Neoliberalism and government responses to Covid-19: Ramifications for early childhood education and care

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The Covid-19 pandemic has created an opportunity to examine the initial policies developed by Australian, Canadian, English, German, Greek and Irish governments to limit the spread of the virus. This has revealed governments' conceptualisation of the early childhood sector and its workforce. This paper argues that neoliberal ideology and neoliberal imaginaries have already influenced the early childhood sector globally. During the pandemic, the choices that governments made at the outset of the pandemic has allowed their priorities and underlying ideology to be more transparent. Using an ethnographic methodology, early childhood researchers from each of the six countries, examined their individual governments policy responses and the effects on the early childhood sector during its initial months (between March and June 2020). The authors consider the extent to which this may have implications for the sector in how it should continue its ongoing pursuit of professionalisation of the sector.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic created an opportunity to examine how the initial policies developed by Australian, Canadian, English, German, Greek and Irish governments to limit transmission of the virus illuminate their perceptions about a range of matters. These include their perceptions of young children and their place in society and also of their parents, carers and educators. The initial policies examined in this paper focus upon the period from March to June 2020. The paper first explores what we are arguing is 'neoliberalism', and the extent to which it has been successful in creating social imaginaries (Taylor, 2003) that have global effects. In examining neoliberal ideology, we argue that its associated social imaginaries have consequences for the direction taken by the early childhood care and education (ECEC) sector. The paper then explores the way that governments responded to an unprecedented emergency; Covid-19, the decisions they made, and how their choices and priorities have exposed their underlying ideologies.

Finally, the paper explores what this might mean for pursuing routes to professionalism for the ECEC workforce.

Social imaginaries in education created by neoliberal discourse

Social imaginaries are the ideals, symbols, laws and institutions through which people imagine their social world (Taylor, 2003). In regards to neoliberal ideology, Mirowski (2014), a historian of political economic thought, saw such outcomes as the result of a deliberate political project of the Mont Pelerin society. He describes this as a 'neoliberal thought collective', founded by Friedrich Hayek, and intimately linked with Milton Friedman, from The Chicago School of Economics. We argue that their 'project' has become increasingly influential over the last 60 years. For education therefore, the economic policies and popularising writings of Milton Friedman, denigrating public education and arguing for private choice and competition, and his associated collaborators, Heckman and Becker, arguing for the valuing of education in terms of the future economic potential of the individual child have had far reaching and damaging consequences. These extend to early childhood, and to conceptualisations of both education and care.

Thus, it can be argued that the 'neoliberal thought collective' has been successful in fashioning a neoliberal social imaginary, where education is strongly located within the human capital/economic discourse (Friedman, 1962; Becker, 1964; Friedman & Friedman, 1980), and one which positions young children as human capital (Boyden & Dercon, 2012; García et al., 2018; Heckman, 2018). In this discourse, appropriate investment early in life increases the chances of creating employable citizens of the future whose labour can be exploited and whose need for employment and income offers opportunities for life-long control and subjugation (Bourassa, 2019). In a scathing, but amusingly written article, Paul Taylor (2003) warned of the risk in narrowing education to simply producing vocational (employment) outcomes. Yet there are many alternative ways of viewing children (e.g., possessors of the right to have a quality life now, possessors of the right to quality ECEC), instead of positioning them as future human capital. However, neoliberal discourse does not prioritise these alternative perspectives (Lackéus, 2017), which policy makers tend to ignore when making and implementing policy decisions (see Vandenbroeck, 2020).

Exploring the beliefs embedded in the writings and practices of authors such as Lackéus (2017), Taylor (2003) and Vandenbroeck (2017), it can be argued that the neoliberal social imaginary reifies inequality. Such reifying can be understood as, a taken for granted and thus often unacknowledged, belief that inequality between individuals is both innate and inevitable. While Anissimov (2013) argued it is one of the key platforms of neoliberalism, we suggest, it is evident from the outset in the writings of Hayek and Friedman. Hayek (1944) in *The road to serfdom* argued:

> There will always exist inequalities which will appear unjust to those who suffer from
> them, disappointments which will appear unmerited, and strokes of misfortune which
> those hit have not deserved (in Caldwell, 2007, p. 137).

Critically, Bettache, Chiu and Beattie (2020, p. 217) contended that neoliberalism condones "social inequality by attributing the presence of social hierarchy to innate individual differences (e.g. IQ) and acquired traits". They further argued that:

> This attribution style also serves to legitimize the suffering of structurally disadvantaged groups, such as minorities or people with mental health problems (p. 217).

Trickle-down economics (i.e., supply side economics), the approach associated with the neoliberalism of Friedmans' Chicago School firmly entrenches power with those who hold status and wealth. The state supports the elite because it is posited that the more wealth they generate through their businesses, the more they are likely to offer employment to those less advantaged, removing any obligation from the state to provide extensive welfare services (Sims, 2020). Because of this focus, prior to the pandemic, inequality across much of the Western world was greater than had been evident in at least the past 100 years (Hartwich & Becker, 2019; ACOSS and UNSW Sydney, 2018; Green, Riddell & St Hilaire, 2017; Kakana, Roussi-Vergou, Mavidou, Garagouni-Areou et al., 2017; Watts, 2017; Voulgari, Androusou, Tsafos, Avgitidou & Kakana, 2016). In his principles of reactionary thought, Anissimov (2013, p. 1) captured this idea, "People are not equal. They never will be. We reject equality in all its forms."

Translation of this refusal to recognise systemic inequality into practice means that many countries prioritise equality of access. In education systems, therefore, the assumption is that as long as all children are offered the same learning opportunities, they ought to achieve the same outcomes. Additionally, standardisation of curricula and pedagogy is seen as desirable, and adjustments designed to meet individual learning needs are commonly discouraged as the following examples from selected countries show.

Many years ago, it was identified that the most effective Australian Indigenous services were those that did not follow the 'white fellas' recipe, but rather used culturally appropriate strategies to engage families and children (Sims, Saggers & Frances, 2012; Sims, Saggers, Hutchins, Guilfoyle et al., 2008). Despite this, government policy has continued to pressure Indigenous services to conform to mainstream ECEC funding programs (Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, 2012). Likewise, in Ireland, while well intentioned, the Government has adopted a one size fits all approach to funding ECEC (see the National Childcare Scheme, Ireland, n.d.). The recent furore in England concerning the provision of A-level grades to students unable to sit exams because of the pandemic revealed similar governmental ideological assumptions in operation in relation to schools. Supposedly to stop grade inflation, in the absence of exam results, the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (OFQUAL) was exposed as using an algorithm to standardise grades, which inflated the results for children in small classes. Given that private schools were more likely to have smaller classes than state schools, these inflated results disadvantaged the poorest children. The justification for using this algorithm was that a school could not achieve better results than they had the previous year. In this instance, the public's challenges prevailed in that the English Department for Education (DFE), and OFQUAL, backtracked to the extent that they had to recognise teachers' expertise and use teachers' predicted grades (Porter, 2020). Thus,

there is the risk that such practices as arguing for standardisation on the grounds of fairness, but underpinned by the same refusal to recognise systematic structural inequalities, such as poverty, may spill over into the ECEC sector.

Across individual countries, the neoliberal imaginary prioritises standardisation (in the name of quality control) over choice and flexibility, with a consequence that inequality of outcomes increases. The further consequence is that this approach implicitly denies the need for teachers and pedagogues with autonomy, who are able to make judgments based on their own expertise and experience, that is as 'professionals'.

Arguably, under the neoliberal discourse, ECEC professionals, are the "tools" used to shape children in the direction of these desirable outcomes (Woodrow & Press, 2007); that is future employees who accept inequality as part of the natural order. They are, in fact, the "Taylorist machine producing skills (rather than educated communities) to benefit the nation in the international competition" (Millei & Jones, 2020, p. 14). As the human capital needed to deliver the product (employment-ready graduates whose success is founded on the creation of school-ready young children), educators' work becomes increasingly standardised and controlled (Sims, 2017). As noted by Taylor (2003, p.16) this approach creates graduates whose skills are quickly outdated, and whose ability to think creatively, and to problem solve miss the target "with an amnesiac's sense of timing and the marksmanship of Mr Magoo".

In a range of contexts, national curricula identify acceptable knowledge, and accreditation systems that police teaching and learning to ensure that acceptable knowledge is taught and assessed. For example, see Ireland's professional award criteria and guidelines for initial professional education for the early learning and care sector (DCYA, 2019). In other contexts (e.g., England) private schools and 'free' schools can determine their own curricula and operate their own systems for determining what students are required to learn, whereas, state-maintained schools cannot. Accordingly, children from advantaged families are more likely to have individual learning needs met through flexible curricula and pedagogy.

In the ECEC sector, a technicist idea of play is evident in the early years foundation stage, in prioritising desired learning outcomes (Wood, 2014) and assessment itself becomes increasingly standardised to ensure that all children achieve norm-referenced outcomes. The 'technicist' nature of teaching, as argued earlier, is prioritised in neoliberal discourse. It thus becomes the social imaginary context in which ECEC also attempts to locate itself. This is to pursue a version of professionalisation based uncritically on a historical version of a teaching profession, aspired to as being autonomous, but which increasingly may no longer be so. For example, we have seen increasing numbers of national curricula, accreditation systems monitoring quality service provision, and accreditation systems specifying and policing pre-service qualification content, including an international early learning study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2020). As discussed later, should the ECEC sector pursue professionalism via the neoliberal imaginary, it actively accepts this positioning. It is our contention that this is unacceptable, and that we need to see the pandemic as a wake-up call; an opportunity to

explore other options where children are not considered expendable and increased inequality is not considered an appropriate price to pay.

Methodology

This paper is underpinned by an interpretivist ontology. In adopting this stance, we posit that reality is dependent on the interpretation and understanding of each person. Using our social constructivist epistemology (Owen, 1992), we hold that we all create our own truth, influenced by the world around us and, our own experiences. We share our experiences amongst our Special Interest Group of researchers through the process of collaborative auto-ethnography, which "acknowledges the social and communal nature of academic meaning making" (Tuinamuana, Bentley-Williams & Yoo, 2019, p.225). In this way,

> We contribute unique and autobiographical perspective to a multi-voice text. This combination of voices can create rich, complex and layered texts as individual voices are interrogated within a community of practitioners (Tuinamuana et al., 2019, p. 225).

This auto-ethnographic approach was enacted through the following process:

- The three convenors of the EECERA Professionalism Special Interest Group (P-SIG) (EECERA, 2022) brainstormed some key reflective questions to create a short survey, seeking publicly available information about each government's response to Covid-19 in ECEC, and the co-researcher's reflection on that response;
- P-SIG members from each country represented in the SIG were approached to determine their willingness to become co-researchers/team members in the project;
- All co-researchers provided their response (via email) to the initial survey questions;
- The three convenors of the EECERA P-SIG identified themes, and developed a draft paper from the data provided that fit with the major themes (described in more detail later in this section);
- Thought was given to ensure each country was represented in some of the themes, depending on the data provided;
- The draft paper was circulated to all co-researchers and extensive feedback requested;
- Feedback was collated and the paper recirculated to all team members. This iterative process continued until all co-researchers indicated their voice was appropriately presented and they were satisfied with the paper.

As illustrated, collaborative auto-ethnographic research is multi-vocal, relational and democratic (Hernandez, Chang & Ngunjiri, 2017). As such, each team member is integrally involved in providing data and reporting the results of their collaboration. While neither auto-ethnography (the work of one researcher) nor collaborative auto-ethnography are usually subject to a formal ethical approval process, research must be undertaken ethically (Winkler, 2018). The concept of relational ethics (Ellis, 2007), which requires that everyone involved in the research study is to be treated with respect and dignity, is useful here. In this project, team members were invited to participate, and chose freely whether they wished to do so. There were no power imbalances between team members in that no one was in any formal supervisory position or position of power in relation to anyone else

in the team. At all stages, team members were free to withdraw without reason or penalty. Should any member choose to withdraw, it was agreed at the outset that any data provided would be excluded from the paper. All co-researchers were involved in providing data and constructing the paper. As mentioned, the consultation process continued until all were comfortable with the paper. Although much of the data provided (e.g., government directives and policy initiatives) was publicly available, thus not subject to ethical constraints, the individual reflections and interpretations of that data are intellectual property owned by each of the co-researchers.

In analysing the data provided (co-researchers reflective answers to the survey question), a process of constant comparison (Glaser, 1965) was used. This involved first examining the data for information that linked to neoliberal social imaginaries. These imaginaries are presented in the introduction above and involved themes relating to children and human capital, and parents as employee human capital. Having parsed the data for themes relating to neoliberal social imaginaries, the data was then re-examined for any other themes, and in particular themes that contradicted neoliberal social imaginaries.

The Lincoln and Guba (1985) criteria for research rigour and trustworthiness were used. To ensure credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, we engaged in extensive member checking, as outlined in the research process above. Triangulation of themes was established through comparison across the data from different countries, as well as comparison with the extant literature.

Findings and discussion

Closures and lockdown: Prioritising human capital

Using the lens of neoliberal imaginaries, it appears that across the countries included in this paper (Australia, Canada, Germany, Greece, Ireland, England) government responses to the pandemic, focused primarily upon supporting the immediately necessary human capital (essential or key workers) already in the workforce. But also taking a neoliberal approach in seeing them as interchangeable, genderless individuals, as in Becker's (1981) view, regarding 'households' as an interchangeable category with 'individuals', in his *Treatise on the Family*.

In this respect, in March 2020, a number of countries (e.g. Canada, Germany and Australia) closed access to ECEC services except for the children of essential workers. In contrast, all ECEC services closed with immediate effect in Greece and Ireland on 11-12 March 2020, respectively. Additionally, in some of the compared countries, children identified as vulnerable, were able to attend their ECEC service (either with [Germany] or without [England] a break in attendance). In some contexts, this also depended on the type of service operating. For example, in England most private day care and nursery services closed but some nursery provision in schools remained open. Therefore, while children classified as vulnerable were entitled to a place, not all eligible families were able to find a place that would accept their child(ren). Additionally, a lack of clarity as to the definition of vulnerability (mirrored in other countries such as Germany) contributed to

the confusion around who could, or could not, access a place and who could actually achieve their rightful access.

At a later stage, in Canada and Australia, ECEC settings received special funding to enable them to remain open for children of essential workers. Thus, ensuring their viability while supporting smaller numbers of children. Likewise, in Ireland, the Government launched a *Temporary Childcare Scheme for Essential Health Workers* on 7 May 2020. The scheme was scrapped one week later as only six ECEC services had signed up (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Ireland, 2020). Consequently, all ECEC services remained closed in Ireland until 29 June 2020.

In England, a Sutton Trust research briefing suggested that as many as two thirds of early years services were closed in April and May 2020 (Pascal et al., 2020). Children of essential workers may therefore have had to attend a different service than their normal; a transition unlikely to have supported their ongoing learning and creating further stress during other societal upheavals. As such, governments in some countries overlooked what could be argued are children's rights to education and care and the continuity of children's wellbeing and learning.

An exception can be noted, in Germany and England, with regard to children identified as vulnerable. While this reveals a motive following a welfare state idea, it has to be emphasised that, in Germany this was not the first group to be identified as relevant for consideration. Other children were required to remain at home where they may, or may not, have had access to stimulating learning experiences, which will be discussed further later. It appears therefore, that the neoliberal imaginaries operating across many countries prioritised the employment of essential workers and sometimes, financial support for those who were furloughed and thus, unable to work, such as in Ireland which introduced a '*Pandemic Unemployment Payment*'. Both stances reflect an economic imperative; the need to keep the economy ticking over with purchasing of essential supplies and provision of essential services, and some money available to enable families to purchase these essentials.

Valuing the ECEC workforce

The way in which staff were treated reveals how their work was perceived and valued. In the main, staff salaries continued to be paid throughout the lockdown in the compared countries. In Germany, public and clerical providers continued paying staff salaries. While some of them in return required a form of compensation, (e.g., setting the overtime hours to zero); others ensured that staff did not generate undertime hours although most of them worked from home and did not have the chance to work their regular hours. In England, while staff in the ECEC public sector continued to be paid, for the 80% of staff in the private sector, this depended on their individual employer or situation.

Some governments created a funding program providing income to workers who were no longer able to work. In Ireland for example, the sector was temporarily nationalised

(Moloney, 2020) as the Government committed to pay the salaries of educators and contributed 15 percent of staffing costs towards overheads between March and June 2020.

However, in other countries, working conditions for ECEC were far more restrictive. Some staff were unable to access government funding, such as some nursery workers in England. In Greece, both childcare units (0-4 years old) not included in primary education and kindergartens (4-6 years old) included in primary education were closed and the staff were normally paid during the pandemic, both in the public as well as in the private sector (Government of Greece, 2020).

As discussed later, many ECEC educators across the compared countries attempted to reach out to children at home, while at the same time working in their service with children who were attending. In effect, educators were working a 'double shift'. This additional work was not acknowledged in any way at the policy level. In Germany, some heads of ECEC institutions expressed the hope that, given the work undertaken by educators during this period, the pandemic would increase awareness of the importance of ECEC.

Agentic ECEC professionals

Government initiatives to support ECEC also illuminated the extent to which early childhood staff were regarded as professionals, whether they were supported by government or whether they were overlooked, or disregarded and had to rely on their own agency. As discussed here, due to a lack of Government direction or support, many ECEC staff enacted their own professional agency to support children and reach out to families.

A number of countries bolstered learning opportunities for children at home in innovative ways. In Australia, Germany and England, television stations showed more educational programs for children (e.g., BBC, 2020). In Greece, primary school children had classes offered through public television with some targeted at younger children. The Hellenic Ministry of Education & Religious Affairs (2020) estimated that throughout April 2020, 145,000 Greek children aged 4-14 participated every day in the educational television program established and implemented by the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the Institute of Educational Policy & Public Television. The Greek Ministry of Education also offered free access to its website and associated links.

Elsewhere, due to a lack of Government support, ECEC staff themselves enacted their professional agency to reach out to children and their families, partly to provide them with learning opportunities, and partly to maintain relationships with children and families. In Canada for instance, some ECEC educators created videos of themselves story-telling and singing, which were posted on social media or *YouTube* and/or emailed out to families. This enabled educators to stay connected with the children and families who were unable to attend due to setting closures or the family not fitting the essential services criteria.

In England and Australia, some children were supported with hard copy or IT learning packages. Many ECEC professionals held weekly get-togethers via *Zoom* video conferencing, as a way to connect with children and parents. In Germany, Greece and Ireland, ECEC professionals used social media (e.g., *Facebook, Messenger, Viber, WhatsApp*) to organise closed groups with the children's parents. In all instances, these actions instigated by the educators themselves were neither universal nor required. However, these alternate learning avenues occurred alongside home schooling, mainly using online resources (Gaipov & Brownhill, 2021), and working from home for many parents. Thus, adding to parental stress, and in some instances, exacerbating inequalities for children, whose participation in learning depended upon family resources: access to the Internet (not universal in many countries and not equally available to advantaged and disadvantaged families) and limited IT (e.g. one mobile device being shared between parents and children and/or IT being used by parents working at home rather than for the children accessing online lessons).

Parent's and children's vulnerability

There appeared to be little official acknowledgement by any government that parents who were required to work from home were also placed in a position of having to care for, and provide stimulating learning opportunities for children who were unable to attend their ECEC service. In Canada, female Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland acknowledged the toll the pandemic was taking on women in particular. She stated that the pandemic "is hitting mothers particularly hard" (van der Linden, 2020, p. 2). As many women took on full time care for their children and stopped their paid work (Mangen, 2020), women's participation in the Canadian workforce fell sharply (van der Linden, 2020). A similar situation was noted in Australia (Bagwell, 2020).

Like some ECEC professionals, parents too were undertaking a 'double shift' both working from home, and supporting their child's learning. Their ability to do this would vary depending on family physical, mental and emotional resources. As indicated earlier, many factors affect a family's capacity to provide a nurturing home learning environment for their young children, such as limited Internet connectivity, access to a home computer, reduced income through reduced employment, reduced or no support from other family members because of the lockdown, and limited capacity to source essentials such as food, health care and transport.

Worryingly, for some children, the home environment itself was the source of angst, with incidents of alcohol consumption and domestic violence increasing across the globe during lockdown (Doyle, 2020; Graham-Harrison, Giuffrida, Smith & Ford, 2020; McDonald, 2020; Ravens-Sieberer et al., 2022), thus increasing children's vulnerability. In the case of Canada, gender violence increased by 20 to 30 percent (Patel, 2020), with Ireland reporting similarly worrying trends (Women's Aid, Ireland, (2020). Moreover, Statistics Canada reports that Covid-19 impacted the mental health of Indigenous women in Canada (Arriagada, Hahmann & O'Donnell, 2020).

Interestingly, as mentioned earlier, in Germany and England, vulnerable children were allowed to attend ECEC programs, either with or without a break, a rare response to the pandemic that identified the risk posed by current vulnerability and, perhaps, as indicated by the neoliberal imaginary, the future human capital cost of not supporting these children. However, in other jurisdictions, vulnerability was not considered, with scant attention given to the needs and rights of young children to a safe, stimulating and nurturing learning environment. The assumption being that children at home would be able to access any online learning provision available or experience appropriate learning opportunities delivered by their families.

Conceptualising care and education

Clearly, ECEC services remained closed, with some exceptions where they were needed to provide care for children of essential workers and, in the case of England, children who were vulnerable. Indeed, where ECEC services remained open, they were reduced to their caretaking services (prioritising 'care' rather than 'developmental care' a distinction made and defined by the Office for National Statistics UK (2020).

As mentioned, Governments largely overlooked the rights of children to education as a whole. This is illustrated in Greece where class sizes were increased during the pandemic (Hellenic Ministry of Education & Religious Affairs, 2020) at a time when social distancing requirements might be perceived to require smaller classes. Moreover, parents faced an impossible situation in a time of crisis that required them to work from home and simultaneously care for their children. Interestingly, in England, the Office for National Statistics UK (2020) separated the academic learning elements of childcare (which they labelled developmental) from the social and emotional elements of care (labelled as non-developmental work), arguing that during lockdown, parents had to increase the time they spent in developmental care, but that non-developmental care time decreased as parents were no longer getting their children "ready for school and going out for recreation" (p. 3-4). Mothers were found to provide more time "carrying out non-developmental childcare such as washing, feeding and dressing children and supervision of children" (p. 4) than fathers, throughout this period. Consequently, mothers were more likely to work unsociable hours in order to fit their work commitments around their child care responsibilities.

Once again, in accordance with neoliberal imaginaries, there appeared to be little or no priority placed on the rights of children to broader support for their wellbeing, learning and development, nor on support to facilitate a home learning environment where parents had the time and energy to provide good quality learning experiences. It seems that neoliberal imaginaries created a context where government responses to the pandemic focused on economic maintenance – some level of income for those not working (with no guarantee the income level was adequate to meet needs) and the provision of essential services (i.e., food outlets and basic health care). In this context, the wellbeing of children and their families was not prioritised. Here social imaginaries followed Hayek and Friedman's neoliberal arguments that position individuals as responsible for social justice, not government or society as a whole (Caldwell, 2007).

Discussion of the implications for professionalisation of ECEC

Government responses to the pandemic highlight what are considered the key neoliberal imaginaries; imaginaries that in the past have been somewhat obscured by government rhetoric. For example, many governments around the world have spruiked the importance of ECEC, such that their documents frequently position children as future human capital (Government of Canada, 2019; Heckman, 2011; Center for Education and Workforce, 2010; Irwin, Siddiqi & Hertzman, 2007; Moore, Arefadib, Deery & West, 2017; Moss, 2013; Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2014; Strong Foundations, 2019). Yet, prior to the pandemic, funding for ECEC services was often insufficient. Ireland for instance, invests 0.1% versus the UNICEF recommended 1% of GDP (SIPTU, 2019; 2020). According to Friendly (2008, p.61) insufficient funding demonstrates "an extensive gap between what we know and what we do"

Funding had reduced in other countries over time (Learner; Smith, Sylva, Smith, Sammons & Omonigho, 2018). For example, during the three Conservative-led governments in the UK between (2010 to 2019), an All-Party Parliamentary Group, *The First 1001 days, from Conception to Age 2* (with leadership throughout from senior Conservative politicians), was set up with the explicit aim of emphasising the importance and significance of the earliest years. However, while Conservative politicians in these sessions rhetorically but seemingly hypocritically extolled the importance of ECEC, in the same period, their Government was responsible for drastic cuts to the funding of public services and, in particular, to the funding to local authorities who were responsible for providing them (Smith et al., 2018).

In Canada, where there is an absence of a common vision for early learning and care at the federal level, the provinces and territories determine the value and priority of early learning and care. While movement has been made through the signing of a *Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework*, there is much work to do to reach the goal of a national child care plan. Beach and Ferns (2015) wrote:

> ... a deeply entrenched neoliberal approach to social policy at the federal level and in
> many provinces has left child care twisting in the wind. We have seen the total absence
> of the federal government from child care funding at the provincial level, and the
> privatization of some of the few publicly delivered child care services that we have...
> (p. 55)

Thus, while neoliberal imaginaries position ECEC services as important because they provide the human capital necessary to shape children (as future employable human capital) in ways needed by the state, in a time of crisis, it reveals the narrowness of this view of children. As human capital, and as reiterated throughout this paper, in a time of crisis, children's wellbeing as persons, in their own right, was overlooked. Instead, economic imperatives took, and continue to take the foreground. Additionally, as stated earlier, expectations existed that, given the work undertaken by educators during this period, the pandemic would increase awareness of the importance of ECEC. However, rather than recognising the importance of ECEC in its own right, in keeping with

neoliberal imaginaries, the sector was recognised as a significant cog in maintaining and restarting the economy in many countries (Moloney, 2020).

We posit that we, as ECEC professionals, (regarded in the neoliberal framework as the human capital working in ECEC services) must consider what we believe are important human values, and what we believe we ought to be working towards. We argue that pursuing a path towards professionalism that accepts the neoliberal imaginary means accepting that children's rights are expendable in times of crisis such as occurred during the pandemic.

Not only are children's rights expendable, it seems that neoliberal imaginary reproduces inequality, as demonstrated for example, in the recent Asia Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (APRNEC, 2020) report. This report found that in the region, over 50% of families were experiencing high levels of stress associated with the pandemic and were struggling to cope. Most importantly, the report identified that children who were already disadvantaged (through poverty, migrant status, poor living conditions, children with special needs and those facing prejudice through gender, location, ethnicity, religion and language) were more impacted by the pandemic than other children. In particular, these children faced increased food insecurity, reduction in their families' ability to meet basic needs, increased risk of neglect, isolation and exposure to family violence. Reduced access to health care and poor sanitation compounded health risks for these children. While television and social media were the most used channels in the region for provision of information and learning resources, the most disadvantaged children and families generally had no access to these. Addressing this increasing inequality is one of the most important actions to take as nations attempt to transition out of pandemic restrictions (APRNEC, 2020).

Clearly, government responses to the pandemic have widened the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children and families. This outcome seems acceptable to some governments, as they pursue immediate economic goals at the expense of the lives of many children. We argue that these costs are antithetical to the principles upon which the ECEC profession was founded. ECEC values do not support actions that increase inequality nor do they support actions that render children unimportant. To pursue professionalism along a path that allows such outcomes is unacceptable. This means contesting strategies that have to date been acceptable by some, including standardised definitions of professional knowledge, externally imposed curricula, and monitored definitions of quality. Standards associated with a version of 'professionalism', accepted by the currently higher paid and higher status teaching workforce. We believe these should be rejected and the ECEC profession should seek another route to professionalisation.

Given the hegemony of neoliberalism, such an alternative path is not easy to find. However, in their Manifesto opposing neoliberalism, the Real Democracy Movement (2018) suggested that a key step involves returning power to workers. In challenging the existence of inequality, therefore, the way forward is not to standardise services for all, but to deliver services better targeted to each context so that local input helps shape delivery. In relation to ECEC then, decisions about curricula and quality service provision ought to

happen locally in order to find flexible and individually adaptive arrangements (e.g. Rothe, Charlie & Moyo, 2016). What might be regarded as quality ECEC provision in the remote outback of Australia, for example, could look very different from quality provision in the middle of a large metropolitan city, and different again from quality provision in the middle of a slum. Decisions about quality therefore must be made by highly trained professionals, in consultation with the local community, who have the right to use their professional knowledge and skill to make discretionary decisions. This suggests that the key initial intervention to counter neoliberal imaginaries is in the ways in which ECEC professionals are trained. This also means acknowledging "professional creativity" (Rothe, Del Negro & West, 2021) and professional agency, as an essential part of professionalism, and reflecting this in professional training.

Exposing preservice ECEC professionals to a range of different knowledge[s] builds their capacity to operate in widely different contexts and make very different decisions about their pedagogy, based on the different contexts in which they operate. One size does not fit all, and one pedagogy does not fit all different contexts. Loosening controls over what ought to be taught in pre-service ECEC qualifications, and broadening the scope of learning for pre-service students is an essential first step. Once this has been undertaken, and discretionary decision-making power shifted to the local level, it becomes possible for services to offer more relevant and appropriate learning opportunities for children and their families (as evidenced in the findings from this study). Professional ECEC workers, armed with extensive theoretical and practical understandings are then able to articulate what it is that they do and why they have chosen the pedagogical approaches they have. Power should rest with the workers who are trusted to use their extensive understandings acquired through their training and experience to offer the best possible learning opportunities to each child and family, an essential pre-requisite in any unexpected future emergency.

Conclusion

2020 brought with it the pandemic which some predict may shake up our ECEC systems so substantially that things may never return to how they were. This creates an opportunity to examine the responses to Covid-19, in the hopes that a better understanding of the social imaginaries guiding policy might influence the path to the future (Rothe et. al., 2022). We question whether ECEC should continue to pursue professionalism by accepting the current positioning of education in the neoliberal social imaginary and whether this positioning of education itself should be challenged.

Our world is full of challenges and complexities, crises and contradictions that lead daily to the deconstruction of fundamental principles such as equality, justice, individual freedom, respect, equality and democracy (Allan, 2011). ECEC educators are confronted daily with all these paradigms of challenge, at both practical and theoretical levels, facing dilemmas, gaps and disputes. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated these challenges for ECEC (Rogers, Boyd & Sims, in press). All this has a negative impact on our professional identity and professionalism. Perhaps the answer to all this contradiction and distrust of globalised society is a transformation of how we perceive fundamental

principles not as global paradigms, but as paradigms that happen in our personal environment, in local events, in the family, the community and the workplace (for example, see Lyotard as discussed in Malpas, 2003). In this context, ECEC and other levels of education could acquire meaning and respond to neoliberal narratives by emphasising theories, practices and paradigms that highlight the educational process and not just its results. Here the emphases can be shifted to processes such as problem-solving, networking and community organisation, interaction, participation, and inclusion. Multiculturalism, the existence of many and varied paradigms and identities that are constantly evolving must be our response to the various neoliberal policies and practices.

The pandemic has offered an opportunity to cut through much of government rhetoric (bullshit language as originally identified by Frankfurt, 2005) and see by actions taken, what is judged as really important. In this context, children and their rights have fallen outside the neoliberal imaginary understandings of importance. Should the ECEC sector continue to pursue professionalism via the neoliberal imaginary, it actively accepts this positioning, which is unacceptable. Given the importance of the ECEC for children's development (Mwoma, Begi & Murungi, 2018), we need to view the pandemic as a wake-up call. It has created an opportunity to explore other options where children are not considered expendable and increased inequality is not considered an appropriate price to pay.

Acknowledgements

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