



# Infant and toddler educare: A challenge to neoliberalism



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We contend that the conventions, practices and philosophies underpinning working with infants and toddlers provide an alternative way of viewing early childhood work, and such a perspective may well help to challenge the ‘wicked problem’ of neoliberalism. It is in this context that we propose that a deeper understanding of the perspectives of those professionals working with our youngest children in a range of different countries may inform a wider resistance to neoliberalism across all of early childhood. We seek, in this article, to share the voices of early childhood professionals reflecting on the manner in which they understand work with infants and toddlers, and how this relates to their understanding of issues related to education and care. We hope this exploration will lead us into further refining our argument that infant and toddler pedagogy has the potential to challenge the hegemony of neoliberalism in early childhood. Our dream is to steer early childhood away from the tyranny of standardisation, accountability and economic rationality into a space where children are valued for being, where individuality and diversity flourish, where learning academics is one (relatively unimportant) element amongst many others and where relationships and participation (and dare we say, happiness) reign supreme.

## Introduction

Around the world, there is growing concern that hegemonic neoliberalism is adversely impacting the work of those educators working with our youngest children: infants and toddlers. Nearly 10 years ago, Davies and Bansel (2007) warned that ‘the latest iteration of neoliberal discourse [was] a travesty of their early childhood ideals’ (p. 257): unfortunately, the past decade has not seen a retreat from that position. Neoliberal impacts on early childhood are many. Brogaard Clausen (2015) argued that the standardisation accompanying the neoliberal agenda limits children’s learning to what is measurable, and educators themselves are less and less able to recognise children as individual learners because curricula set standard learning outcomes as desired goals. For infants and toddlers, neoliberalism is driving a push-down curriculum which aims to standardise learning opportunities and focus on outcomes comparable to those identified in curricula designed for older children (a push-down effect on early childhood curricula). This is evident in a growing focus on teaching to tests which runs the risk of sidelining the egalitarianism that has for so long been a feature of education, particularly in the Nordic countries (Otterstad & Braathe 2016). This move away from egalitarianism is identified by the key critics of neoliberalism as an abandonment of social justice (Chomsky 2013, 2016; Furedi 2017; Giroux 2015).

This concern is reflected by Brown (2015), who argues that the neoliberal focus on preparing children for school (and ultimately employment) is prioritised over individual children’s strengths and interests; again an emphasis on the neoliberal objective of standardisation and pushing school curricula down into programmes for very young children, positioning early childhood education (ECE) as an investment in the labour market of the future (Simpson, Lumsden & McDowall Clark 2015). This position identifies families as potential problems whose behaviour can risk the ability of their children to achieve desired outcomes. Interventions (including education) are then targeted at the individual and family, and fail to address the systemic problems that underlie disadvantage. In this discourse, increasing attention is being paid to infants and toddlers, given claims that early investment pays much better profits (e.g. Heckman 2011, 2014). The impact of neoliberalism on programmes for very young children is increasingly evident in this positioning of children as investments and the construction of curricula centred around the skills judged necessary for productive future employment.

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However, such positioning is not universal. In Finland, for example, whilst the neoliberal discourse of children as investments for the future is evident, it once played a secondary role to the discourses around supporting parental employment, gender equity and child development (Campbell-Barr & Nygård 2014). There is growing concern that promoting child development is an element slowly being eroded (Onnismaa & Kalliala 2010) in the Finnish context, and this is identified by Paananen, Lipponen and Kumpulainen (2015) as hybridisation: in other words, the neoliberal discourse is slowly transforming the previous social democratic discourse with its growing positioning of early childhood services as fulfilling an economic imperative – parental employment in this case. This makes countries such as Finland interesting case studies because hybridisation (the mixture of social democratic ideals with those of neoliberalism) reflects a unique local adaptation of neoliberalism. Another form of local or contextual adaptation is evident in nations of the Pacific. In Pacific nations, the neoliberal agenda is complicated by an overlay (or underlay?) of colonialism. The post-colonial agenda is clearly visible in the well-known New Zealand early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (New Zealand Ministry of Education 1996, 2017), which acknowledges and promotes Māori ways of knowing and learning. Despite this, Stover (2013) identifies the impact of neoliberalism and warns that safety is becoming more important than exploration, accountability is becoming more like surveillance and children, because they are investments, are becoming too precious to be exposed to any level of risk. Similar tensions are evident in other nations of the Pacific as well (Sims & Tausere Tiko 2016).

Another hybridisation of neoliberalism is evident in Bhutan. Bhutan has in recent years opened its doors to the world with television and internet only allowed since 1999 (Bhutan Media Foundation - <http://www.bmf.bt/media-in-bhutan/>). Spirituality is a key element of the constitution, with 70% of the population following the state religion of Vajrayana Buddhism and the key measure of the country's productivity being gross national happiness (GNH) (Kingdom of Bhutan 2008; Ura et al. 2012). Early childhood services began in 2004 and in metropolitan areas are modelled on western provision, whereas in remote villages, non-parental care remains the responsibility of family (Sims & Pedey 2015). In this context, Bhutan represents a triple hybridisation: neoliberalism influenced by post-colonialism and by spiritual values underpinning GNH.

In contrast, despite the Australian colonial heritage, Cheeseman, Press and Sumsion (2015) demonstrate how successive government policies have both increased the regulation and governance of early childhood and targeted younger and younger age groups. They are particularly concerned that the increasing regulation addressing education for infants and toddlers results in increasing limitations on infant and toddler learning. Sims and Waniganayake (2015) make a similar point. They argue that early childhood leaders are tending to focus more on compliance to the Australian early years curriculum, rather than on developing their

capacity to make their own professional judgements about children's best interests. A similar level of neoliberal discourse is evident in the United Kingdom. Moss (2013) highlights the investment narrative that has driven the early childhood sector for many years and points out the strong influence of neoliberalism in the latest Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) narratives (Moss et al. 2016).

Thus, it is clear that the neoliberal agenda is implemented in different hybrid forms in different nations. Countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia are strongly influenced by the neoliberal discourse, with little or no hybridisation. Hybrid versions of this discourse are evident in other countries: in Finland, where the social democratic discourse creates a local hybrid; in Pacific nations, where the post-colonial discourse creates a hybrid; and in Bhutan, where GNH creates a uniquely complex hybrid. Thus, examining the way early childhood professionals in these very different contexts understand their work, and the factors influencing this understanding, will help illuminate the ways in which neoliberalism is shaping the evolution of the early childhood profession and potentially provide support to those who are beginning to resist some of the directions in which it is driving professionalisation. Examining this in the context of early childhood work, and particularly work with infants and toddlers, is particularly useful because it is our contention that it is in this sector that the tensions introduced by the neoliberal discourse are particularly evident. This is demonstrated in the neoliberal privileging of the education elements in early childhood practice over care elements (Sims 2014). Whilst many argue that education and care are inextricably intertwined, the reality is that, in many countries, care is marginalised and undervalued in early childhood work (Aslanian 2015; Davis & Degotardi 2015; Harwood et al. 2013). This is particularly problematic with infants and toddlers where relationship work is crucial (Cortazar & Herreros 2010; Duschinsky, Greco & Solomon 2015; Nelson, Kendall and Shields 2014) and must form a key element of the learning environment. We argue that the struggle to maintain care as a valued element of early childhood work, and to improve its status in the eyes of those outside the profession, is a form of resistance to the neoliberal agenda that could inform other sectors in education.

We argue that challenging the hegemonic assumptions of neoliberalism is one of the 'wicked problems' of our time (wicked problems as defined by Australian Public Services Commission 2007; Moore 2011). Whilst we are sure that the Australian government would not agree with our contention that neoliberalism is a wicked problem, nevertheless they propose that solving wicked problems requires a reassessment of traditional ways of working (Australian Public Services Commission 2007). It is our contention that the importance of relationships and care which underpin working with infants and toddlers provides an alternative way of viewing early childhood work, and that such a perspective may well contribute toward challenging the wicked problem of neoliberalism. In this contention we are

not alone. Other researchers have demonstrated that the elements of infant and toddler work that are different than is usual in work with older children serve to prompt reflection around key elements of early childhood work in ways that change practice with all children. Beck (2013), for example, demonstrates how pre-service teachers' experiences working with infants and toddlers challenged them to construct new ideas about a range of key professional issues, including their understanding of development, curriculum, the role of the teacher, working with parents and families and building relationships with children. Beck argues students' practicum placements working with infants and toddlers, so different from the experiences of working with older children:

...are precisely what make them so critical to include. In response to the current preoccupation with test scores and standards, more and more early childhood teachers are expected to abandon emergent, child centered practices ... they are being pressed to embrace pre-packaged curricula and teacher directed practices that leave little room for variation in development.... (p. 20)

Recchia and Shin (2012) make a similar point: they argue that working with infants and toddlers is specialised, and this specialisation creates a very different emphasis in terms of how children's learning is viewed. Thus, working with infants and toddlers and sharing the understandings of early childhood professionals about their work in this context may create a space where neoliberal assumptions can potentially be challenged.

Unfortunately, there has been little focus in the research on the ways in which the philosophy, pedagogy and practice associated with working with infants and toddlers could be used to reassess traditional early childhood practice and the ways in which neoliberalism is defining these. Challenges to neoliberalism are evident in the education literature (Freire 1973; Giroux 2013), but few have been proposed in early childhood, with the exception of the post-colonial focus forefronted by early childhood academics such as Ritchie (2016) and Pérez, Medellín and Rideaux (2016). Much of the key critique of the impact of neoliberalism on education is targeted at higher education (e.g. Furedi 2017) or at formal school education (e.g. Baltodana 2012; Giroux 2013) and, with few exceptions (e.g. Hunkin 2017; Sims & Waniganayake 2015), has not been applied to early childhood.

It is in this context that we propose a deeper understanding of the perspectives of those professionals working with our youngest children in a range of different countries may inform a wider resistance to neoliberalism across all early childhood. We seek, in this article, to share the voices of early childhood professionals reflecting on the manner in which they understand work with infants and toddlers, and how this relates to their understanding of issues related to education and care. We hope this exploration will lead us into further refining our argument that infant and toddler pedagogy has the potential of challenging the hegemony of neoliberalism in early childhood. Our dream is to steer early childhood away from the tyranny of standardisation, accountability and economic rationality, into a space where

children are valued for being, where individuality and diversity flourish, where learning academics is one (relatively unimportant) element amongst many others and where relationships and participation (and dare we say, happiness) reign supreme.

## Methodology

### Conceptual framework

We argue that understandings of both education and care feed into the ongoing evolution of pedagogy as it relates to working with infants and toddlers. The nature of infant and toddler work is the context we use to focus on important elements that can contribute towards shaping a new understanding of early childhood pedagogy, initially as operationalised when working with infants and toddlers, but hopefully impacting across the entire early childhood sector. This new understanding forms a challenge to the current neoliberal shaping of the evolution of the early childhood sector. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

### Participants

Participants were recruited through early childhood networks in a number of countries, as described in previous research (Australia – Sims 2014; Bhutan – Sims & Pedey 2015; the Pacific – Sims & Tausere Tiko 2016). Data collected in Finland and in England are yet to be published. In all countries, early childhood networks were used to advertise the research and people who were interested were directed to an online site where they could obtain further information, including the eligibility criteria for participation (see below). Networks used to advertise the project included early

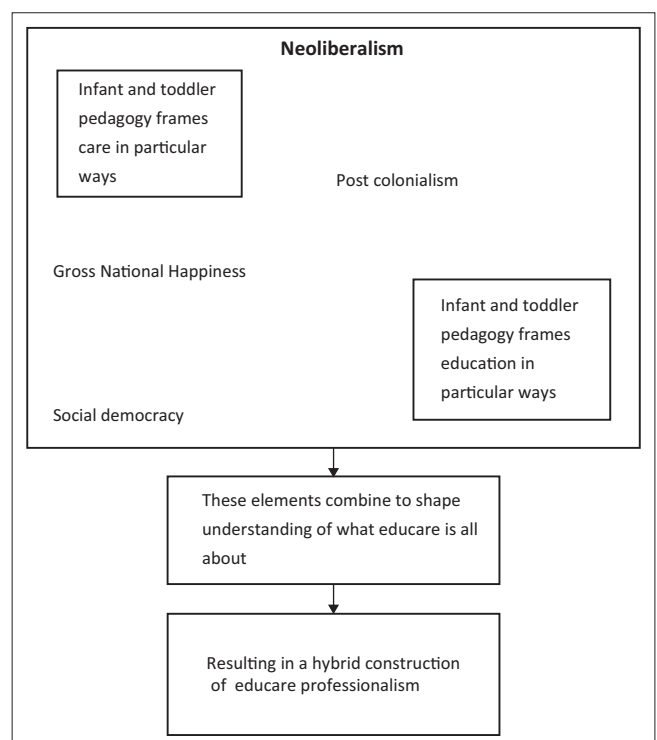


Figure 1: Illustration of the Conceptual Framework

childhood professional organisations, tertiary institutions teaching early childhood programmes, early childhood advocacy networks and early childhood online discussion groups.

The number of participants from each country was:

- Australia = 107
- Bhutan = 30
- Pacific = 104
- The United Kingdom = 75
- Finland = 1159

Eligibility to participate in the study was defined as:

- Those who were working in any early childhood service. Services were defined as child care, preschool, kindergarten, nursery, family day care, occasional care, religious early childhood programmes, home-based early childhood programmes, early intervention, early childhood special needs programmes or centres, playgroups, early childhood mobile services, Indigenous services and bilingual/multilingual early childhood services. Consultation with locally based team members ensured that names used for service types were appropriate and inclusive of all types of services offered in that context.
- Those who were working in a tertiary institution providing education (pre-service or in-service) for qualifications to work in any of these early childhood services.
- Those who were working in early childhood policy.
- Those who were working in early childhood service management – services defined as above.

## Data collection

Data were collected via an online survey as described in Sims and Pedey (2015) and Sims and Tausere Tiko (2016). The focus of the survey was to explore the professionalisation of early childhood. The data for this article were taken from the questions in the survey that related to infant and toddler pedagogy and is thus all qualitative, narrative data. Questions were open-ended in order to give participants as much space as they wish to share their thoughts.

## Analysis

A thematic analysis was undertaken using the conceptual framework as a guide. Content was assigned to the themes identified in the framework using Glaser's (1965) method of constant comparison to identify the content and the boundaries. Once this was completed, the data were scrutinised for content that did not fit these key themes. Quotes best representing the content of themes were selected to ensure that the voices of participants were strongly represented in the study.

## Ethical consideration

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee at the base university, which operates under the Australian standards

set by National Health & Medical Research Council et al. (2007 [updated 2015]). Relevant information was provided at the beginning of the online survey, including the right to choose not to answer any questions, and to withdraw without penalty. Participants were anonymous and the survey did not ask any information that could be used to identify any participant.

## Results

### What is care in infant and toddler pedagogy?

The element most consistently mentioned when discussing care for infants and toddlers was the emotional/relationship dimension. Whilst we acknowledge the importance of relationships when working with all children, we argue that in infant and toddler work this element is particularly strong and provides a platform from which a challenge to the neoliberal education focus can be launched. Participants across all countries identified emotional work as very important:

'Infants and toddlers require loving, supportive and emotionally (and physically) available adults whose primary focus is nurturing care'. (Pacific – 17)

'Sensitivity. Warm encounters, interaction, creating feeling of safety, lap, shared experiences'. (Finland – 171)

'Caring and secure relationships are fundamental to working with this age group. Doing so supports both the child and the parents. Babies need these warm and loving relationships that intrinsically care to develop and then build their future education. There are experiences that we provide for the babies but again in a caring and supportive manner'. (UK – 17)

'Without the care there is no trust, no attachment and resistance to learning, exploring, sharing, being open to new things is reduced. Young children aren't as responsive to these educational toys, resources, or those 'teachable' moments and events in the day if they feel disconnected'. (Australia – 64)

There was concern that emotional work is neither recognised nor valued and this came through more strongly in the Australian and UK data, where neoliberalism is not hybridised:

'Working with children under 2 [two] as identified is about relationships and caring and this is not 'measurable'. (UK – 11)

'Need more focus on birth to three as a specialised area in professional learning, teacher education and research ... not as poor relation of year before school or understudied in combined degrees'. (Australia – 7)

We see in this theme that the importance of relationship work is recognised and valued by our participants. However, in both Australia and the United Kingdom there is a feeling that the neoliberal emphasis on education is so powerful that this work is neither valued nor understood outside of the early childhood profession.

### What is education in infant and toddler pedagogy?

In contrast, education was often not discussed in infant and toddler pedagogy unless it was, as in the transcripts of some



participants, positioned as separate from care and offered to children once they were no longer infants and toddlers. In this, we are seeing the impact of neoliberalism where education is seen as separate from care, and it is interesting that this is evident in the data from our hybridised contexts. For example:

'In this care a teacher gets more focused on taking care of the child and not focused on teaching the child. Early care should be separated from ECE at least until age 4 and up'. (Pacific – 33)

In Bhutan, participants felt that parental expectations forced this split upon the early childhood sector and consequently there was a perception that care was something applicable to younger children but not to older preschool-aged children:

'Parents think they come to the centre to learn alphabet and all and they misunderstand what ECCD [early childhood care and development] is'. (Bhutan – 9)

'In Bhutan the focus is more on preparing children on literacy and numeracy and not on care'. (Bhutan – 5)

Such a position is contrary to the perspective reported in the Finnish data, where education and care were not separated and it was suggested that those working with infants and toddlers needed to be more highly-qualified professionals:

'The younger are the children, the more competent and permanent staff. Adequate group size. Extremely important that the groups have a qualified early education teacher. The level of staff education should be increased towards pedagogical expertise the level of education should not be decreased. There is a need to have more highly educated staff and early special education teachers'. (Finland – 188)

Thus, our hybrid contexts show different responses in the way in which they perceive the education elements of early childhood work. Fiji early childhood professionals tended to accept the neoliberal privileging of education, whereas in Bhutan this privileging was attributed to parents as well as articulated by educators. In Finland, the United Kingdom and Australia, the focus was on combining education and care (discussed in the following section), and participants did not talk about education as a separate element, nor did they position education as something that was offered to older children, not to infants and toddlers. We interpret this in the United Kingdom and Australia as the strategy used to preserve the care elements of their work as much as possible by integrating it into education and discuss this in the following section.

Whilst this was the case for participants in the study, it is worth noting that there has been recent policy advice given to the Australian government indicating that children under two years of age do not need educational support and therefore those who work with them do not need university-level qualifications; rather a six-month post-secondary school qualification (one at a lower level than that mandated in New South Wales (NSW) over 100 years ago – Feez & Sims 2014) would be sufficient (Productivity Commission 2014). This advice has not yet been acted upon.

## Combining education and care

In the Finnish, Australian and UK data are statements from participants arguing that care and education are intertwined, and that one without the other is not appropriate (note that there were no statements to this effect in the Bhutanese and Pacific data):

'Care is not to be excluded from the theoretical constructs available to a graduate workforce, and falls easily into the disciplines of education when that term is properly defined. Excluding it, in fact, diminishes the role of the teacher'. (UK – 21)

'The importance of pedagogy should be noticed. Development is so fast in toddlers, and in my opinion, this is not valued enough in the field of ECE. It is wrong, that people think that those smallest ones don't need teachers. Similarly, if children have teachers in their group, people think that activities are too educative/academic in nature. Unfortunately, this is the way some people think'. (Finland – 783)

For some, particularly in the Australian sample, there was a belief that care should be part of education and that this was so fundamentally true that there is no value in attempting to discuss the balance between them, or accept that there is any risk that care might *not* be as highly valued as education.

'I get so angry at the idea that 'education' and 'care' are somehow distinct entities. Care is part of a child's education. Nurturing plays a major role in a child's learning'. (Australia – 85)

However, combining two elements is not as simple as it may appear on the surface. There are many ways the combination can occur; the resultant combination can reflect a stronger positioning of one in comparison to the other, or the two elements can be reflected equally. Ignoring the balance of elements making up the combination can lead to an unintended outcome and this is what appears to have happened in the United Kingdom and in parts of Europe. There, the combining of care and education led to a perception that education has overshadowed care to the disadvantage of the early childhood sector (Bennett 2003; Oberhuemer 2005; Williamson & Morgan 2009). In other words, there is evidence that education is commonly perceived as more important than care, whilst many early childhood professionals would prefer that these elements were either equal or that care was positioned as more important; positions evident in the data from this study:

'The notion of education is what is problematic – as the emphasis should be on developmental perspectives for young children up until about age 6 in my view. The EYFS [Early Years Professional Status] is very clear about the needs of young children for social, emotional, physical and language development. What the education discourse fails to include for all young children is the notion of an ethic of care rather than just 'caring' recognising the multiple relationships that practitioners working with children and their parents have to manage is really important'. (UK – 4)

We propose that the integration of care and education is a pragmatic strategy used in contexts where the neoliberal positioning is perceived to place the status of care at risk, and therefore it is perceived that the way to maintain it is to

define education in a way that encompasses care. We discuss this in the following section.

### The desired outcome

Have we developed a new discourse that is not influenced by the assumptions and value positions that currently accompany the words 'education' and 'care'? This was certainly the intention when the term 'educare' was coined (Caldwell 1991; Smith 1993), and it is certainly the intent of a number of the participants in this study:

'Anyone who says babies can't be educated just isn't very good at their job. This is why we need to keep the term 'education and care' to ensure that the 'care' part of our job is never removed'. (Australia – 81)

Whilst the term 'educare' did not last, it is currently reframed into various names including early childhood education and care (ECEC), early childhood care and education (ECCE) and early childhood care and development (ECCD). All of these terms reflect the belief that working with young children requires a combination of both elements: care and education. However, along with the education and care elements, a small number of participants talked about the additional factors that they see need to be included into a holistic vision of infant and toddler early childhood professionalism.

'Working with children under 2 [two] needs a strong focus on working with families'. (Pacific – 11)

'Working with very young children who are below 2 [two] years of age has a lot of care, safety, survival issues'. (Bhutan – 3)

'Working with children under 2 [two] needs a strong focus on working with families. Part of the issue is working with under 2's is not measur[e]able, our government need to see an outcome and the value of outcomes to them is based on children's 'academic' achievements. Working with children under 2 [two] as identified is about relationships and caring; this is not "measurable". (UK – 11)

The concept of holistic early childhood professionalism is one that is particularly strong in the majority world (often identified as the developing world) and is reflected in UNICEF's focus on early childhood development (<http://www.unicef.org/earlychildhood/>) rather than on early childhood care and/or education. Early childhood work in the Asia Pacific region, for example, focuses on working with families and communities as well as with children themselves (Sims 2015): in Cambodia, increased social cohesion is the target of an early childhood initiative (Dolinska, Downey & Chew 2015), whereas community education is used in various regions of Southeast Asia aimed at reducing child mortality from unexploded ordinance (Moore 2015). The new UN agenda (Transforming Our World – The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300>) emphasises the importance of addressing early childhood development in order to achieve the sustainable development goals: poverty reduction, elimination of world hunger, improved health and well-being, women's economic empowerment, gender equality, employment and economic growth, and a reduction in

inequality. These broader understandings of early childhood work seem somewhat divorced from the work undertaken in the minority world (the Western world) where a holistic approach is espoused but rarely enacted and where the neoliberal privileging of education is in tension with these broader understandings.

### The role of infant and toddler pedagogy in changing thinking

We argued at the beginning of this article that experience working with infants and toddlers challenges educators to think about their work in a different way. Not all of our participants had experience working with this age group, particularly in the Pacific and Bhutan where programmes were not available for children in this age group. However, in both Australia and the United Kingdom where children under three years of age are more routinely included in early childhood programmes, participants shared how they perceived working with this age group contributed to a better quality of early childhood work more generally. Our participants said, for example:

'In my career as an early childhood teacher I have spent 5 [five] years working with 0- to 2-year-olds, and I can tell you that programming and providing meaningful learning opportunities whilst at the same time providing an appropriate level of care was challenging indeed, but I never thought of myself as less of an early childhood professional because I wasn't working with 4- to 5-year-olds. On the contrary, I found it to be a profound learning experience that challenged my previous notion that it wouldn't be as hard as working with older children. In fact providing a stimulating yet manageable learning environment for this age group was much harder!' (Australia – 5)

'Lacking an understanding of younger children and the care they need might be seen to force the focus of educators working with 3+ year olds onto the older primary model'. (UK – 21)

We further argued that these different understandings had the potential to challenge some of the assumptions underpinning the neoliberal impacts on the early childhood sector. Unfortunately, our Australian research suggests that educational leaders are not taking this opportunity to challenge hegemonic neoliberal assumptions (Sims & Waniganayake 2015), and work in Finland suggests that leaders are closely engaged with issues in their own services and do not reach out to share those understandings more widely (Heikka, Halttunen & Waniganayake 2018).

### Discussion – Where to from here?

We begin with a reflection on resistance and the role of those working with infants and toddlers in that resistance. International resistance to neoliberalism is growing (Chomsky 2013, 2016; Giroux 2015; Harris 2003) and there are multiple ways in which resistance is enacted. Some argue that simply coping is a form of resistance (Springer 2010), but a more active approach involves engaging in critical conversations (Baltodana 2012). Tesar (2014) suggests that one of the aims of these professional conversations is to

disturb the balance of power: to question accepted practices and understandings, to reflect on alternatives and to claim the power needed to try other options.

The important elements our participants identified in infant and toddler pedagogy (the importance of both care and education, of family and holistic practice) can be used in professional conversations across the early childhood sector. How do these elements play out in working with older children? What does it mean to build relationships with preschool-aged children and their families? If there is not sufficient time to focus on relationships AND academics, how do educators prioritise? How do we use the knowledge and expertise developed in other parts of the world in relation to holistic practice to influence western or minority world thinking about early childhood, the policies and development of services. Where better to begin this reframing than in the area of infant and toddler ideology and service delivery.

If we follow the lead offered by the United Nations and the various countries in the majority world, our infant and toddler professionals could be helping us to think about early childhood work in a different way. Rather than be limited by the neoliberal focus on accreditation requirements that specify the curriculum content of early childhood pre-service qualification, by a focus on recording observations and demonstrating written plans for each individual child, and an emphasis on what is needed to achieve an acceptable level of service accreditation, perhaps we could develop the kinds of programmes that would benefit all our infants, toddlers and their families and communities. This resistance to the neoliberal definition of early childhood professionalism might then impact on services offered to other children, children of preschool and primary school age, and we could begin to wrest education free from the insidious tentacles of grasping neoliberalism.

## Conclusion

In this article, we demonstrate that elements of infant and toddler pedagogy provide opportunities for early childhood professionals to challenge the hegemony of neoliberalism and, in doing so, shape the direction in which the sector is developing. The discourses of care, of partnering with parents as equals and of taking a holistic perspective in our work all challenge key elements of neoliberalism. Focusing on relationships operates counter to the neoliberal emphasis on transmission of approved, standardised content. Focusing on true partnerships with families counters the neoliberal emphasis on removal of agency through the power of the elite. Focusing on holistic development counters the human capital elements of neoliberalism where knowledge associated with future employment is valued. As Moss (2011) reminds us, early childhood is where children first begin to learn about how to live democratically: in our services they learn the ways of 'relating to self and others, an ethical, political and educational relationship that can and should

pervade all aspects of everyday life' (p. 2). We must do this for and with our children.

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### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Authors' contributions

M.S. (project leader) was responsible for Australian data collection. E.A., (UK project co-ordinator), M.N. (Finland co-ordinator), K.P. (Bhutan co-ordinator) and L.T.T. (Fiji co-ordinator) were responsible for data collection in their respective countries as well as being involved in collaborative analysis and writing. N.S. was responsible for Finland supervision, access to participants, collaborative analysis and writing.

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