
COMMENT

This issue of *Early Childhood Folio* goes to publication as the second New Zealand Council for Educational Research national survey of early childhood education services is being released. The national survey was conducted in late 2007. It questioned parents, teachers, parent committees, and management, and provides a snapshot of the sector.

High teacher morale, greater involvement by parents in assessment, and reduced costs to families are among the positive themes to emerge. The data shows steady improvement in important aspects such as financial stability of centres, affordability for parents, assessment practices, and teacher professional development, compared to the first national survey conducted by NZCER in 2003.

The early childhood education sector is in good heart. This is really good news for our children and families, and shows that investment in this important area of education pays dividends. Where there has been policy work that has changed resources for early childhood education services, parents, and teachers we see some positive gains.

Perhaps one of the most striking changes in this survey compared to the first national survey was that parents have become much more involved in their child's assessment—80 percent of parents compared with 53 percent in 2003. This usually meant taking assessment portfolios home and contributing stories from home.

Despite that higher level of involvement, 32 percent of parents said they would like more information about their child's early childhood education, and this was higher than in 2003 (18 percent). It may be that parents are now more aware of how they can contribute to their child's learning and development, and they're getting more of an idea of what they might expect from their early childhood education service. That's a positive development.

Assessment resources, *Kei Tua o te Pae Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars*, are being widely used according to teachers and are having an impact. Most teachers thought the resources had helped them to become better able to assess children's learning and development, and around half saw other benefits—helping children to self-assess, involving families, and

understanding sociocultural theory. These positive shifts are towards more qualitative and interpretive methods of documentation that are able to capture the learner within the contexts of relationships and environment.

This is the first independent survey of the sector since the implementation of 20 hours Free Early Childhood Education for three- and four-year-olds in July 2007. Almost all families surveyed reported reduced costs as a result of the policy. Fifty-seven percent of those in education and care centres, where costs are highest, were saving more than \$40 a week.

The comments from parents indicate the policy has meant some children are getting early childhood education who would otherwise have missed out. As one parent said, "It will allow us to keep our daughter in early childhood education care for at least a few days a week when number two arrives. That will be great for our daughter as well as mum!"

Free early childhood education was promoted as a goal by sector representatives who participated in the working group to develop the early childhood education strategic plan. The working group's vision was for "an entitlement to a reasonable amount of free early childhood education for all children before they start school". Adoption of a policy of free early childhood education is also in keeping with trends in OECD countries to provide at least two years free provision before children start school. Recently, there has been advocacy to develop policy framed around the participatory rights of children: free early childhood education is consistent with those rights.

I believe that at least two policy goals are important for early childhood services to be sites for the kinds of participation and contribution that are becoming a feature of early childhood education in New Zealand:

- a well remunerated, professionally supported, qualified, and registered teaching workforce
- provision of free early childhood education for all children whose parents see they would benefit from the opportunity.

The current policy frameworks go some way to supporting these goals. Let's ensure we keep them.

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