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**Policy and the image of the child: a critical analysis of drivers and levers in English early years curriculum policy**

#### **Abstract**

Using a post-structuralist framework, this article seeks to analyse the ways in which English early years curriculum policy has led to different constructions of young children. Although policy is often presented as being logical and factual, policy making can also be seen as a value-laden process in which meanings are socially constructed and can therefore be deconstructed and reconstructed.

In this article, I analyse the different interests that are served by curriculum policy, the intentions of policy makers and how policy levers and drivers might combine to produce potentially conflicting images of the child. I conclude that these conflicting images create tensions between policy makers' pursuit of cost efficiency and the rights of young children in early years settings. However, post-structural analysis suggests that these are political decisions and things do not have to be this way. Those working in early years can challenge policy makers' constructions of young children, to adopt a more ethical rights-based approach to early education.

Keywords: early years curriculum; school readiness; early childhood education; post-structuralism; policy

## **Introduction**

In this article I use a post-structuralist framework and critical paradigm (Lingard & Garrick, 1997; MacNaughton, 2005), to analyse early years curriculum policy in England. I aim to uncover key policy drivers in order to identify the ways in which early years policy might lead to different constructions of young children and the implications that this might have for current early years practice.

Curriculum policy is often presented as following a rationalist paradigm based on logic, facts and reason, whereas Hyatt (2013) argues that policy making can also be seen as a value-laden process in which meanings are socially constructed and can therefore be deconstructed and reconstructed (McKenzie, 1992). As an early years teacher and lecturer who has experienced the implementation of policy initiatives in practice and seen their often unintended consequences for young children, I wanted to analyse the different interests that are served by early years curriculum policy, the intentions of policy makers and how policy levers and drivers (Ball, 1990) impact on children and practitioners. The connections between politics, power and knowledge are central themes in Foucault's work (1979, 1980, 1988) and he argues that 'power produces, it produces reality' (1979, 194) therefore Foucauldian principles offered a useful lens through which to critically analyse the ways in which policy produces particular regimes of truth about young children (Foucault, 1980). By uncovering these 'truths' my analysis leads to an argument that potentially conflicting images of the child create tensions between policy makers' pursuit of cost efficiency and the rights and diversity of young children in early years settings.

## **The English context**

The importance of planning educational activities to meet children's individual needs was highlighted in the English 'Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage' (DCSF, 2007) which applied to all early years settings including nurseries, play groups, pre-schools and schools working with children from birth to five, and was later to be termed the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). Here, the guiding principles included 'A Unique Child' which states that 'every child is a competent learner from birth who can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured' (DCSF, 2017c, 6).

Although this view of the unique child with individual interests, learning needs and rates of development implies that children are regarded as having their own rights as autonomous individuals, it is interesting to note that the current curriculum framework document (DfE, 2017c) offers no exemplification of how this principle might be translated into practice, and yet it creates clear contrasts with the knowledge-based curricula of the later stages of schooling. This raises difficult questions regarding appropriate pedagogical approaches in the early years and presents the challenges in facilitating smooth transitions into formal schooling that have troubled policy makers both in the UK and internationally (OECD, 2017b; DfE, 2017b; Tickell, 2011). Therefore, it is important to analyse relevant policy documents in order to understand the intentions of their authors and the ways in which early years policy implementation might impact on the children it seeks to serve. This could be seen as a process of uncovering policy levers and drivers through critical post-structural analysis.

## **Post-structural Policy Analysis**

Osgood (2006), Moss, Dillon and Statham (2000) and Basford and Bath (2014) all offer examples of the ways in which a post-structural approach offers a helpful lens through

which to uncover the values and assumptions that are often taken for granted within current early years policy and practice and to demonstrate how this can lead to oppressive and inequitable power relations. As Osgood (2006, 175) argues, 'human agency is profoundly conditioned by social and political forces' and therefore in this article I draw on Foucault's thinking in order to analyse the micro-practices of power in policy-making, to disrupt the existing regimes of truth (Foucault, 1980) that have led to particular understandings of young children and to explore potential ways to 'play it otherwise' (Foucault, 1988:15).

Traditional approaches to policy making have been likened to a medical model in which policy problems are treated as 'diseases' with causes that are due to particular social conditions such as poverty or disadvantage and 'treatments' that are provided by the proposed policy solutions (Scheurich, 1994). This implies a rational, objective and linear approach to policy making that is based on evidence and undisputable facts. However, Scheurich (1994) proposes new ways of thinking about policy based on Foucauldian ideas. He argues that both educational and social problems and the range of possible solutions are all socially constructed and open to further question and analysis.

Similarly, Hyatt (2013, 836) sees policy making as 'an arena for struggle over meaning' with policies being the 'outcome of these struggles'. Policy documents can then be seen as encapsulating particular ideological positions within their texts and therefore, by deconstructing and decoding these texts, it is possible to uncover the underlying ideologies in policy problems or drivers.

To understand policy drivers, it is helpful to consider the ways in which policies are justified or warranted (Hyatt, 2013). Key themes in the justification for educational policy were identified by Cochren-Smith and Fries (2001) as being accountability, evidentiary and political warrants and I will return to these themes in relation to early

years curriculum policy shortly, but Ietcu-Fairclough (2008) likens the strategy of political policy legitimation to ‘strategic manoeuvring’ as policy makers attempt to meet differing political demands and also appeal to the electorate. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu, she argues that this could be seen as a ‘*double* political game, a game of democratic representation and a game of power’ (2008, 399).

Post-structuralist theorists acknowledge that individual understandings of the world are shaped by different experiences and cultural contexts (MacNaughton, 2005) and therefore by taking a post-structuralist approach, it is possible to challenge the particular view or ideology and associated truth claims that are being presented in policy documents. Similarly, post-structuralist approaches enable the policy analyst to challenge the power games outlined above by identifying whose knowledge is represented, privileged or excluded and who decides what knowledge is valued (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). In early childhood curriculum policy, much of this power is exercised through policy levers which Steer, et al. (2007, 177) define as:

...instruments that the state has at its disposal to direct, manage and shape change in public services...functional mechanisms through which government and its agencies seek to implement policies.

Coffield et al.(2007, 728) identify five important educational policy levers as ‘funding, targets, initiatives, planning and inspection’ which are all reflected in early years policy. From a post-structuralist perspective it is important to recognise that these policy levers have the potential to shape how we think, who we are and how we behave by creating particular discourses (Ball, 2013; MacNaughton, 2005). These socially constructed discourses and modes of legitimation are presented as being neutral, ‘taken for granted’ or ‘common sense’ and through a process of ‘naturalisation’, policy comes to define what is regarded as ‘normal’ or morally right and what else is considered marginal or

deviant (Hyatt, 2013, 840). However, these discourses represent particular value positions and are powerful policy drivers that are created and sustained through various policy texts and practices (Hyatt, 2013; MacNaughton, 2005). Therefore, it is important to critically analyse policy discourses to uncover the relations of power that shape the ways in which children are constructed within society.

### **The child as future citizen**

National governments tend to see children in terms of their contribution as future citizens and judge the quality and effectiveness of their educational interventions from an economic perspective (Logan, 2018; OECD, 2017b). Similarly, Penn (2002) cites the World Bank's neoliberal interpretation of early childhood and application of Western ideas of developmentally appropriate practice as an example of the global homogenisation of young children's experiences.

In the UK, the English Department for Education's proposals for improvements in early years qualifications argued that 'More great childcare is vital to ensuring we can compete in the global race, by helping parents back to work and readying children for school and, eventually, employment' (DfE, 2013, 6). Human capital theory suggests that such an investment in early childhood education will be outweighed by children's increased earnings in adulthood and the contribution that they will make to the economy in later life (MacNaughton, 2005; Penn, 2002). Therefore, effective or high quality provision is intended to provide a good return on the initial financial investment and the earlier that children meet expected outcomes the better.

Ball (1997) suggests that this style of quality improvement has been the focus of public sector reform since the 1980s and that policy makers have tended to approach this through commercial models of management whereby school leaders achieve the policy

aims by ensuring their employees hold the same core values as the whole organisation. Teachers would then be empowered to take individual responsibility for their own practice and required to demonstrate their commitment and professional competence through their personal thoughts and feelings regarding the agreed pedagogical approaches as well as the overall aims for early education. Those who do not do so would be regarded as being ineffective and suffer the consequences in terms of their career progression or future in the profession. The political expectation of teacher professionalism is then replaced by autonomy, accountability and competition between individual practitioners (Ball, 1997). Ball describes this as policy makers 'steering at a distance' and he argues that these commercial models of quality management produce the 'micro-disciplinary practices' (1997, 26) that can be seen in the reporting of assessment results, inspections, school league tables, observations and performance management systems for teachers. Ball (2016, 1133) argues that this creates a 'regime of numbers' rather than a values-based, professional approach to education.

Traditional approaches to the early years curriculum do not fit easily within this economic, data driven view of quality and this has led to a growing discourse that views existing, more play-based, holistic approaches to early years education with their focus on children's individual interests, as being laissez-faire and requiring modernisation (Wood & Hedges, 2016). This tension appears to have been a constant and growing concern throughout more recent early years curriculum policy with an erosion of opportunities for child-initiated play activities in a curriculum document that is titled 'Setting the Standards for Learning...' (DfE, 2017b, 9).

### **The Universal Child**

A further method of justifying policy involves an 'evidentiary warrant' (Cochren-Smith

and Fries, 2001, 4). Here, policy makers offer evidence of how young children learn and how this impacts on their future development on the basis of what are presented as scientific facts or ‘truths’ (Ball, 2016). Therefore, it is not surprising that when Dame Clare Tickell was asked to review the existing English early years curriculum in 2011, she stated that ‘I should ensure that my review was evidence-led, building on what works well in the current EYFS, and improving those areas that are causing problems’ (p.2). This focus on ‘what works’ demonstrates the business-like, economic model of quality outlined above while the desire for scientific evidence is clearly apparent.

Developmental evidence is mainly derived from psychology, biology, genetics or neuroscience using largely positivist methodologies such as observation, experiments and randomised controlled trials (Wood & Hedges, 2016). As a result, policy is then informed by what is often highly specific and sometimes contradictory research literature on a ‘pick and mix’ basis’ (Penn, 2002, 126). These political and developmental truths are underpinned by the basic assumption that all children in all cultures are largely the same and follow the same patterns of development and this results in lists of developmental ages and stages, tick lists, ratings scales and other norms through which all young children can be understood (Wood & Hedges, 2016).

Developmental psychology has also become central in early years philosophy and practice (Burman, 2017) and it is so well established that it forms an essential element for all early childhood pedagogies. Consequently, it has come to determine what is considered to be developmentally appropriate practice and what is not and therefore, developmental truths determine how early years practitioners should think, feel and act in order to be successful educators (Osgood, 2006). Furthermore, inspection regimes, performance management systems and assessment practices act as micro-disciplinary practices that make it difficult for practitioners to challenge or question these truths



(Ball, 2016; MacNaughton, 2005).

A key example of the influence of developmental psychology on policy and practice stems from the inclusion of an appendix to the curriculum guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage (DCSF, 2007, 24) headed 'Areas of Learning and Development'. This list of 'ages and stages' documents what is generally expected of children within narrow age bands of several months and then what is appropriate for adults to do in order to support each age group. Without any discussion of individual needs or developmental pathways, this created a particular model of the normal child, the abnormal child and the delayed child (MacNaughton, 2005). This homogenised view of childhood risks labelling of children who do not follow the standardised developmental pattern as being in deficit at a very early age, together with the targeting of services for children whose 'progress is less than expected' (DfE, 2017c, 10). From a policy maker's perspective any failure to meet the agreed developmental goals is seen as a failure on the part of the child, the family or the practitioner rather than an overly narrow and standardised view of what the goals should be in the first place.

However, these officially sanctioned developmental truths are not neutral or scientifically established. They are socially constructed from the perspective of largely affluent, white, industrialised societies and research has demonstrated that the stages of development cannot be applied to all countries and cultures or begin to address the complexity of young children's learning (Burman, 2017; Penn, 2002). When used to inform policy levers, developmental psychology creates dominant and authoritative discourses that combine to form a 'regime of truth' (MacNaughton, 2005) that normalises and standardises the child (Burman, 2017). The ages and stages model suggests that children's development is linear and predictable. It homogenises development, does not allow for children's individual interests or abilities and does not

take them as far as they might go in terms of understanding curricular content (Hatch, 2012). Instead it produces a deficit model where practitioners are looking for what is missing from the next developmental stage and then teaching becomes a technical matter of finding ways to get children there as quickly as possible. Consequently, the adult's desire to meet curricular requirements takes precedence over children's own individual needs and interests (Wood & Hedges, 2016) and this causes further tensions as well as raising questions about what might replace developmental approaches in curriculum policy to create more appropriate pedagogies.

### **Early years pedagogy**

Brooker, Blaise and Edwards (2014) argue that early childhood pedagogies have always drawn on a wide variety of ideological and theoretical perspectives to inform the curriculum, with play being a key medium for learning. However, play is individual, unpredictable, non-linear and difficult to define in policy documents. The 2017 curriculum states that it 'must be implemented through planned purposeful play and through a mix of adult-led and child-initiated activity' (DfE, 2017c, 6), although there is no explanation of what 'planned and purposeful play' might look like in practice and the balance between adult and child-initiated activity is qualified by a further statement that:

As children grow older, and as their development allows, it is expected that the balance will gradually shift towards more activities led by adults, to help children prepare for more formal learning, ready for Year 1 (p.6)

It might be concluded that the policy driver of school readiness is combining with developmental psychology to shape the curriculum and privilege the adult agenda by standardising the means through which young children are able to learn. The unintended

consequences of this are likely to be further limitations on children's independence, creativity and freedom of expression as well as their opportunity to direct their own learning. Although the basic principle of child-led, play-based learning initially appears to be supported by the current curriculum policy document, there are no real policy levers to ensure its implementation or prioritise it over other ideologies and therefore individual children are increasingly expected to conform to a standardised, adult-led agenda.

### **The 'schoolified' child**

Cochren-Smith and Fries (2001) identify a third warrant for educational policy as accountability. This stems from the neoliberal drivers of improving quality, standards and cost effectiveness, all of which are inspected and regulated in England by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) who recently stated that:

For too many children... their Reception Year is a missed opportunity that can leave them exposed to all the painful and unnecessary consequences of falling behind their peers (2017, 4)

The emotive language in this statement evokes a notion of inclusion and 'common sense' because no practitioner would want to see the children in their care 'in pain' and 'falling behind' but it also implies that there are standardised expectations and outcomes of early years education that can be measured and compared. Consequently, the requirement for accountability has resulted in policy levers such as league tables, the statistical analysis of children's progress against a set of prescribed learning goals (DfE, 2017a) and proposals for the reintroduction of baseline assessment (DfE, 2017b) the purpose of which was to create 'an accountability measure of the relative progress of a

cohort of children through primary school' (DfE, 2014, 1). Therefore, it appears that the political desire for accountability is being prioritised over the individual patterns of children's development and prior experiences and the result is a lack of respect for their rights, as autonomous human beings, to receive an education that meets their individual needs.

Furthermore, the more recent review of primary and early years assessment (DfE, 2017b) makes it clear that any new baseline assessment will be in the form of a test rather than an observational assessment that is carried out over time. This is despite the alternative argument that observation provides a more accurate and rounded view of children's skills and abilities and it appears to contradict research that shows there is no evidence that baseline tests are accurate predictors of future expected progress (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2018). Again this demonstrates that one perspective about suitable methods of assessment and accountability measures is being privileged while other possible discourses are being silenced.

Further accountability measures are based on international comparisons as policy makers aim to improve economic competitiveness by fighting for higher places in international league tables (Rivzi & Lingard, 2010). In early years this will include England's participation in the OECD (2017a) International Early Learning and Child Well-being study as policy makers collect increasing amounts of data on the effectiveness of early years education. This constant need for yet more data has created what Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2007) describe as a climate of performativity in which policy levers act as a means of control over pedagogy and the curriculum and therefore it becomes difficult for individual teachers to challenge them without putting their own careers or opportunities for progression at risk (Ball, 2016; MacNaughton, 2005). As one teacher commented:

In this game, you gotta play the game. If you're being judged on a score – teach to it – you're a fool if you don't. You must teach to the test – that's the agenda.  
(Teacher, Northside cited in Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2018, 50).

Bradbury and Roberts Holmes (2018) go on to demonstrate how this 'datafication' of schools and early years settings affects everyday practice and impacts on young children's identities, relationships and individual learning. Their research shows how the data driven culture acts as a form 'of surveillance and can be theorised as disciplinary power in Foucault's terms' (p.23) and they argue that it creates an image of children as 'robots' or 'sausages' on the 'conveyor belt of education' (p.65).

Policy makers have frequently argued that accountability measures and reform are necessary in order to ensure school readiness and improve social mobility (DfE, 2017b, 2017c, Tickell, 2011). Cronin, Mulhaney and Pearson (2017) argue that school readiness has become another dominant discourse in early years education. They claim that this is at the expense of the social, emotional and intellectual needs of individual children and as with the earlier image of the child as a future citizen, it can be related to neoliberal principles of marketization and globalisation (Logan, 2018; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). However, school readiness is interpreted differently by the various stakeholders in education. For example, Dockett and Perry (2002) reported that teachers tended to focus on the specific school context, parents were more concerned with their children's well-being, whether they were happy and able to make friends, while children themselves were keen to do the right thing and make friends. Therefore, it could be argued that school readiness is a socially constructed concept with a range of possible meanings rather than a single measurable standard or level. However, this did not deter Sir Michael Wilshaw then Head of Ofsted from stating that:

Every parent should be issued with a simple checklist of skills children should master by the age of five, including toilet training, putting on a coat and shoes and talking in sentences

and claiming that:

...many middle class parents 'intuitively' raise their children well but large numbers of poor families lack the ability to pass on vital life skills (Paton, 2014).

It would appear then, that the dominant discourse of school readiness is being extended to define what counts as good parenting and what does not (Simpson, Lumsden & McDowall Clark, 2015), as well as standardising the expectations for young children. These expectations are narrowed even further when the driver of school readiness is combined with the principles of accountability and testing.

In a report about the balance between child-initiated and adult-led activities Ofsted argued that:

For too many children, the foundations for a successful start to their education are weak. In 2014, around two fifths of children did not have the essential skills needed to reach a good level of development by the age of five. Worryingly, in our most deprived communities, the outcomes were much worse. Less than half of all disadvantaged children had the skills needed to secure a positive start to school (2015, 4).

These statistics were obtained from the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile results which are based on teacher assessments of children's progress against the seventeen learning goals for the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). Over the last decade, early years settings have been required to report their profile results to the Department for Education for statistical analysis and this provides the data for the calculation of the percentage of children achieving a 'good level of development' (DfE,

2017a). However, only the prime areas of ‘communication and language’, ‘physical development’ and ‘personal, social and emotional development’ are included in the calculation together with literacy and mathematics (DfE, 2017a) presenting a particular view of what is expected of children at the end of the EYFS. This is based on a narrow set of predetermined outcomes and it does not acknowledge children’s cultural backgrounds or prior learning experiences. Children from the most deprived backgrounds are unlikely to have access to the resources that are available to their middle-class peers and their families may not be aware of the educational expectations of the EYFS learning goals (Penn, 2002). Perhaps this might explain why these children did not perform as well as their peers in the EYFS Profile and why the measures themselves might be acting against, rather than for the principles of inclusion.

As the percentages of children achieving a ‘good level of development’ are published nationally and frequently used as the measure of quality in early years education (DfE, 2017a) it is likely that school leaders and individual practitioners will be required to focus only on the learning outcomes that are included in the assessment (Biesta, 2010) producing a narrowed curriculum with a technical, skills-based approach. Yet in an earlier report from Ofsted it is argued that:

Early education is about every aspect of a child’s development. It is about more than imparting knowledge. It is about providing a wide range of experiences and opportunities so that every area of development receives attention. (Ofsted, 2015, 8)

The apparently growing policy focus on literacy and mathematics appears to reflect an increasing political desire to make clearer links between the EYFS and the Key Stage 1 curriculum as well as to introduce a more formal approach to early years education (DfE, 2017b, 2017c; Ofsted, 2017; Tickell, 2011). For example, in their report on the

curriculum in Reception classes, Ofsted (2017) analysed their findings from visits to schools that they had judged to be 'good' and concluded that 'headteachers made sure that their curriculum was fit for purpose, so that children were equipped to meet the challenges of Year 1 and beyond' (p.4) and four of their five recommendations for schools were concerned with the teaching of literacy and numeracy. While these subjects are clearly important, they are not the main purpose of the Reception year and many practitioners would argue that the development of social skills and positive learning dispositions would be more appropriate aims.

Although curriculum policy (DfE, 2017c) acknowledges the role of play-based learning in the development of children's social skills and learning dispositions, recent policy drivers, including the Ofsted report (2017) cited above, demonstrate further tensions between the ideological drivers for early education and the desire for accountability and performance measures that can be published in a competitive, market-based system.

Therefore, it could be concluded that policy has contributed to a dominant discourse of school readiness that acts as regime of truth and shapes what it means to be an effective early years practitioner (MacNaughton, 2005). It limits children's experiences of early education and does not recognise their individual agency, cultural backgrounds, prior experiences, individual talents and capabilities (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2013).

Therefore, it could be argued that current early years policy has led to a 'schoolification' of early childhood (Open EYE Campaign, 2011, 96; Jensen, Brostrom & Hansen, 2010, 252). It privileges adult agendas of finding 'what works' (Biesta, 2010) in rushing to meet the next target and compete in the global market. It seems then, that policy levers and drivers are focused on performance data and competitiveness at the expense of young children's rights and educational experiences.



## **The Unique Child**

The discourse of school readiness is presented as an argument for inclusion with frequent references to children from disadvantaged families not being as school ready as their peers, as in the statement above from Ofsted (2015, 4). Cochren-Smith and Fries (2001) identify this as a ‘political warrant’ in which the proposed policy is presented as something that is for the public good, promoting freedom, inclusion and social justice and justifying considerable expenditure on early childhood education with increased opportunities for early intervention (Cronin, Mulhaney & Pearson, 2017). However, the standardised approach to readiness fails to recognise that children do not have equal prior experiences or backgrounds and they do not all reach predetermined developmental goals at the same time (Burman, 2017; MacNaughton, 2005). Furthermore, policy makers are unlikely to be successful in addressing the vast and complex issues of deprivation and inequality through early education alone (Penn, 2002).

The political driver for inclusion has been aligned with traditional early years practice through the principles of the EYFS which are grouped into the four themes of ‘positive relationships’, ‘enabling environments’, ‘learning and development’, and importantly for this analysis, ‘a unique child’ (DfE, 2017c, 6). This principle of the ‘unique child’ recognises young children as individuals and promotes inclusion. However, in practice it is challenging to bring these principles together into one coherent curriculum policy that respects young children’s individual agency, needs and interests while addressing the political desire for accountability, competitiveness and a narrow interpretation of school readiness. Therefore, the early labelling of children as being in deficit and the resulting intervention strategies actually act against inclusion and instead, highlight further tensions between the drivers, or curricular goals, in policy frameworks and

children's own interests.

### **Alternative curricular discourses and children's agency**

It is frequently argued that effective pedagogy requires a balance of adult and child-led learning and in their report on this topic Ofsted acknowledge that:

The most skilled adults we saw during our visits made these decisions almost automatically. They combined a deep understanding of each child in their care with a thorough understanding of child development and an expert level of subject knowledge. They could identify quickly the exact, small steps to continue a child's learning journey (Ofsted 2015, 14)

This requirement for a 'deep understanding' demands a willingness to listen to children in order to attend to the *processes* of their learning and the diversity of their individual needs. However, there are tensions between such a climate of listening and the existing demands of school-centred outcomes and targets. In order to address these tensions, policy makers might look towards what Dahlberg (2009, 229) describes as the 'social pedagogic' approaches of the Nordic countries and central Europe where policy is more localised and the focus is on social development and play 'with an accent on children's agency'. Here, a listening pedagogy is understood as 'a culture and an ethic, a continuous process and relationship' (Clark, Kjørholt & Moss, 2005, 13).

Similarly, in New Zealand, the importance of acknowledging the different ways and pace at which children learn has recently led to the removal of the existing National Standards in favour of a focus on the 'progress and achievement of all children across the wider New Zealand Curriculum and Te Marautanga o Aotearoa' (Ministry of Education, 2017, 1). Furthermore, in England early years lobby groups have argued for a broad-based curriculum that supports children's learning dispositions (Early Education, 2018) and a 'reiteration of the interconnected nature of young children's

development' (TACTYC, 2017).

These alternative curricular approaches represent a commitment to very different policy drivers, and consequently, they have the potential to address existing tensions by producing new curriculum policy initiatives that are based on an image of the child as a competent social actor and the subject of rights.

Biesta (2010) questions what educators themselves might hope to achieve and how they might reach such outcomes as he calls for a more values-based approach. In early childhood this would require practitioners to question who has the power to reduce or limit opportunities for children's self-directed activity, their individual agency, motivation, creativity and well-being and to present alternative views of curriculum policy where early childhood is regarded as an important stage in its own right, with its own pedagogical approaches, rather than as preparation for later life.

However, the discussion above has demonstrated that practitioners must 'play the game' and comply with accountability requirements in order to protect their careers and ultimately, their source of income. Consequently, the promotion of children's rights may challenge the rights of the practitioner who may be unwilling or unable to hand over control. Therefore it is essential that curriculum policy is developed through localised negotiation between children and adults 'as part of the currency of democratic politics rather than as truth claims professing to stand outside such messy exchanges' (Clark, Kjørholt & Moss, 2005, 177). Ultimately, a more democratic, values-based approach to policy making, in line with the United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child, would respect children's rights as competent citizens and enable them to develop a stronger more positive self-image. Surely that is the best preparation for their later success.

## **Conclusions**

In this article I have used Foucauldian principles and a poststructural lens to critically analyse policy in early childhood education. I have shown how policy drivers and levers have combined to create a dominant discourse that views young children as future citizens with the potential to contribute to the economy and compete in the global market. A reliance on developmental psychology as the main source of evidence to justify policy making decisions about expected levels of achievement has led to developmental truths that create a uniform view of children as being the same regardless of their individual cultural backgrounds, talents and experiences. Furthermore, the escalating desire for competition, accountability measures and the collection of more and more data have led to a regime of truth about what constitutes effective pedagogical practice, good parenting and normal levels of children's development in the early years.

However, MacNaughton (2005, 4) draws on the work of Foucault to remind us that there is no 'one truth' and 'what we hold to be true about child development or early childhood curriculum is fiction created by truth games'. By privileging particular political, social and economic constructs of young children, policy makers are silencing other understandings that view children as unique individuals with differing backgrounds, prior experiences, ways of learning, rates of development, interests, talents and abilities. These cannot and should not be standardised and reduced to single numbers on a league table and here lies the fundamental tension between current curriculum policy and traditional early years practice.

This should not be seen as the only way that things have to be and Foucault (1988) argues that practitioners can refuse to naturalise these relations of power and can disrupt existing regimes of truth by choosing a more democratic, values-based approach to

early childhood education that reflects their own truths and respects children as unique, capable and autonomous human beings.

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