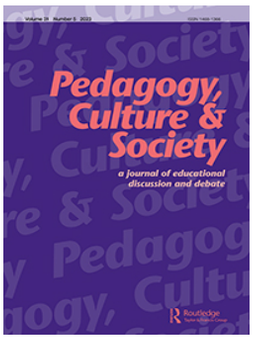

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The manifestations of universality and cultural specificity in national curriculum policy frameworks: negotiations for culturally reflective practice in early childhood education

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings from a review of 19 national curriculum policy frameworks (NCPFs) across the globe and discusses dominant and culturally specific discourses that shape early childhood education (ECE). We combine two frameworks of developmental universality and specificity and culturally contextualised pedagogy to explore whether and how NCPFs are venues where culturally reflective practice is negotiated. Culturally reflective practice embraces minimum, globally universal standards of children's rights and evidence-based practice, meanwhile critically reflects on the dominance of global and local discourses that impede a glocalised interpretation of quality in ECE. The paper argues that culturally reflective policy and practice is an alternative framework to cultural appropriateness/relevance in ECE.

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National curriculum policy framework; early childhood education; culturally-reflective practice; glocalisation; dominant discourses

Introduction

This paper summarises the dominant early childhood education (ECE) discourses as reflected in 19 national curriculum policy frameworks (NCPFs) from influential Western countries and emerging economies. We discuss the globalisation effects on national policy making (Ball 2012; Dale 1999) in ECE and argue that advocates for culturally appropriate and/or -relevant policy and practice (e.g., Bautista et al. 2021; Durden, Escalante, and Blitch 2015; Li and Chen 2017) do not necessarily challenge dominant discourses that shape ECE at global and local levels. Instead, we propose that culturally reflective practice needs to be promoted in national ECE policies, which incorporates universal 'minimum standards' of human and children's rights (see Schweisfurth 2014 for a detailed discussion and see also United Nations 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights) into local specificities of ECE (McCoy 2022); meanwhile critically reflecting on the dominance of global and local discourses. 'Local' is conceptualised in this paper as relational in the binary use of global and local, which manifests multiple layers of 'locality' in relation to each other (Alfasi and Fenster 2009; Campbell-Barr and Bogatić 2017). These

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include national as 'Local' in relation to global; regional and other levels of ECE systems as 'Local' in relation to national; the situational, contextual and fluid practices in ECE as 'Local' in relation to fixed ECE systems and structures at all levels; and the individual (child) as 'Local' in relation to their wider contexts.

Foucault's concept of discourse (Foucault 1972, 1980) is employed to theorise knowledge and power that exist in international systems of ECE, which normalises the field with universal standards on a global scale (Delaune 2019). The global ECE discourses may disadvantage certain ECE systems (e.g., those from less developed economies) and marginalise some groups within a system (e.g., ethnic minority groups, children with special education needs, children from low socio-economic status families). Dominant ECE discourses are reflected in NCPFs (McCoy 2022), which are top-down policies with statutory guidelines on the aims, principles, pedagogies, and practices of ECE (Wood 2004). NCPFs are enacted through local curricula in ECE settings, which reflect local understanding, interpretation and translation of NCPFs (Braun, Maguire, and Ball 2010). The 19 NCPFs analysed in this paper include internationally renowned ones from countries such as Australia, England, New Zealand, and Ireland; under-explored ones from the Greater China regions (Rao, Zhou, and Sun 2017) including Mainland China, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan, as well as from South Africa; and recently renewed ones from the four Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden). Consequently, our paper provides a comprehensive and updated review of dominant global and local discourses that shape ECE policies.

In this paper, we begin by discussing the tensions between globalisation and localisation that exist in international ECE scholarship. We then problematise the potential marginalisation of disadvantaged groups by national ECE policies, followed by a presentation on our methodological approach. The global and local discourses of ECE are presented later as findings, with further discussions on the problems of culturally appropriate/relevant policy and practice in a 'glocalised' (Stenglin 2012) context of ECE. Our paper concludes by advocating culturally reflective policy making and practice in ECE, in order to embrace universal 'minimum standards' and local specialities, while resisting dominant ECE discourses.

Globalisation and localisation in ECE

The influences of globalisation on ECE are well established in the international literature (Campbell-Barr and Bogatić 2017; Rana 2012; Yang et al. 2020). Situated in a powerful policy discourse of neoliberalism, ECE is increasingly politicised across countries as an arena that promotes state economic gains by providing young children with the foundations for future opportunities and lifelong learning (Campbell-Barr and Bogatić 2017; OECD 2018). Correspondingly, another global discourse of governance and control (Dahlberg, Moss, and A Pence 2013; Moss 2015; Moss and Urban 2020; Wood and Hedges 2016) emerges in ECE policies, aimed at ensuring the 'effectiveness' and socio-economic returns of ECE provisions in which governments invest. In those policies, accountability is emphasised through inspections and assessments oriented by quality standards and child outcomes (Hayes and Filipović 2018; Meisels 2007; Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury 2016; Wood and Hedges 2016). Such accountability measurements further lead to the comparison among ECE systems internationally, especially as pushed by the

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) initiatives, reports, and studies (OECD 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020). Whilst comparisons between ECE systems provide alternative and/or various practices and possibilities to achieve high-quality ECE (Phillips and Schweisfurth 2014), attempts to define international quality standards and indicators as underpinning the comparisons remain controversial.

Scholars such as Delaune (2019) and Moss and Urban (2020) criticise the OECD's ongoing International Early Learning and Child Well-Being Study for its lack of contextualisation and 'comparability' in terms of the social, economic and political variations in participant countries' ECE systems. The cultural values that construct education and childhood in those countries are also not embedded in international assessments of children, who are 'decontextualised' (Delaune 2019, 67) into a global and neoliberal vision of the child who is equipped with knowledge and skills to benefit their country's global competitiveness but has not enacted agency to actively participate in contemporary democratic societies (Nussbaum 2010). A hegemonic discourse of 'outcomes and investment' (Moss et al. 2016, 344) is reflected in the OECD values of ECE and is gaining power in shaping policymaking in ECE (e.g., the recent introduction of Baseline Assessment in England [Standards and Testing Agency 2020]). Yet a universal framework for quality standards on a global scale is not established and questions remain regarding whether such a framework is needed. Our paper adds to this debate by reviewing how state governments 'localise' global discourses of ECE as reflected in their NCPFs.

In the formation of global discourses, the dominance of mores and values from Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies is widely acknowledged and deconstructed by scholars particularly from non-WEIRD contexts (Gupta 2018; Pence and Benner 2015; Rana 2012; Skerrett 2017). The development of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings 2014) and practice in local ECE under the regimes of global discourses and WEIRD ideologies has received much scholarly interest, in dual contexts of decolonialising education and curriculum in the global south (Burman 2019; Gupta 2018; Makalela 2018) and of increased multiculturalism in contemporary societies (Antonsich 2016; Meer, Modood, and Zapata-Barrero 2016). For instance, Yang and Li (2018a, 2018b, 2019, 2020) investigated the mechanisms of school-based curriculum development in Chinese kindergartens and found that four main stages of *imitation, absorption, integration, and evaluation* were followed. A key aspect embedded throughout the stages is the conflict and fusion of 'Western' and Chinese cultures (Yang and Li 2019). Gupta (2018) reviewed ECE policies in India, China, Singapore, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, pointing out that cultural incursions is a challenge that ECE reforms in Asia face 'when a "Western" progressive early-childhood discourse is viewed as the basis of "appropriate" pedagogy in Asian classrooms' (24). She argues that teachers should be allowed the space and opportunity for minimising a top-down ECE curriculum and maximising a child-centred culturally appropriate one. Although this body of literature implies a binary construction of Western versus non-Western cultures (which is addressed in this paper through a non-binary framework of global and local), it recognises the important role played by teachers/educators in 'hybridizing' international pedagogical approaches (Yang and Li 2019) and enacting culturally appropriate local curricula.

Existing research also points to a child-centred approach to culturally appropriate ECE, as mentioned in Gupta's (2018) argument above. In addition to embracing the sociocultural and political constructions of childhood as situated in the local contexts of the

individual child (Burman 2019), this approach promotes children as agents of change (Xu 2020a) in the development of local curricula. Children are viewed as active participants in ECE and the wider society, whose voices should be accounted throughout the process of ECE. This image of the child is noted in a recent discourse analysis of national curriculum frameworks in Australia, China, New Zealand and Singapore, conducted by Yang and his colleagues (Yang et al. 2020). The authors denote that children's agency is recognised in their active participation in learning, play, social interaction, and community.

Whilst existing literature recognises educators' and children's roles in resolving the tensions between global and local constructions of ECE, advocating for culturally appropriate/relevant ECE increasingly becomes a dominance itself in ECE contexts. This can be problematic as cultural appropriateness/relevance implies possible reproductions of traditional beliefs that oppress human and children's rights in contemporary societies (Knocke 1997; Riger 1993). Our paper problematises cultural-appropriateness/relevance as a dominant discourse in international ECE contexts.

Problematising the regime of top-down ECE policies

Another gap that mirrors the tensions between global and local discourses in ECE is how the power of national policies marginalises certain regions and groups within the state. As mentioned above, the global discourse of governance and control shapes national policy making in ECE emphasising accountability for quality and high returns of ECE (Moss 2014). Meanwhile ECE settings are social institutions that reflect and reinforce dominant cultural discourses prevalent in their societies (Alexander 2000; Tobin, Hsueh, and Karasawa 2009). Those hegemonic global and local discourses are problematic due to their hegemonic nature, often blind to the experiences of others that do not fit the stereotypical norm, as illustrated by Gabriel (2020). Such hegemonic discourses particularly disadvantage groups of children vulnerable in terms of their gender, ethnicity, race, special educational needs and disabilities, and poverty (Darling-Hammond 2007; Bradbury 2013; Hutchings 2015; Jennings and Lauen 2016; Xu, Warin, and Robb 2020). For example, Maher and Buxton (2015) point out that, on entry into formal schooling, Australian children from Aboriginal communities struggle to develop a positive sense of self due to the expectations of a Western curriculum. Therefore, whether and how national ECE policies attend to social justice and equality issues matter in local contexts of ECE.

Top-down ECE policies such as NCPFs determine society's views of childhood and the corresponding roles of ECE settings and families (Hasan 2007). As such, the degree of freedom for families and communities to enact their educational visions for their children is limited by centrally defined expectations/requirements imposed on children, families and ECE settings (Delaune 2019). There are two approaches to how governments manage and regulate expectations of ECE through NCPFs, categorised by Bennett (2005) into two traditions: pre-primary and social pedagogy traditions. Key characteristics of a pre-primary curricular framework include centrally defined goals and outcomes, prescriptive standards of practices and assessments, and a clear focus on school readiness. By contrast, a social pedagogy curriculum provides broad principles, goals, and orientations, with flexibility for developing local curricula subject to their characteristics and conditions. Assessment is not required in a social pedagogy curriculum and child outcomes are set collaboratively by educators, parents, and children themselves. Although Bennett's (2005)

categorisation was based on curricular frameworks from almost two decades ago and countries may have updated their curricula since then, the categorisation can still be used to describe the approaches adopted in NCPFs nowadays. In fact, the NCPFs included in this paper all reflect features of the two traditions and stand on a spectrum that has pre-primary and social pedagogy traditions at its two ends. Whether and how those approaches promote/prohibit culturally reflective practices in local ECE settings are the insights to which our paper contributes. The research question addressed in this paper is: What dominant global and local discourses shape the 19 reviewed NCPFs?

Methods

The original study (Xu et al. 2020) that this paper draws on employed documentary analysis (Bowen 2009; Frey 2018) to analyse NCPFs that covered 0–3 years-olds. 19 frameworks (see Table 1) are included and divided into three groups: 1. Those of major English-speaking countries, such as Australia, Canada (Ontario), England, Ireland, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Scotland, US (California and New York), and Wales; 2. Those of the four Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden) whose ECE systems are internationally renowned; 3. Under-explored frameworks from the Greater China regions (Rao, Zhou, and Sun 2017) including Mainland China, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan, as well as from South Africa. The NCPFs selected were chosen to reflect the dominance of OECD countries in shaping global ECE, the recent updates of NCPFs in the Nordic countries (which may inform developments in the field), the emerging forces (e.g.,

Table 1. National Curriculum policy frameworks (NCPFs) in selected countries/regions.

Country/Region	Framework	Year of Publication	Age Group
Australia	Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework	2009	Birth to 5
Canada (Ontario)	How does learning happen? Ontario' pedagogy for the early years	2014	Under age 6
China (Mainland)	Guidelines for 3–6 Children's Learning and Development	2012	3–6
Denmark	The strengthened pedagogical curriculum: Framework and content	2020	0–6
England	Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)	2017[1]	0–5
Finland	National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care	2018	0–5/6
Hong Kong SAR	Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide	2017	2–6
Ireland	Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework	2009	Birth to 6
New Zealand	Te Whāriki (Updates)	2017	0–6
Northern Ireland	Learning to Learn: A framework for early years education and learning	2013	0–6
Norway	Framework Plan for Kindergartens	2017	0–5
Scotland	Pre-Birth to Three: Positive Outcomes for Scotland's Children and Families	2010	Pre-birth to 3
Singapore	Early Years Development Framework for Childcare Centres	2013	0–3
South Africa	The South African National Curriculum Framework	2015	Birth to 4
Sweden	Curriculum for the Preschool Lpfö 18	2019	1–5
Taiwan	Curriculum Framework for Kindergarten Education and Care Activities	2012	2–6
US (California)	Infant/Toddler Curriculum Framework	2012	Birth to 3
US (New York)	Early Learning Guidelines	2012	Birth to 5
Wales	Early Years Outcomes Framework	2015	0–7

Greater China and South Africa), and the practicality and accessibility (i.e., the documents available in English). This selection of NCPFs is both a new contribution and a limitation regarding its coverage of countries. As many countries/regions have recently (between 2017 and 2020), updated their NCFs (e.g., England, New Zealand, Nordic countries, Hong Kong) our paper serves as an update of possible global trends in ECE curriculum policies.

Additionally, the study analysed the national evaluation reports that monitor the implementation of NCPFs in local practices. Although only seven out of the 19 countries have conducted nation-wide evaluation of the effectiveness of NCPFs and have reports available in English (e.g., Australia, Canada, England, Ireland, New Zealand, Scotland, and Wales), we were able to identify some shared issues that focused on structural factors (Melhuish and Gardiner 2019) and local understanding and interpretation by staff both of which informed our conceptualisation of culturally-reflective policy and practice (Bautista et al. 2019; Lim 2019; Lin 2016).

The NCPFs were analysed and coded using content analysis (Erlingsson and Brysiewicz 2017). A hybrid of inductive and deductive approaches was adopted in developing major themes, including: 1) Skim reading each framework to yield an initial list of themes; 2) The research team reviewed the list and added/revised themes/subthemes; 3) In-depth coding was conducted through NVivo and adjustments to the themes were made. Further content analysis on these themes was carried out to identify patterns of universality and cultural specificity (McCoy 2022) in global and local discourses of ECE as embedded in the 19 NCPFs and presented below.

The discourse of developmentalism in ECE

Developmental theories have long been influential in (early) childhood studies (Blaise 2005; Gabriel 2020; Wood and Hedges 2016), including the often-associated brain theories and neurosciences. Key understandings of child development include that children follow shared patterns of development at different stages of their growth; that the development is predictable and earlier-stage development provides the basis for later stages; that development spans across five main domains such as physical, cognitive, communication/language, social, and emotional; and that development must be holistic and cover all domains. Those key understandings are largely present in all the NCPFs reviewed. To illustrate, all NCPFs emphasise the importance of early development for future learning and the acquisition of skills. Whilst key aspects of the NCPFs vary in detail, all have included the domains of development. Countries like Australia, Canada (Ontario), China, England, New Zealand, US (California) have provided detailed guidelines on 'typical' characteristics of development for children at different ages, even though they also stress that individual children may develop differently within the continuum of development (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning 2007; California Department of Education 2015). Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) (Copple and Bredekamp 2009; Gestwicki 2013) appears dominant in shaping pedagogies and practices in ECE, providing universal standards for child development across the world.

Nevertheless, developmental theories were constructed in particular contexts (e.g., Western) and histories, and therefore do not necessarily reflecting the diversity of childhood experiences in contemporary societies and in countries of the Global South (McCoy

2022; Nolan and Raban 2015). The normative guidelines on what children are expected to develop at every stage/age may also disadvantage and marginalise children from various backgrounds, such as those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), those from a language background other than the main instructional language in a society, and those with other socio-cultural diversities and differences. As Dahlberg et al. 2013) have pointed out, developmental theories prescribe and constrain childhood experiences.

Understanding ECE beyond developmentalism is evident in the reviewed NCPFs, both by directly addressing its limitations and by drawing on other theories (in particular, socio-cultural theories). For example, all NCPFs specify that children develop 'in different ways and at different rates' (The Curriculum Development Council 2017; Department for Education, England 2017). Further, child development (including brain development) 'takes place in the context of families and communities and is shaped by the day-to-day experiences and environments of early life' (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning 2007). Therefore, individual children's development is unique and subject to interactions with the contexts they are in.

Other discourses that complement the limitations of developmentalism are described below. Nonetheless, developmental theories still significantly underpin all 19 ECE NCPFs albeit to various extents (much less so in the Nordic countries than in others). The expectations that ECE prepares children's future learning and life and that all children become developmentally ready for more formal schooling at the end of ECE seem universal across countries. Even if individual differences are acknowledged and 'allowed', a universal goal for all children to ultimately develop into able and capable individuals is a powerful, neoliberal discourse amongst all countries.

Socio-cultural theories as post-developmental 'norms'

Socio-cultural theories complement developmental theories by explaining why differences in child development exist within a society and across cultures. As such, the influences of families, communities, and cultures (local, national, and global [Ministry of Education, New Zealand 2017]) are emphasised in ECE practice; and children's interactions with the social world become a significant part of their development and learning. Socio-cultural theories seem to have become the post-developmental 'norm' as all reviewed NCPFs focus on the collaborative partnerships between ECE settings, families, and communities. All parties provide support in forms of relationships (e.g., love, attachment), resources, and stimulation (Edwards 2003; Vygotsky 1962) to enable children's full potential for development. At the same time, cultural understandings and expectations of childhood shape the support provided. There are shared and culturally specific discourses that situate ECE in multiple socio-cultural contexts in the 19 countries/regions.

The discourse of children's rights

Globally, children are recognised as independent rights holders and citizens, under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). All states of concern in this paper have ratified UNCRC, except the US. Therefore, 10 NCPFs (Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, New Zealand, Norway, Scotland, Singapore, Sweden and Wales) explicitly refer to the UNCRC and portray all children as having rights to the best

possible childhood (their best interests), education and care, play, protection, and active participation in all matters affecting their lives. The remaining nine NCPFs equally recognise children's rights in those aspects even if UNCRC is not mentioned. ECE thus should respect and enable children's rights through practices that promote children's awareness of rights and responsibilities. In the Danish NCPF, it mentions that 'ECEs should provide children with co-influence, co-responsibility, and an understanding and experience of democracy' (Ministry of Children and Education, Denmark 2020, 7), which are similar to the statements in *Aistear* (NCCA 2009, the Irish ECE NCPF), the framework plan for kindergartens in Norway, and the Curriculum for the Preschool in Sweden. This means that children should have a say in their daily life and activities and embrace the democratic values of their societies. The Finnish national framework even suggests that 'children are provided with an opportunity to participate in preparing and developing the local curriculum for ECE' (Finnish National Agency for Education 2018, 17).

The universal agreement on children's rights has also led to other shared images of childhood amongst those countries. Australia's Early Years Learning Framework summarises early childhood into three connected dimensions: being, becoming and belonging (Australian Government 2009) which are reflected in all 19 NCPFs. Being a child is first of all life on its own, in addition to preparing for future life (Thorne 1993). Childhood embraces happiness, security, relationships with others, confidence, creativity, curiosity, other complexities and even challenges. Children actively engage with and respond to those complexities of life, with their competence, capacity, curiosity, ability, agency and resilience. Even young babies are competent and not merely vulnerable. At the same time, children's ideas, interests, knowledge and skills evolve and flourish as they gain experiences through their engagement with the social world. In the processes of being and becoming, children develop their sense of self and belonging to their families, communities, and societies. They construct their own values, identities, and understandings of the world through interacting with the social world surrounding them; actively participate in and contribute to the community.

Culturally-specific discourses of ECE

In reviewing the sociocultural perspectives of ECE, this paper finds that cultural constructions and expectations of children are highly consistent in different countries and in a globalised world, although bearing in mind that the majority of countries in this study are from WEIRD contexts. Where some culturally specific descriptions of children are presented, they are fundamentally resonant with the universal understandings. For example, New Zealand's understandings of children significantly reflect Māori traditions. In its Te Whāriki – Early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, New Zealand 2017), it states that '[i]n Māori tradition children are seen to be inherently competent, capable and rich, complete and gifted no matter what their age or ability' (12). This statement is consistent with the shared images of children described above. In Taiwan's Curriculum Framework for Kindergartens (Ministry of Education, Taiwan 2012), cultural expectations of children are founded upon the value of Ren ['仁'] (benevolence). Children are expected to inherit filial piety and fraternal duty in Taiwanese society, love and be kind to themselves and others, protect the environment, confront challenges, and build up cultural

competence. The ultimate goal is for Taiwanese children to become future citizens who value communications and principles, are capable of thinking and collaborating, and are confident and inclusive. Whilst articulated in cultural-specific languages, those goals in the Taiwanese NCPF are shared by other countries and cultures to a great extent.

In Hong Kong, a few culturally specific discourses are directly addressed in its new 2017 curriculum guide. Parental expectations that children should perform well in academic studies (Wong and Rao 2015) are challenged and the guideline particularly requires that kindergarten education should not encourage any forms of comparison among children. The role of Information Technology (IT) is also mentioned in a growing discourse of more Hong Kong children coming into contact with IT products at an early age. There are expectations that children should use and take advantage of IT to support their learning and development while not being deprived of real-world experiences and physical health due to over-reliance on IT. Although these discourses are specific to the Hong Kong context, they are underpinned by developmental theories (e.g., developmentally appropriate practices, domains of development) that the majority of other countries also agree with.

Particularly, a specific discourse noted in the 3–6 learning and development guideline in Mainland China is the culture of collectiveness being promoted among Chinese children. Children are encouraged to participate in group activities so as to develop their sense of belonging to groups. Furthering this, the collective sense of honour towards children's communities, hometowns, and the nation needs to be developed through daily activities such as locating where the child comes from on maps, discussing photographs of landscapes, architectures, and other local specialities across the country, and learning about national flags, songs, and significant Chinese inventions and creations. In stressing collectivism, there is a brief mention of inviting children to discuss and decide on big events and plans in the kindergartens and classrooms. This could potentially be a sign of democracy that other NCPFs frequently mention regarding children's participation in a democratic society (see below).

Overall, sociocultural theories have significantly influenced contemporary ECE policies and have become the post-developmental 'norms' in global discourses of ECE. Acknowledging that sociocultural contexts at micro, meso, and macro levels (Bronfenbrenner 1994) can be dynamic and complex, countries share universal understandings of childhood and broad significance/goals for ECE. Those understandings and goals are constructed by the power of children's rights as legitimised by UNCRC, as well as by the associated images of the child. Whereas the UNCRC is criticised for its 'Western' underpinnings in terms of both the constructions of children and childhood and the realisation of children's rights (Pupavac 2011). Sociocultural theories therefore fail to account for the perceived 'superiority' of Western constructions of childhood over other cultural constructions of childhoods, whereby the latter remain less visible in national curriculum policy framework (NCPFs) even if sociocultural perspectives are claimed.

A critical and democratic approach to ECE

Whilst the dominance of developmental and socio-cultural theories is strongly evident across the 19 NCPFs, there are also emerging appeals to challenge dominant theories, to continually reflect on taken-for-granted practices in working with young children, and to

become aware of the 'hidden curriculum' that exists in ECE (Apple 2019; Cohen and Waite-Stupiansky 2017; Nolan and Raban 2015). A discourse of promoting liberty and democracy in understanding the world and being critical of the dominance of certain forms of knowledge (Bohman 2019) is reflected. Adult teachers are expected to reflect on their pedagogy and practice, including on the reasons for certain approaches they adopt, whether alternative approaches exist, how different approaches may lead to different experiences, and how their own personal experiences and subjectivities form part of the curriculum. Children also demonstrate critical thinking in their activities, with and without adult support. The NCPFs of the four Nordic countries specifically mention that adults should challenge children and inspire them to 'make new discoveries and acquire new knowledge' (Skolverket 2019, 7). Teachers' reflective practices are advocated in the professional development of ECE workforce (Altrichter et al. 2007; Hayes et al. 2014; Lindon and Trodd 2016) and are frequently mentioned amongst all NCPFs.

In addition, the power of normalising child development in alignment with dominant 'Western' constructions of childhood is likely to be minimised when NCPFs embrace justice and inclusion, cultural diversity, and child agency in critical and reflective ways.

Promoting justice and inclusion

A critical approach advocates that ECE offers opportunities for social transformations that challenge social inequalities and injustice in the wider society (Butler 1990; Connell and Pearse 2015; Warin 2019; Xu 2020b; Xu, Warin, and Robb 2020). The intention for states to tackle social inequalities and injustice through ECE is well documented in the reviewed NCPFs. In the first place, all NCPFs state that ECE supports young children to have a best possible start in their life and to achieve their full potential. This is believed to be particularly important for children from disadvantaged and/or vulnerable backgrounds (e.g., poverty, special education needs and/or disabilities, second language learners, indigenous groups). Therefore, the inclusion of all children is a key principle in an ECE NCPF. As New Zealand's *Te Whāriki* early childhood curriculum describes, 'Inclusion encompasses gender and ethnicity, diversity of ability and learning needs, family structure and values, socio-economic status and religion' (Ministry of Education, New Zealand 2017, 13). Inclusion is achieved through promoting equality and diversity. The former is about making sure all children can 'participate equally with the opportunity to fulfil his/her potential' (NCCA 2009, 8); whereas diversity means to welcome and value individual and group differences, and to understand and celebrate difference as part of life. Whilst the good intentions underlying equality and diversity are endorsed, some of their problems need further reflections. For example, equality only relates to providing equal opportunities, not necessarily addressing the removal of barriers in societal structures that impede opportunities (Schenker et al. 2019). Diversity emphasises respect for differences, whereas it fails to clarify whether differences that contradict minimum human rights should be included (Knocke 1997).

Aspects concerning justice for and inclusion of children and their families/communities are multiple. They include but are not limited to: abilities and needs, culture, gender, ethnicity, race, language, sexual orientation, religion, and socio-economic status. All NCPFs require that ECE curriculums take those differences into account and act against discrimination of any form. More importantly, the diversity of children, their families and

communities, and even those who work in ECE, is an asset and represents resources that enrich children's experiences in ECE environments (Ontario Ministry of Education 2014). Although a variety of differences and diversity is mentioned in all NCPFs, the degrees of elaboration on those aspects vary (Xu et al. 2020). Further problematisation of those 'differences' is also necessary when reflecting on how certain differences may reproduce norms and beliefs that disadvantage certain human groups.

Cultural diversity

Among the various aspects of diversity, cultural diversity is an increasingly universal element in globalised societies (Antonsich 2016; Meer, Modood, and Zapata-Barrero 2016). Incorporating cultural diversity into ECE is emphasised by all NCPFs and comprises two dimensions: celebrating multiple cultures and promoting understanding of the cultural histories of specific communities within a geographically relevant area to the ECE setting (local cultures). On the one hand, ECE pedagogies and practices must respect culturally specific ways of knowing, seeing and living that children bring to ECE. Staff members must endeavour to embed children's multiple cultures in ECE environments and promote children's cultural competence both in honouring their own cultures and respecting others'. On the other hand, in some curricula, the inclusion and understanding of marginalised local cultures is key. For example, in Australia, understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and being is pivotal in ECE. Canada requires ECE systems to 'recognize the unique needs of French and English linguistic minority communities and those identified by provinces and territories in their action plans, and of Indigenous peoples' (Canada 2017, 2). South Africa emphasises that indigenous and local knowledge, skills and behaviours should inform programme design and activities for children and their families. In Hong Kong, there is a new agenda to help non-Chinese speaking (NCS) or newly arrived children to understand and adapt to local cultures and lifestyles. Northern Ireland's Intercultural Education Service (IES) and Supporting Newcomer Pupils policy similarly offer support and advice to meet the needs of newcomer children. In Taiwan where globalisation is recognised, the uniqueness of local cultures is also important in kindergarten education. Local identities and traditional values are stressed when allowing young children to explore and construct their own identities. Other local cultures specifically mentioned in ECE frameworks include Sámi cultures in Finland and Norway, Pasifika cultures in New Zealand, and Welsh cultures in Wales (UK). Similarly though, promoting cultural diversity as stressed in reviewed NCPFs has little to say about addressing issues of injustice that some traditional cultures may experience.

Child agency

Lastly, in challenging dominant discourses and social inequalities and injustice, critical theories also view young children as agents of change and social transformers (Ebrahim 2011; Xu 2020a). ECE in this regard serves to empower young children and enable their agency in challenging social norms and structures that disadvantage them and others. This theory is reflected in nine out of the 19 NCPFs, as they demand that children (and their parents) participate in the planning of curricula, assessment, and the creation of learning environments in ECE (e.g., Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, New

Zealand, Norway, Scotland, Sweden). ECE settings are expected to be democratic contexts and empowering environments that enable children to challenge dominant knowledge, norms, and practices; as well as to incorporate local, national and international perspectives in constructing new worldviews and values (Ministry of Education, New Zealand 2017; Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2017). Nevertheless, the emerging discourse of empowerment in ECE is argued to be problematic, attributed to its underpinning connections with individualism that 'gives' power to individuals in resisting dominant discourses (Riger 1993). Empowerment therefore is criticised for being Western-centric (Cook 2021) and may not be able to address the hierarchical power relations in collective societies. Echoing Ellsworth's (1989) argument, the focus on individual child agency and their empowerment in ECE does not challenge the fundamental power structures that persist in many countries' ECE policies.

Discussion: culturally reflective policy and practice in ECE

This paper finds that two dominant global discourses shape ECE as reflected in the 19 reviewed NCPFs: developmentalism and socio-cultural theories. Meanwhile, a critical and democratic approach is emerging in the recent development of some NCPFs. The four Nordic countries' NCPFs are highly representative of critical and democratic approaches to ECE, allowing local ECE settings to develop their local pedagogical curriculum according to local challenges, strengths and competences. Only broad principles, requirements and themes are set. The Finnish NCPF further suggests that there are three levels of curriculum, comprising the national core curriculum, local curricula, and children's individual plans. A significant part of the national core curriculum concerns how the three levels of curriculum work in coherent and consistent ways. The Norwegian NCPF proposes a model of working methods that adapt for individual children, the group of children and the local community. This model echoes the 'working theories' suggested by Wood and Hedges (2016) as they question the content, coherence, and control in ECE policy frameworks.

NCPFs from the majority of studied countries/regions (e.g., Canada, Hong Kong, Ireland, New Zealand and South Africa) embrace socio-cultural theories and allow for local curricula that reflect local socio-cultural contexts. In Canada, a recent NCPF across the country provides guiding principles and objectives whilst allowing provincial and territorial governments to develop their own ECE systems. The New Zealand framework 'provides a basis for each setting to weave a local curriculum that reflects its own distinctive character and values' (7) and suggests the factors that a local curriculum should consider. In Hong Kong, the curriculum guide is claimed to be flexible and adaptable and provides a comprehensive framework for the development of a local curriculum with school-based characteristics. Similarly, the Irish framework offers concrete ideas and suggestions as sample learning opportunities under the curriculum aims and goals. At the same time, it points to the necessity of local adaptions where relevant. The South African framework also provides guidelines for observation and planning, but it underscores that the activities documented are examples rather than prescriptions. They provide ideas for opportunities for learning but are subject to the specific context of the child and to effective indigenous, local and global practices. Nevertheless, those NCPFs meanwhile provide detailed lists of learning outcomes, informed by the patterns of child

development. The 'localisation' of ECE curriculums is therefore compromised by the regimes of child developmentalism in those NCPFs.

Lastly, NCPFs in England, US (California and New York) and China strongly reflect the powerful discourses of neoliberalism, developmentalism, and governance and accountability. The English framework has clear definitions of areas of learning, characteristics of effective learning, and early learning goals that are statutory for ECE settings and children to work towards. A recent policy of baseline assessment is also in its pilot phase (Standards and Testing Agency 2020). Such standardisation is evident in US and Chinese frameworks/guidelines. For example, the California framework for infants and toddlers adopts a universal design for learning, so that it applies to all young children. Under this universal framework there are however multiple means of representation, expression and engagement. In other words, there are desired outcomes for all Californian young children to achieve, whereas the realisation depends on various factors concerning each individual child. The New York framework is similarly intended to enable children to meet the standards set according to the guiding principles, relevant literature, and developmentally appropriate practice in ECE. In those three countries, local practices should start with the overarching goals and objectives and end by meeting expected outcomes and standards. Even if there is some flexibility in adapting to local conditions, the regime of universalisation and standardisation leaves little space for local pedagogies and practices.

Through the comparison of how global discourses are embedded in the implementation requirements of the 19 NCPFs, this paper argues that culturally appropriate/relevant policy and practice is not a conceptual framework that necessarily challenges the dominance of the global discourses that shape ECE. Critical and democratic approaches in NCPFs that promote justice, inclusion, diversity, agency and empowerment clearly demonstrate significant attempts to enact local curricula that respond to dynamics in local socio-cultural contexts, as well as to support marginalised and/or disadvantages groups of children and their families. However, the problems that are identified within local socio-cultural contexts must not be ignored or even reproduced when culturally- and locally appropriate practices are endorsed. Such problems include for example, cultural values, beliefs, norms and practices that run counter to minimum human and children's rights (Knocke 1997; Schweisfurth 2014; United Nations 1948).

Our further review of national evaluation reports in selected countries (Xu et al. 2020) on the effectiveness of NCPFs identified that policy enactments of NCPFs rely significantly on the understanding and interpretation of leaders and staff in ECE settings, who find it a challenge to assure quality implementation of the vision and aspirations set in NCPFs (Bautista et al. 2019; Lim 2019; Lin 2016). The evaluation reports widely recognise that continuous professional development and staff training is essential, particularly in relation to reflective practice and self-evaluation (Xu et al. 2020). Informed by the empirical evidence on challenges of implementing NCPFs at local levels, and taking into account the dominant global discourses that normalise ECE, we propose a conceptual framework of culturally reflective policy and practice in response to debates around the global-local divide in constructions of ECE. Details of this conceptual framework is detailed below.

Conclusion

This paper suggests that the dominant global discourses that shape ECE curricula in the countries/regions studied are based on developmentalism and socio-cultural theories, which complement and compete with each other. Developmentalism seems to lend power to the neoliberalisation of ECE, underpinning the accountability measures that states put forward to achieve standardisation, normalisation, and universalisation in ECE provisions and child outcomes. The hegemony of a developmentalist construction of a child makes other visions of childhood(s) invisible, especially in contexts other than the Western (Rudolph 2017). It also marginalises children and families from vulnerable backgrounds by failing to embrace the diversity of societal factors that influence children's learning and participation in ECE. Whereas socio-cultural theories respond to the ecological system that operates to shape the dynamics of ECE, emphasising the global and local contexts that children, families, ECE settings and communities are situated in. NCPFs underpinned by socio-cultural theories seemingly address the issue of 'decontextualisation' in international and national ECE policies (Delaune 2019). However, a top-down transmission of macro-level values exists in both international and national systems of ECE. Culturally- and locally relevant educational values and visions are difficult to enact without challenging the regimes/power of higher-level, dominant discourses.

The analyses and comparisons of 19 NCPFs reveal that a critical approach to ECE is pivotal in challenging dominant discourses at global and local levels. However, a critical approach needs to stay away from advocating for cultural appropriateness/relevance in local ECE practices. Culturally-reflective policy and practice is a proposed conceptual framework that incorporates universal 'minimum standards' of human and children's rights (Schweisfurth 2014) into local cultures, at the same time challenging social norms and dominant discourses through a democratic system of ECE (Moss 2015) that gives voices to key stakeholders including educators/teachers, children, and families, who decide on the learning and experiences of each child subject to multiple-level contexts and conditions. This approach requires that local key stakeholders are given the freedom and autonomy to make local decisions; are recognised as active and agentic participants in challenging the power of dominant discourses and knowledge; and are supported with necessary resources to enact changes and transformations that benefit children, families, communities and the society.

Note

1. This study was conducted before the 2021 version of EYFS was published.

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