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Discourses of Neoliberalism and 'Quality' in Early Childhood Care and Education in Aotearoa New Zealand

Neo-liberal Discursive era

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Neoliberalism has been described as a “heightening and renewal of modernity’s now dominant metanarrative” of individuals as “rational utility maximisers” (Peters, 2001, p. 119). Recent neoliberal metanarratives “reframe *all* human transactions as being primarily economic in nature” (Cope & I’Anson, 2003, p. 220). International globalisation forces such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have promulgated “a Western-centered architecture for global capitalism” (Robertson & Dale, 2009, p. 32), resulting in “the triumph of market fundamentalism” infiltrating what were previously social services, and education being remodeled to be a marketable commodity (Saltman, 2009, p. 56). This discursive shift is seen in education curriculum documents which promote the “ability to earn money, flexibility, [and] competitiveness” as opposed to previously celebrated values for maintaining the social fabric such as “solidarity, fairness, and compassion” (McCarthy, Pitton, Kim, & Monje, 2009, p. 40-41).

The workings of neoliberalism create a sense of positioning for educational (and other) services which is deliberately (and artificially) detached from the direct engagement of government, a form of governmentality that allows the governmental officers to maintain a sense of independence from any calamities that ensure, since “Risk management is forced back onto individuals and satisfied through the market” (Peters, 2001, p. 111). The perils of this approach was supremely evident in the tragedy of the recent Fukushima disaster in Japan (Stiglitz, 2010). Meanwhile, corporate, middle-class bureaucratic capture promotes individualism in the forms of consumer autonomy, privatisation, user-pays, and individual enterprise (Peters, 2001), which are in contrast to Indigenous values of collectivism. Ironically the individual also becomes relatively powerless to oppose these forces, as “our

contemporary capitalist society adjusts to changes, and works to refold rogue elements of the socius back into the ceaseless play of the commodity” (Roffe, 2007, p. 48) As neoliberal subjects are required to become ‘entrepreneurs of themselves’ (Foucault, 1979, as cited in McCarthy et al., 2009, p. 40), individual ‘freedom’ is positioned “as being more important than welfare liberalism’s privileging of equality” (Farquhar, 2008, p. 17).

New Zealand during the 1980s and 1990s experienced an extreme conversion to neoliberal doctrine resulting in deregulation, devolution, corporatisation and privatisation of services such as education which had previously been held as the domain of the state (Farquhar, 2008). Within a decade, the “governance of New Zealand changed from an ethos of liberal, positive freedom, involving the provision of certain resources for the public good, to neoliberalism” (Farquhar, 2008, p. 119) in what has been described as “the most ambitious attempt at constructing the free market as a social institution to be introduced anywhere this century” (Gray, 1998, p. 39, as cited in Farquhar, 2008, p. 119). After many years of priding itself on being a ‘welfare state’ which cared for all its citizens, “New Zealand moved almost overnight to a user pays, market driven economic system”, welfare systems were pruned and national assets privatized (Carpenter, 2009, p. 3). New Zealand early childhood services have been increasingly privatised in line with OECD policy which aims to “limit public expenditure and to allow greater choice and control by parents” (Farquhar, 2008, p. 125). A dramatic increase is evident in the decade since 2000, when 26% of early childhood centres were privately owned profit-making businesses, whilst in 2010 we now have 40% of our early childhood provision operating in the for-profit sector (ECE Taskforce Secretariat, 2010, p. 5), a situation which has rendered children, families and teachers vulnerable to “market failure” (Farquhar, 2008, p. 126).

New Zealand has therefore become “a culture where the market is regarded as the ethic guiding all human action, [and] the subject’s identity is constructed in and by the

market” (McCarthy et al., 2009, p. 40). Recent research has identified increasing discrepancies in the provision of early childhood education, with many low-income, Māori and Pacific Islands families struggling to have access to any early childhood care and education settings, let alone high quality culturally responsive services (Ministry of Education, 2012; Ritchie & Johnson, 2011). The neoliberal meta-narrative is comprehensively devoid of an ethic of care, or the egalitarianism which was once a professed characteristic of New Zealand society, albeit with the ongoing under-belly of racism and colonisation. “This ‘business capture’ has successfully established corporate hegemony and with its economic reductionist mode of thinking and acting, people (and collective interests) are of minor consideration and importance” (Tooley, 2000, p. 57).

The individualism of neoliberalism directly contravenes the collectivism of te ao Māori, as expressed through Māori values of whanaungatanga (relationships, connectedness), aroha (the reciprocal obligation to care, respect), utu (reciprocity), and manaakitanga (generosity) and kaitiakitanga (guardianship of the earth). Furthermore, the commodification of ‘market forces’ reconfigures not only education, but Māori culture as a source of individual profiteering, a revisiting of colonialist assimilation in the guise of capitalist enterprise (Tooley, 2000). The Waitangi Tribunal recently released a long-awaited report on the commodification of taonga Māori (things of value to Māori). Māori had claimed that

their language, symbols, stories, songs, and dances have been commodified by people who have no traditional claim to them. They say the native flora and fauna upon which their culture and identity are built have been controlled, modified, and privatised by people, companies, or government agencies who have no affinity with those things. (Waitangi Tribunal, 2011, p. 17)

An aspect of Deleuze’s project has been described as being a mode of ethical resistance to regimes, such as the machines of neoliberalism, enabling reconsiderations which

allow us “to locate the ethical self as a locus of resistance to the systematicity of knowledge-power processes; a locus of resistance which operates in ways which enable the interstices in those systems to be exploited and the reproduction of control to be traversed or subverted” (Chesters, 2007, p. 245). Deleuze situates this ethical project within “a broader process of becoming-minor”, a trajectory that Graeme Chesters (2007) believes has great resonance with the resistances currently being demonstrated by “alter-globalization movement(s)” (p. 245) and which is in keeping with Māori understandings in regard to the importance of humility (Smith, 1999/2006).

Conclusion

This ‘geneological’ discursive analysis of the pervasiveness of historical and contemporary discourses permeated by assumptions of white superiority delivers a platform from which to launch a project of unmasking the impact of neoliberal policies in our country, an impact which is fated to be even more severe for Māori children and families due to the ongoing legacy of colonisation. *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* and *Te Whāriki* are representative models which reflect Aotearoa as a bi-epistemological nation, indigenous research theorising and discourse foregrounding our methodological paradigm. As activist researchers, we draw on our specificities, as ethics, as philosophy, as belief, as theory – these are all tools that translate into our methodological paradigm which adopts a counter-colonial approach (Ritchie & Rau, 2010). *Mana Wahine* and kaupapa Māori theorising challenges the prerogative assumed by colonisers and neoliberal policy-makers which they presume allows them the right to dictate what ‘choices’ are made available.

The recent neoliberal policy initiatives both in education and in asset sales demonstrate a patent lack of genuine consultation, an implicit self-justifying belief that these government portfolio holders and officials know that they are ‘doing what’s best’ for ‘all New Zealanders. This patronising attitude has its antecedents in the British Empire’s

colonialist project, based in their implicit/explicit belief in white superiority. The current machinations of capitalism now re-perpetuate the discourses of the past, an extreme version of recolonisation manifest in contemporary neoliberalism. This paper has outlined some ways in which unpacking of historical discourses provides the context for uncovering the neoliberalist reterritorialisation of both te ao Māori and early childhood care and education within Aotearoa.

