

# Can we belong in a neo-liberal world? Neo-liberalism in early childhood education and care policy in Australia and New Zealand <sup>[1]</sup>

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## Excerpt from introduction

Several decades of neo-liberal economic reform have profoundly altered the ways in which infrastructure, including the social infrastructure of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services, is provided in nation states around the world. This article is concerned with the impact of neo-liberalism on the attainment of 'belonging', a key curriculum objective of Australian and New Zealand ECEC services. Australia and New Zealand provide rich contexts for considering this question. In both countries, the provision of ECEC has been subject to a profound shift from the community to becoming more commodified and subject to the market than any other area of education. In addition, New Zealand has been proclaimed to be at the forefront of neo-liberal economic reform in general (Kelsey, 1997), and Australia was an international forerunner in opening a previously non-profit childcare sector to the market under a neo-liberal-inspired microeconomic reform agenda.

A number of analyses of ECEC policy refer to the impact of neo-liberalism (e.g. see Moss, 2012; Sims, 2017). Worryingly, in many respects, the influence of neo-liberalism and its effects have assumed the status of the 'new normal' and, as Tronto (2017) argues, too many scholars position it as inevitable and invincible. In the realm of ECEC, neo-liberal hegemony in both Australia and New Zealand has not only normalised the dominance of the market in the provision of such services for children; it appears to have limited our capacity to consider/envision the role and positioning of ECEC in society in alternative ways. In Australia, this entrenching of the market as the primary provider of early childhood services was starkly illustrated by the collapse of the nation's largest for-profit childcare provider, ABC Learning, in 2008. Despite this collapse costing the federal government AU\$22 million in temporary bailout money, the neo-liberal trajectory for the provision of ECEC remains (Woodrow and Press, 2017). However, policy is a normative choice (Clarke, 2012). This behoves us therefore to understand the impact of policy choices and advocate alternative positions when the impacts are deleterious.

'Belonging' is a key concept in the early years curricula of both Australia and New Zealand. We argue that neo-liberalism is antithetical to the aspirations encompassed in the evocation of belonging in such curricula. Our discussion commences with a consideration of the ways in which 'belonging' might be understood both within ECEC programs and in relation to the constructs of both care and education. We follow by examining the logic of neo-liberalism, its impact on the ways in which early childhood is provided, and its consequent distortion of interdependence and concern for our collective good, which we contend are inherent to notions of belonging

**Region:** Australia and New Zealand <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** neo-liberal <sup>[4]</sup>

market <sup>[5]</sup>

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