications for how practitioners¹ plan and enact curriculum.

Having laid out our focus and argument, our first section briefly describes the policy reform movement in ECE. The second section justifies our approach to policy analysis and the third section presents our analysis of the two policy frameworks in England and New Zealand. The discussion contrasts approaches to curriculum in the two countries reflected in the findings and identifies the limitations of policy borrowing in relation to cultures, contexts and values.

POLICY REFORM IN ECE

Global–local education reform movements have created a new dynamic between policy, theory and practice. As Savage (2018) has argued:

Rapidly evolving transnational flows of policy ideas, practices, actors and organisations pose new and difficult questions for how we understand power, knowledge and influence, as well as the making and doing of policies. (p. 309)

Policy borrowing and implementation in ECE have been informed by influential research on educational effectiveness, with economic cost–benefit analyses driving government investment in a non-statutory sector (e.g., Heckman & Karapakula, 2019a, 2019b). Linking ECE with improving children's outcomes and enabling parents to return to the workplace, became an economic justification for increased investment. Whilst such investment has had a significant positive impact on the sector, Savage (2018) argues that terms such as policy cycle, policy transfer and policy implementation imply rigid, linear processes and proposes that the concept of policy assemblage captures 'complexity, non-linearity, and emergence' (p. 309). The concept of policy assemblage is relevant to exploring the ECE curriculum as a means of achieving the desired goals and outcomes in terms of what sources of evidence are used, which experts are consulted and whether goals and priorities change as a result of wider socio-political and economic forces.

Cameron and Moss (2020) propose that contemporary problems and inadequacies in policy in England reflect the pervasive influence of neo-liberalism as a global ideology and blueprint for social and economic change. Established commitments to freedom and flexibility in curriculum planning have been disrupted by concerns with compliance influenced by country-level systems of assessment, inspection and accountability. Those systems may be light- or heavy-touch according to the degrees of surveillance and accountability exerted through government regulatory bodies. However, policy reform has not provided the required solutions for all of the problems ECE provision is intended to solve, in spite of the benefits of government investment.

Although global discourses have extensive reach and influence, we argue for attention to local approaches in order to respect distinct curriculum genealogies and their social and cultural–historical principles and values. ECE policy frameworks exemplify the significant work that curriculum has to accomplish in order to achieve national policy goals. Therefore, a specific analytic focus is needed to explore how curriculum is formulated in policy texts and discourses, what responses arise from within the community and what are the tensions in curriculum theory and practice. A comparative analysis using theorized questions can thus illuminate global and local discourses and influences (e.g., see Hedges, 2022) and problematize policy borrowing. The following section turns to the underpinning theory and methods used to analyse the curriculum frameworks in England and NZ.

THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

Ball (2015) argues 'discourses and concomitantly power relations are manifest in material and anthropological forms, that is, in policy objects...architectures, subjectivities and practices' (p. 308). Although ECE is non-compulsory, policy intensification has involved similar processes to compulsory education: the imposition of policy objects and architectures juxtaposed the established rhetoric of freedom and flexibility with unprecedented forms of control and accountability, thereby creating tensions and challenges for the field.

Policy frameworks typically include an assemblage of statutory and non-statutory documents that embody policy as text and discourse and, as such, are the sites through which particular forms of governmentality, ideologies and power relations are manifest (Hunkin et al., 2022). As noted previously, although global policy discourses convey similar drivers across international contexts, solutions that derive from policy borrowing have to be locally contextualized in systems, practices and cultures.

The origins and intentions of the curriculum documents themselves are significant and, we argue, require an understanding of their epistemological foundations and the contexts in which they were developed and are enacted. Critical policy analysis of two documents, Te Whāriki (MoE, 2017) in New Zealand and the EYFS (DfE, 2023a, 2023b) in England thus considers the genealogical and epistemological assumptions about what and whose knowledge is valued, alongside the limitations of policy borrowing.

Critical policy analysis

Critical policy analysis (CPA) derives from critical discourse analysis (Wodek & Meyer, 2016), drawing on a range of theories and methodologies to explore complex systems and contexts in which policy is made and enacted (Diem et al., 2014). By applying critique to discourse, CPA aims to reveal which rhetorical features and devices are used to persuade policy actors of particular courses of action. Focusing on ideologies and power relationships, CPA can reveal what policy frameworks aim to accomplish, by what means, with what intended outcomes and on what evidence. Policy texts and discourses exert rhetorical power in that they are simultaneously persuasive and authoritative in order to influence behaviour, drive change and produce the desired outcomes (Wood 2019). CPA focuses on how language can be used as an ideological instrument, the ways in which it can be manipulated to convey certain meanings and the power relationships that inhere in texts and discourses (Diem et al., 2014). CPA thus encompasses the relevance of cultures, histories and discourses, and, in the context of this paper, their place in Te Whāriki and the EYFS.

In New Zealand and England, the ECE policy assemblage includes a range of documents such as statutory frameworks and inspection protocols, non-statutory guidance, literature reviews and research reports. Policy texts are cultural tools, created for specific purposes: they construct a dominant discourse (including language, images and concepts), which influence what and how phenomena are understood. Based on analyses of ECE policy in England, Wood (2019) argues that one text (such as the EYFS) is reinforced by other texts through a circular discourse in which problems are constructed and solutions are justified on the basis of selective evidence, including government commissioned research and inspection reports. Therefore policy-led evidence making requires attention to what sources are used and what counts as evidence. CPA reveals the intended effects and consequences of particular discourses, particularly where policy texts name the problems that need to be addressed and offer or prescribe the solutions.

Although Te Whāriki and the EYFS encompass broad-ranging goals, our focus is on three questions specific to theorizing curriculum adapted from Dillon (2009) and Mueller and Whyte (2020):

1. How are children positioned and understood?
2. What knowledge is valued and how is that expressed through discourse?
3. What outcomes are valued?

Each of these questions draws attention to the relationship between knowledge and power, which, as Mueller and File (2020) have argued, is important to understanding curriculum. These questions are also concerned with what kind of a curriculum serves children—and families—well; what and whose knowledge is valued; what children are entitled to know and learn and how practitioners create worthwhile curricular experiences (Mueller & Whyte, 2020). In the context of policy borrowing, these questions focus on how policy discourses act in various ways on and through practitioners and other professionals, children and families to achieve policy goals. As Dillon (2009) has argued, asking critical questions

provokes different answers and, as we show in our analysis, reveals contrasting theoretical and conceptual vocabularies for thinking about curriculum.

Our analytical strategies compared the two documents using individual words (such as play, outcomes), tenses and meaning units (clusters, repetition of key concepts such as 'learning and development'). We focused on knowledge about children, learning and development (e.g., children learn in different ways) and how curriculum content is defined (e.g., as goals, knowledge, dispositions, behaviours, skills). We worked first individually then jointly across the documents for our respective countries, to identify similarities and differences in relation to the three questions. This close analysis foregrounded the authority of the texts in terms of what discourses or systems of knowledge they draw on to construct curriculum, what outcomes they intend to achieve and how they influence the work of practitioners.

CONTEXT: GENEALOGY OF TE WHĀRIKI AND THE EYFS

Almost ten years of policy development and consultation led to writing the curriculum Te Whāriki/Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo (MoE, 2017), designed to serve children aged birth-school age (usually 5 years) in English and Māori-medium settings respectively. A whāriki is a woven mat for children and adults to stand on. The curriculum whāriki carries aspirations for learning. Children, families and teachers weave the principles, strands, goals and learning outcomes in the document (itemized later in the findings section) to create a local curriculum that reflects societal, communal and cultural values and shared priorities. A refresh of the curriculum occurred in 2016 leading to the current updated version of Te Whāriki (MoE, 2017). The curriculum document is bilingual and bicultural (English and Māori).

From its inception, Te Whāriki grounded the curriculum in Kaupapa Māori, a way of framing and organizing ideas and thinking about Māori knowledge, language, customs, values, principles, ideologies and agendas. These ideas have a genealogy centuries older than those borrowed from developmental psychology and other knowledge systems that have influenced ECE curriculum. This was perhaps both a response to former colonial and European influences and an acknowledgement of the significance of culture and its impact on learning, curriculum design, pedagogical approaches and assessment. Te Whāriki positions practitioners with responsibility for incorporating Māori language and culture in curriculum so that all children can learn and value their indigenous language, culture and identity.

Te Whāriki is rooted in Māori whakapapa (i.e., genealogical links; see Rameka, 2016; Rameka & Soutar, 2019). Whakapapa conveys an understanding of personal history, family, significant places and other aspects that shape identity. However, whakapapa is also 'a way of thinking, a way of learning, a way of storing knowledge and a way of debating knowledge' (Smith, 2000, p. 234). One way whakapapa is evident in the document is through the use of whakataukī (culturally significant proverbs).

In England the EYFS (DfE, 2023a, 2023b) is one of many versions of ECE policy frameworks since 1999, which indicates the shifting nature of the policy assemblage under different governments. The EYFS sets the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five, alongside the requirements for safeguarding and welfare. The EYFS seeks to provide quality and consistency; a secure foundation; partnership working and equality of opportunity (DfE, 2023a, p. 5). The EYFS goals intend that children are following their developmental trajectory and building the right foundations towards life-long learning and responsible citizenship. This developmental trajectory is elaborated in the non-statutory curriculum guidance, *Development Matters* (DfE, 2020a) which foregrounds child development as the theoretical basis for practitioners' decisions about the educational programme.

The age of starting compulsory education is the term following the child's fifth birthday. However a single point entry (September) in most schools means that the majority of children age 4–5 years attend the Reception class of maintained (state-funded) primary schools. The Reception year marks the transition from the EYFS into Key Stage 1 of the National Curriculum (age 5–7) and to more formal adult-directed activities. As Kay (2022) has argued, the EYFS provides an example of policy steering towards school readiness and the construction of the 'school ready child'. This brief genealogy is elaborated further in our response next to the three questions that are specific to theorizing curriculum.

CURRICULUM POLICY ANALYSIS: FINDINGS

Question 1: How are children understood?

A core genealogical belief for Māori is that that the mokopuna (child) is special as a 'living link to the past, the embodiment of the present, and the hope for the future' (Reedy, 2019, p. 39). This belief is evident in the vision of children in Te Whāriki 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 society. (MoE, 2017, p. 5)

It is also evident in the use of whakataukī such as 'Tū mai e moko. Te whakaata o ō mātua. Te moko o ō tīpuna. Stand strong, O moko. The reflection of your parents. The blueprint of your ancestors' (p. 17).

Te Whāriki therefore states that

A curriculum must speak to our past, present and future. As global citizens in a rapidly changing and increasingly connected world, children need to be adaptive, creative and resilient. They need to 'learn how to learn' so that they can engage with new contexts, opportunities and challenges with optimism and resourcefulness. (p. 7)

Informed by both Kaupapa Māori and contemporary interpretations of sociocultural theory, learning leads development. Children are positioned as each being on a unique journey. They come into the world eager to learn and are lifelong learners. The knowledge children bring to an ECE setting is connected to family knowledge as a strength to be built on, one reason why Te Whāriki is viewed as a credit-based curriculum. Variation in the rate and timing of learning is recognized through different examples of expectations for learning and for teaching practice included in the document for three overlapping groups of learners: infants (birth–18 months), toddlers (1–3 years), and young children (2.5–5 years).

In the EYFS children are understood as individuals who are unique, strong and independent (DfE, 2023a). These characteristics construct the desirable and desired child who can benefit fully from ECE provision, become resilient, develop executive functions and learn how to self-regulate their learning, emotions and behaviour. The EYFS is informed by a 'development leads learning' epistemological orientation.

The concept of the 'unique child' acknowledges that achieving developmental milestones varies over time (DfE, 2020a), with all children following a similar developmental pathway towards the goals.

The contrasting orientations towards how children are understood in Te Whāriki and the EYFS connect with our second question.

Question 2: What knowledge is valued?

Curriculum in Te Whāriki incorporates 'all the experiences, activities and events, whether direct or indirect, which occur within the ECE setting' (p. 7), which reflects historical and contemporary perspectives (Mueller & File, 2020). These experiences are based on practitioners assessing and planning for children's 'strengths, interests, abilities and needs' (p. 13). Play is expected as a dominant form of pedagogy in the English version of Te Whāriki – it is less clear that this is dominant in the version for Māori-medium settings.

Although an interest in domain knowledge therefore arises from and is embedded in, children's learning, learning to learn is viewed as more important than the construction of knowledge per se (Carr, 2001). In learning to make sense of their worlds, Te Whāriki values the development of children's knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions that support life-long learning. These elements intertwine in two overarching learning outcomes of learning dispositions and working theories.

Reflecting global discourses, subsequent government investment in research and professional learning focused on the development of assessment practices. This research on formative assessment and learning dispositions has led to influential practices such as learning stories (e.g., Carr, 2001; Carr & Lee, 2019). Over the past 12 years the other major learning outcome of working theories has been elucidated and exemplified (see Hedges, 2021). Both outcomes have benefited from research partnerships with practitioners. Although Carr's original work on learning dispositions occurred through a European lens, Rameka's subsequent work (MoE, 2009) balanced this focus to illuminate learning dispositions valued by Māori. Similar work is needed in the future to explore working theories from a Kaupapa Māori perspective.

Also reflecting a learning to learn emphasis rather than knowledge construction, four principles underpin pedagogy in Te Whāriki: whakamana (empowerment), kotahitanga (holistic development), whānau tangata (family and community) and ngā hononga (relationships). The principle of relationships states that 'Children learn through responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places and things' (p. 21).

The content of the curriculum is suggested across five strands and associated goals: wellbeing (mana atua); belonging (mana whenua); contribution (mana tangata); communication (mana reo); and exploration (mana aotūroa). Domain knowledge may be part of what children learn, but is rarely itemized in the examples of practices that promote the learning outcomes of these strands.

In notable contrast, the EYFS is organized into seven areas of learning and development which 'must shape activities and experiences (**educational programmes**) for children' (DfE, 2023a, p. 5, emphasis in original). The three prime areas are:

- Communication and language
- Physical development
- Personal, social and emotional development

The prime areas interconnect with the four specific areas, including literacy, mathematics, understanding the world and expressive arts and design and should inform practitioners' approaches to curriculum planning. Within these areas, the 17 Early Learning Goals (ELGs) are normative and hierarchical and reflect the epistemological orientation of development leads learning. Practitioners are expected to build on children's needs and interests, which refer to basic developmental needs, with interests being activity-led rather than fundamental sources of knowledge and inquiry. The three characteristics of effective teaching and learning—playing and exploring, active learning, creating and thinking critically—are narrowly defined in relation to children's self-regulation.

The ELGs define what children can demonstrate at the expected level of development and specify the outcomes—‘the knowledge, skills and understanding all young children should have gained by the end of the EYFS ’ (DfE, 2023a, p. 8). Although ‘it is up to providers how they approach the curriculum’ little conceptual knowledge is specified other than in literacy (reading, writing, phonics) and mathematics rather, the ELGs are mostly skills and behaviours, which prepare children for the conceptual content in the subject disciplines in Key Stage 1. There is little acknowledgement of the content of children’s investigations, their interests, or the sources and funds of knowledge with which they are engaging. Because the EYFS assessment profile focuses on Literacy and Mathematics, these areas tend to be prioritized in practice, especially an emphasis on phonics instruction to support the goals for reading and writing.

The EYFS aims to provide equality of opportunity and anti-discriminatory practice. Children are encouraged to develop and use their home language in play and learning, supporting their language development at home (DfE, 2020b). The language of assessment at the end of the EYFS is however English and the expectation is that children are provided with sufficient opportunities to reach a good standard in English language.

Question 3: What outcomes are valued?

Present in the principle of empowerment and in all the strands, Te Whāriki prioritizes a commitment to children’s mana, a Māori concept that ‘can be translated as “prestige” or “power”’ (Rameka, 2007, p. 129). Mana is foundational to Te Whāriki because ‘having mana is the enabling and empowering tool to controlling [children’s] own destiny’ (Reedy, 2019, p. 37). ‘Curriculum and pedagogy empower the child to learn and grow by giving them agency, enhancing their mana and supporting them to enhance the mana of others’ (MoE, 2017, p. 60).

The image of children as strong in mana and capable learners further reflects the importance of Māori cultural concepts and practices (Rameka, 2016), connecting directly to outcomes that reflect the power of place and therefore children’s rights to identities, languages and cultures.

This curriculum acknowledges that all children have rights to protection and promotion of their health and wellbeing, to equitable access to learning opportunities, to recognition of their language, culture and identity and, increasingly, to agency in their own lives. These rights align closely with the concept of mana (p. 12).

Children are more readily bi- or multilingual and bi- or multiliterate when language learning and the education setting build on home languages, cultures and identities.

Emanating from the strands and goals, 20 learning outcomes are expressed in present continuous tense. These outcomes develop ‘over time and with guidance and encouragement’ (MoE, 2017, p. 24), prioritizing learning dispositions and working theories (see previous section) ‘because these enable learning across the whole curriculum’ (p. 23). Progression in outcomes is expressed as ‘changes in children’s capabilities’ (p. 63), as evidenced through formative assessment. For these reasons the learning outcomes of Te Whāriki have been described as following a capability rather than a human (cultural) capital approach (Hedges, 2022). At present further work is underway to explain and share interpretations of the outcomes from Kaupapa Māori perspectives to further enrich all children’s experiences as learners (see <https://conversation.education.govt.nz/conversations/gazetting-te-whariki/>) in order to mandate these outcomes in policy.

Links between ECE and beginning of compulsory education are described as ‘pathways’ to support continuity and progression. Accordingly, the document includes connections between Te Whāriki and the New Zealand Curriculum ([NZC] MoE, 2007) and Te Marautanga o Aotearoa (a Māori-medium curriculum for schools, Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga, 2008). The expected trajectories of the outcomes of Te Whāriki are thus connected with the knowledge expected to develop in schooling. The school curriculum is currently under revision so these connections may change in the near future.

In the EYFS, valued outcomes relate to the desired future-oriented trajectory and the developmental goals apply to all children. The rhetoric of ‘the unique child’ is not consistently reflected in summative assessment of the ELGs, via the developmental check at age 2–3 and the EYFS Profile (EYFSP) at age 4–5 (DfE, 2023b). The EYFSP produces a score in three categories of ‘emerging’ (1), ‘expected’ (2) and ‘exceeding’ (3). In order to receive a ‘Good Level of Development’ (GLD) a score of at least 2 is required in all areas, which also connotes the ‘school ready’ child. The EYFS orientation of development leads learning means that it is difficult for practitioners to identify whether they are planning for, or assessing developmental goals or learning outcomes. The focus on school readiness calls into question the extent to which practitioners are able to plan the curriculum to integrate the three characteristics of effective teaching and learning, in ways that are genuinely responsive to children’s needs and interests.

There is little consistence between the ELGs and how these are broken down into sub-goals in Development Matters (DfE, 2020a) and the evidence on which these sequences are based. Although playfulness, creativity, fluidity and playing with knowledge are learning-relevant dispositions, these are not valued as outcomes. This lack of consistence results in a mix of specific and open-ended goals/outcomes, identified through observation checkpoints and summative assessments. For example, in Physical Development, a specific EYFS goal is that children will ‘hold a pencil effectively in preparation for fluent writing—using the tripod grip in almost all cases’ (DfE, 2023a, p. 13). In contrast, in Understanding the World an example of an open-ended goal is that children will ‘understand some important processes and changes in the natural world around them, including the seasons and changing states of matter’ (DfE, 2023a, p. 15). This goal exemplifies the subject knowledge that practitioners might need in order to engage children with (for example) science, but without clear specification of the relevant scientific skills and concepts. Subject knowledge and progression are most clearly specified in Literacy and Mathematics which are the focus for assessment in the EYFSP and determine whether children have achieved the Good Level of Development by the end of the EYFS.

THE ROLE OF REGULATORY BODIES: ACCOUNTABILITY AND INFLUENCE

Having offered responses to the three questions we now offer commentary on the role of the regulatory bodies that oversee curriculum implementation in both countries. Our commentary illustrates the global reach of discourses of accountability and their influence within ECE policy assemblages on how practitioners enact curriculum in practice.

In New Zealand, the Education Review Office (ERO) is the statutory body assigned to evaluate ECE settings and make recommendations for policy changes and/or professional resource development to support curriculum implementation. Settings are accountable for following regulatory, curricular and funding policies. ERO recently revised the indicators applied in reviews to be responsive to the update of Te Whāriki and governmental shifts to increasing bilingual and bicultural foci for operations (ERO, 2020). Following the intent of Te

Whāriki, a byline of 'what (learning) matters most/here' appears in reports about curriculum implementation (e.g., ERO, 2019) and the 2020 review document.

While the draft indicators were consulted on, their initial construction was supported by research and expertise accessed and invited by ERO, thereby, like OfSTED, being somewhat selective in what evidence counted. The indicators are now organized at both outcome and process levels. The outcome indicators are the learning outcomes of Te Whāriki. The process indicators are the conditions that support high-functioning ECE across five domains. Examples of effective practice are offered in the document.

At surface level there appears to be a close relationship between Te Whāriki and ERO documents. However, the process indicators add a level of complexity that makes it difficult for practitioners to provide evidence of levels of outcomes, evidence of meeting regulatory requirements in ways deemed acceptable and what they should emphasize when reviewers observe teaching and learning practices during their brief visits. A shift from the articulated evaluation for improvement to unarticulated accountability and managerialism appears with reported judgements made about service quality. This policy borrowing from notions of effectiveness is concerning. There is also little use of Māori language, values, or principles in ERO's report, undermining the aspiration to be bicultural and/or credit-based to align with Te Whāriki.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Care and Skills (OfSTED) is the government's inspection body for England. OfSTED uses the Education Inspection Framework definition of the curriculum as 'what teachers teach and when and what children learn' (OfSTED, 2023a, n.p.). Inspectors make a judgement on the quality of education, broken down into three curriculum components of 'intent, implementation and impact' (OfSTED, 2023a, n.p.) and expect to observe these processes in practice during the inspection visit. Focusing specifically on ECE, OfSTED's research review 'Best Start in Life' (2023b) makes direct links between the EIF expectations, the EYFS and desired practices. Although practitioners have some responsibility for making decisions about curriculum planning and implementation, OfSTED (2023b, n.p.) provides a specific understanding of curriculum and progression:

A coherently planned and well-sequenced curriculum enables children to make progress by knowing more, understanding more and being able to do more in the early years (2023b, n.p.).

The direct intervention of OfSTED in matters of curriculum content, coherence and control is a core element of the EYFS policy assemblage. As Wood (2019) has argued, OfSTED's research reviews have shifted the relationship between knowledge and power by defining the features of high quality curriculum and pedagogy. With the addition of 'Best Start in Life' (2023b), OfSTED thus provides strong steering of practitioners' implementation of the EYFS towards desired and approved practices. Whether we look at ERO in New Zealand, or OfSTED in England, strong steering, managerialism and accountability processes all impact on responses to the three questions we have addressed here about curriculum policy in ECE.

In the discussion we synthesize answers to the three questions alongside our accountability commentary to present a comparative analysis of the two curricular documents. Having then identified their distinctive features and ways they have responded to—or spoken back to—global discourses, we discuss global policy borrowing that is a characteristic of curricular documents and guidance for practice and implementation. How those questions are answered from a policy perspective is juxtaposed with the wider research and literature that problematize curriculum as a site of struggle.

DISCUSSION: GLOBAL–LOCAL POLICY RESPONSES

Based on our analysis, we argue that although global discourses promote policy attention to ECE, country-level policy responses need to be understood genealogically and locally in relation to cultures, contexts and values. This position is consistent with international research that draws attention to the contexts of borrowing and lending (Bautista et al., 2021), to contesting western and colonial influences (Yang & Li, 2019a, 2019b) and to wider issues of social justice and democratic participation (Hunkin et al., 2022; Mueller & File, 2020). In Te Whāriki and the EYFS there are parallel discourses about how children are positioned and understood as strong and powerful and as capable and competent learners. However, in Te Whāriki, children learn as members of families and communities and indigenous Māori epistemologies are embedded in the image of children. In the EYFS children are positioned as independent learners and being capable and confident is expressed as achieving the developmental goals.

Another significant difference between the two documents is their epistemological orientations: learning leads development in Te Whāriki and development leads learning in the EYFS. The epistemological foundations of Te Whāriki include Kaupapa Māori, sociocultural and ecological theories of learning. Knowledge is created in context as children make meaning of their experiences and interests. There are suggestions in the examples of practices rather than knowledge/s being specified as defined curriculum goals. A child-focused approach to knowledge development in Te Whāriki then prioritizes funds of knowledge and working theories. Research on these concepts within curriculum has shown consistently that children are knowledge seekers and knowledge builders (Hedges, 2022).

In contrast with the developmental goals in the EYFS (DfE, 2023a) and Development Matters (DfE, 2020a), contemporary theories indicate that knowledge development is not ordered in a hierarchical structure. Conceptual knowledge grows over time, albeit sometimes in unpredictable ways, when practitioners are attuned to children's ways of learning, interests and understandings and use relational pedagogies to support such knowledge development. These contrasting orientations mean that practitioners understand and recognize concepts such as children's interests and needs in different ways and focus on different forms of knowledge, dispositions and outcomes. These differences carry multiple implications for how the capable, competent child is discursively constructed, how the curriculum is planned and enacted and for the pedagogical approaches and participatory learning activities in which children and practitioners engage.

Although research on learning has focused on how children build knowledge within areas such as literacy, numeracy and science, the selective use of evidence means that much discipline-focused research appears to have not been adequately considered in either the EYFS or Te Whāriki. In the EYFS the developmental indicators are mostly skills and behaviours considered preparatory for formal learning in Key Stage 1, with inadequate consideration of the disciplines within which powerful knowledge (or ways of knowing) is grounded.

In both countries, practitioners and/or pedagogical leaders must take responsibility for implementing, designing and enacting the curriculum, within a framework of moral obligations that extend beyond the ECE setting to children, families and communities. Although it remains challenging to specify what knowledge is valued in any curriculum, the question of *what and whose* knowledge remains relevant to ensuring a curriculum is responsive to the respective images of children. Like the weaving metaphor and intentions of Te Whāriki, the 'educational programme' in the EYFS implies a degree of flexibility and freedom for practitioners and pedagogical leaders to develop their own curriculum approaches. However, the OFSTED definition of curriculum as 'intent, implementation, impact' (OfSTED, 2023a, n.p.), potentially narrows the curriculum to what outcomes are observable and measurable.

The 'school ready' child and the 'capable, competent' child thus become discursively constructed in policy and in practice.

Assessment in the EYFS and Te Whāriki both link to the third question 'What outcomes are valued?' Consistent with their contrasting epistemological orientations, the outcomes and the means for assessing those outcomes, are fundamentally different in the two frameworks. The processes of observation, documentation and assessment produce the evidence of children's learning outcomes in both frameworks. However, there are different emphases on formative and summative assessment. In the EYFS, the 'school ready' child is constructed via summative assessment of the ELGs and documented in the EYFS Profile, based on normative developmental goals. Children who do not achieve at least a 'Good Level of Development' are not 'school ready' and become sites for intervention based on perceived 'developmental delay'. Changes in pedagogy from predominantly child-led to teacher-led activities are intended to ensure that children achieve the outcomes and are made ready for school. These changes are endorsed by the OfSTED inspection framework and in practice guidance documents which, as Kay (2022) has argued, define the direction and purposes of governing education. The focus on school readiness highlights the tensions between the OfSTED discourse and the claims made in the EYFS regarding playfulness and creativity as learning-relevant dispositions. In contrast, the processes of assessment and evaluation inscribed in Te Whāriki enable the capabilities, interests and strengths of children and not the assessment process, to determine the curriculum. Hence, there is agreement that assessment makes visible differing valued outcomes in a range of contexts.

In summary, our comparative analysis reveals how different cultural–historical influences and values have become integrated within mandated policy to produce contemporary frameworks for curriculum in England and New Zealand. We argue that global discourses are an important element of policy analysis that need to be understood genealogically and locally in relation to cultures, contexts and values. However, taking a critical approach to global–local discourses is essential because of their political and ideological orientations and their potential influence on all areas of education systems, specifically on the work that curriculum has to accomplish.

Policy borrowing—contextualization

Curriculum in ECE remains a site of struggle because policy reform has profoundly influenced the relationship between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment and the desired outcomes for children. Influenced by global drivers, regulatory bodies further reinforce this relationship through evaluation and accountability processes and inspection regimes. In the context of globalization, it is understandable that policy borrowing between countries is one response to the 'what works' agenda, which assumes that practices deemed effective in one country are transferrable elsewhere. However, in practice, practitioners work with historically evolving discourses, alongside the dynamic policy processes of complexity, non-linearity and emergence discussed by Savage (2018). Our analysis shows that policy borrowing needs to be contextualized in light of contrasting cultural–historical influences on the ECE curriculum. Policy flows can themselves produce frictions in how or to what extent policies are taken up and how they are interpreted, translated and mediated in the contexts of practice. Yang and Li (2019a, 2019b) have also questioned the cultural appropriateness of reforms and imported approaches and the evidence on which these are based. Regarding what counts as evidence of 'what works', definitions of 'best' or 'effective' practices may not be universally applicable or achievable.

As noted in our introduction one limitation of policy borrowing is cherry-picking. As the first bilingual and bicultural ECE curriculum document and one emphasizing learning to learn,

Te Whāriki has been viewed as world leading, although it has not been immune to the kinds of healthy debate and critique all curricula should experience (see Gunn & Nuttall, 2019). Furthermore, in spite of its distinctive genealogy, Te Whāriki is subject to global trends, as the evolving role of ERO indicates. Nevertheless, Te Whāriki has explicitly and implicitly influenced international perspectives on the ECE curriculum. For example, in their recommendations for transformative change in England, Trevor et al. (2020) focus on ‘child-centred curriculum’ and draw on some of the principles and practices of Te Whāriki (MoE, 2017) and associated research, to inform how teachers might develop context-specific pedagogy and culturally relevant assessment approaches. Such recommendations represent a form of policy borrowing that has often ignored the grounding in Kaupapa Māori, a significant concern.

Policy borrowing from other approaches is problematic without a clear understanding of what is being borrowed—for example, principles, values, practices, goals, outcomes—and for what purposes. Taking into account the borrowing–lending contexts (Bautista et al., 2021), there may be multiple interpretations and subject positions, depending on different actors within the wider policy assemblage, influenced, to varying degrees by the demands of policy compliance. Uncritical policy borrowing may also result in surface level interpretations which, in the contexts of practice, may not be sustainable in achieving the desired outcomes, or realizing local contextualisations.

The political nature of ECE is firmly embedded in global, national and local discourses, as evidenced in policy attention and investment. Although policy borrowing and practice guidance create intersecting assemblages that inform local contextualizations, there may be points of friction between the past and present values and cultures of different approaches, the theories and ideologies historically embedded in ECE and the future-oriented intentions of national policy frameworks. Our analysis of two ECE policy frameworks reveals different cultural–historical genealogies and different theoretical and conceptual vocabularies for thinking about curriculum. Based on this analysis, we argue that critical policy analysis draws attention to aspects of policies borrowed and their discursive formulations, including genealogies, epistemologies, values, theories and concepts. In relation to the ECE curriculum, this critical attention raises important questions about what and whose knowledge is valued in relation to children, families and communities.

CONCLUSION

Taking a global–local approach to policy analysis raises critical questions about the processes and efficacy of policy borrowing across international contexts, which we have illustrated with reference to the curriculum documents in England and New Zealand. This kind of analysis is valuable because it identifies what elements of curricula are responsive to global discourses and what elements remain grounded in local cultural–historical contexts. We have argued that the policy borrowing increasingly evident in early childhood curricula internationally implies challenges for ECE leaders and practitioners, whether advocated for by influential international organizations, government departments, or ECE scholars. Drawing on the international research and this policy analysis, we argue that policy borrowing must occur alongside thoughtful learning about the cultural–historical contexts, conditions and epistemologies in which country-level curricula are grounded. Thoughtful implementation also needs to incorporate space for disrupting the contexts of policy intensification, as argued by Mueller and File (2020). Each country has its unique mix of elements, which means that the professionalism of practitioners is critical to developing the ECE curriculum in ways that are responsive to children, families and communities. Therefore, concepts of professional knowledge, agency and expertise are integral to how practitioners make sense of the policy assemblage (Savage, 2018). At the level

of practice, further research is needed on ECE practitioners and pedagogical leaders as policy actors, specifically how they conceptualize, design and enact curriculum in relation to wider social and cultural–historical structures.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data are drawn from publically available policy documents in Aotearoa New Zealand and England, as referenced.

ETHICS STATEMENT

No ethical approval was required for this research.

GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATIONS

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ENDNOTE

¹We use the term practitioners to refer to those in an educative role with children since not all are qualified teachers internationally.

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