

Putting children first: A well qualified early childhood teaching workforce

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Around 150,000 children in New Zealand attend a licensed early childhood education service. Participation is encouraged because there is strong research evidence that high quality early childhood education benefits children, not only when children are attending the service, but also through their schooling and in later life. Smith et al.'s (2000) review of New Zealand and international evidence showed there to be a positive impact of high quality early childhood education on children's emotional, social, physical, and cognitive development. This positive impact is highest for children whose home environment is unstimulating and unresponsive. Conversely, if children participate in early childhood education and care services that are poor, there are likely to be detrimental effects, such as difficulties with language, social development, and behaviour. Improving quality is therefore a policy priority in New Zealand and internationally.

The staff who work in early childhood education services have a major influence on children's learning and development. This is because the ways in which staff interact with children – such as whether they focus on children's learning, encourage children to explore activities, extend and challenge children's thinking, provide meaningful activities, and are responsive to children – are critically important.

There is very considerable research evidence of a strong link between the training of staff and the quality of early childhood education services. In particular, staff who have specialised early childhood education training and more years of formal education, provide more stimulating, warm, and supportive interactions that benefit children. Training and education is a major policy issue because its influence and importance is so widely recognised. Smith et al. (2000) noted training can also weed out people who are unsuitable for teaching, while those who have a gift for working with children can be trained to understand how children develop and are influenced by their environment.

Where does New Zealand stand in relation to training and qualifications? Kindergarten teachers are required by legislation to be registered early childhood teachers. The registration shows that they have completed a teacher education programme providing them with the depth of experience, knowledge, and expertise to be an early childhood teacher. Registered teachers must also hold a practising certificate, renewed every three years, showing that they have undertaken professional development and are still fit and suitable to be a teacher.

In education and care centres, requirements for training are lower. Some centres have no qualified teachers working in them. In 2000, the government made a requirement that the "person responsible" in education and care centres and other "teacher-led" services would have to be a qualified teacher. It let the sector know then that from 2003, all new "persons responsible" had to be qualified teachers and from January 2005 all existing "persons responsible" had to be qualified teachers. Through its strategic plan (Crown, 2002), the government is extending these requirements in a phased approach so that by the year 2012, all teachers in all "teacher-led services" will be required to be registered teachers. Various training incentives were made available to help people train, such as scholarships, incentive grants, and Recognition of Prior Learning. There are opportunities for part-time study, field-based training, and correspondence courses so that people can study while remaining in paid employment.

These policy decisions will go a long way to strengthening quality in New Zealand's early childhood education services. Many in the sector have welcomed the change, and many practitioners have made use of incentive grants and professional support to complete teacher training. A workforce survey (Harkess, 2004) completed by 85 percent of all "teacher-led services", showed that just over half their staff hold an early childhood education teaching qualification, some also hold a postgraduate qualification, and many are doing more study.

A recent newspaper article (Lee-Smith, 2004, p. 5) argued that the policy is pushing out experienced people whose qualifications are not recognised and claims that: "Hundreds of preschools [education and care centres] across New Zealand face closure next year as the sector struggles to cope with new qualification requirements." Figures from the workforce survey and from a 2003 ERO report (Education Review Office, 2003) of 121 services show that most will meet the new requirements by 1 January 2005. According to the workforce survey, a small number (95) of the 1,488 education and care centres that responded may not have any qualified "person responsible" within the timeframe. The biggest problem is in Auckland where 48 education and care centres may not have any person responsible meeting the qualification requirement by 1 January 2005. While the survey figures are indicative (because there is no information on about 185 services that did not respond), the prediction of hundreds of closures is not substantiated by this evidence.

Many education and care centres are full day centres, where children may spend 8–10 hours per day and the need for qualified teachers is crucial. Abandoning the policy in order to address the difficulties of a small group of centres would put children's interests second. Although there will be a new pool of qualified graduates at the end of 2004, the solution rests mainly with centre management and policy makers. ERO reported that centres that found it easier to meet requirements were those that relied on providing opportunities for staff training and professional development rather than on recruiting new staff with the necessary qualifications. While extending the timeframe to achieve the required qualifications may be an option, this would need to be ring-fenced to a prescribed group and for a very short period conditional on management supporting staff to complete the requirements. The Ministry of Education would need to ensure the policy is enforced. The early childhood education sector has a history of training requirements being weakened and changed. This is one reason why a long-term strategic plan was sought and why we do not have a fully qualified teaching workforce today.

Currently in New Zealand there are disparities in the quality of early childhood education, with children's access to good quality services being dependent on these being available in the child's community, and parents making the right choice. As a policy goal, making sure that all early childhood education services are of good quality is a priority. The OECD (2001, p. 126) pinpointed "appropriate training and working conditions" as one of eight key elements of successful early childhood education policy. Ensuring that staff in early childhood education services are qualified teachers is one essential measure to achieve this goal.

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