

**Shifting directions in New Zealand early childhood policy:
The retreat from being
“almost free” and “fully teacher led”**



Early Childhood in Aotearoa -NZ

- Birth to five years
- Policy integration of care and education
- Separation of early childhood and school sectors
- Diverse early childhood services - home and centre-based, parent and teacher-led
- Community - private - state partnership
- Participation rates in early childhood education
 - 98% of 4 year olds
 - 60% of 2 year olds
 - 22% of 1 year olds
- All children receive a subsidy (over two years and under two rates) for up to 30 hours a week and parents pay fees on top of this unless they are eligible for a fee rebate
- 3 and 4 year olds in centre based services - 20 hours “free” (now 20 hours)
- Funding linked to the cost and number of qualified teachers in the centre towards achieving (originally)100% (now 80%) qualified teachers by 2012

Speaking at the second *Early Childhood Care and Education Seminar* at the Centre for Social and Educational Research in Dublin (24 January, 2008) Peter Moss described New Zealand as an, ‘interesting and surprising exception to the general picture’ of ‘market standardisation’ in early childhood policy and its ‘split systems’ of childcare, early education and targeted services for the poor (Moss, 2008, p.7). This presentation is prefaced by Moss’s outsider view of New Zealand,

having developed a reform of ECEC services that confronts the split system and the dominance of technical practice. While there are many elements of the market apparent, including a large for-profit sector, New Zealand has also opened up diversity, most obviously in its innovative early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki*.

New Zealand has developed a national framework, which brings some coherence to the system around issues of equity and access. One Ministry (education) is responsible for all ECEC services; there is a single funding system for services, (based on direct funding of services rather than parents); a single curriculum; and a single workforce, which by 2012 will consist of early childhood teachers, educated to graduate level. Underpinning these structures, and perhaps the most radical change of all, New Zealand has an integrative concept that encompasses all services - ‘early childhood education’, a broad and holistic concept that covers, children, families and communities, a concept of ‘education-in-its-broadest-sense’ in which learning and care really are inseparable and connected to many other purposes besides. *New Zealand has, in short, understood the need to rethink as well as restructure early childhood education and care* [my emphasis] Moss, 2008. pp.7-8).

In May 2007, Moss was in New Zealand. This was the midway point in the implementation of *Pathways to the Future - Ngā Huarahi Arataki 2002-2012* (Ministry of Education, 2002), the Labour Government’s strategic plan for early childhood, developed in collaboration with the sector during 2000-2001. Moss was a keynote speaker at the symposium, ‘Travelling the Pathways to the Future’. There was a ‘celebration’ of the positive effects the plan had on the sector. However, delegates noted that there was much to ‘evaluate’, particularly in relation to issues such as, a divide between teacher-led and parent-led services, the difficulties in meeting the requirements for having qualified teachers in centres and the balance of the new partnership between government and the sector (Meade and Royal-Tangaere, 2007).

Moss told delegates that New Zealand was ‘leading the wave’ of early childhood innovation. More particularly, New Zealand had ‘confronted the wicked issues’ with the development of an integrated and coherent national approach to funding, regulation, curriculum and qualifications (Moss 2007, p.33). Moss identified further challenges towards overcoming constraints to participation. He called for a ‘universal entitlement to

a free ECE service from 12 months' (p.35). This was a re-echo of the original proposal from the Strategic Plan Working Group that asked 'for whanau and families to have a universal entitlement to a reasonable amount of free, high quality early childhood education' (Strategic Plan Working Group, 2001a, p.5). This was deemed by government as 'blue skies thinking' and the working group was urged to be more 'fiscally responsible' in its recommendations (May, 2002). A second report was submitted; the recommendation remained unchanged, except for the phrase '(or almost) free' being inserted (Strategic Plan Working Group, 2001b). Free ECE was not a recommendation from government in its strategic plan, although a new funding model was promised, and 'behind the scenes' policy work began on a model that included the possibility (May, 2009). Free ECE was a surprise announcement in the 2004 Budget with a commencement date of July 2007. The policy, however, had been trimmed to '20 hours free ECE' a week for three and four year olds. There was no universal entitlement; centres and parents had to opt into the scheme. Nevertheless the policy deserved to be hailed as a significant initiative to encourage access to early childhood education.

In 2008 an election was looming. The Labour Government had been in power since 1999. Colin James, an esteemed political commentator, provided a New Zealand insider perspective on the government's social policies. In James's view Labour would lose the election. In a headlined obituary 'Labour's Legacy' written ten months prior to the election and syndicated across all leader newspapers, he stated:

When it comes time to memorialise Labour's fifth spell in office, it may be remembered most lastingly for early childhood education... . Making early childhood systematic...takes us deep into a zone of policy debate: on citizens' access to participation in our economy and society. This debate is no longer just about the absence of legal or administrative impediments. It is about what constitutes genuine capacity to participate... . So early childhood education is investing in infrastructure, just like building roads. It is arguably Labour's most important initiative, its biggest idea (*Otago Daily Times*, 19 February 2008).

James's prediction was correct.

The new government will not unravel all the strategic plan initiatives. This has not been the pattern of the past 60 years during which successive Labour Governments have initiated new policy agendas regarding early childhood policy. The past pattern has been for the more conservative National Governments, to often attack the edges and stall the intended policy but generally maintain the status quo and sometimes smooth the

operational detail that did not keep pace with Labour’s rush to change (May 2009). However, in 2010 the aftermath of a severe economic downturn has provided a rationale for a National-led government to cut deeper into early childhood’s hard-fought-for ‘systematic’ ‘infrastructure’.

The primary goals of *Pathways to the Future* were to implement ‘quality provision’ and ‘improved participation’. Harder to grapple with, the third goal of ‘promoting collaborative relationships’ recognised the role of early childhood education (beyond the benefits for individual children) in community development. There was an acknowledgement that the government would be required to play a more supportive role. The first two sections of this presentation provide more context regarding two key planks of the strategic plan: for early childhood services to be fully ‘teacher-led’ and almost ‘free’. The final section outlines the recent retreat from their full realisation. The concluding statements in the first and second edition of my book *Politics in the Playground* (2001, 2009), broadly framing the years of the strategic plan development and its demise, capture some elements of the politics.



POLITICS OF CHILDHOOD

‘The playground’(2001)

Early childhood education is taken very seriously on the political front. This is a potential problem, as politicians, employers parents and schools see the institutions of the early childhood years as the solution for many things

Early childhood has always been the experiment. The issue is whose experiment and which blueprint will guide the future policy



‘The playground’(2009)

The New Zealand success story has been about ‘travelling’ the ‘pathways to to the future’ with a cohesive vision and policies. The risk now is that divergent pathways might emerge...

The landscape is changing. Not only has there been a government change form Labour to National Early there has also been a world-wide economic downturn... The new political and economic times are undoubtedly going to need new strategies for politics in the playground (Dec 2008).

Teacher-led

There are diverse early childhood services in New Zealand including kindergartens for three and four year olds that have, since the nineteenth century, been significantly fully teacher-led. On the other hand, until the 1990s, childcare services were required to have only one qualified staff member, with less than a teaching qualification. From 1988, colleges of education offered integrated teacher education qualifications whose graduates could work in either kindergarten or childcare. From the late 1980s there was support for

staff in childcare to upgrade their qualifications. Regulations were changed to require firstly one then two staff with teaching qualifications in each centre.

That New Zealand should aspire to 100% teacher-led services was justified by research evidence that the presence of qualified teachers has long-term positive outcomes for children (A. Smith et al, 2000; Wylie and Thompson, 2003). There was also the recognition that the implementation of the vision of the national curriculum *Te Whariki* (Ministry of Education 1996) for all children to be ‘confident and competent learners’, required qualified teachers who understood development, pedagogy, research and practice. *Te Whāriki* provided no recipes for teachers. Within each centre, staff, children and families would ‘weave’ their own curriculum mat – the whāriki - as a participatory process around aspirational principles and goals (Carr and May, 1999).

The strategic plan outlined a staged schedule whereby all adults in teacher-led centres would be registered teachers or completing qualifications by 2012. Teacher registration, a two-year period of professional supervision, was to become compulsory for all teachers in early childhood settings. The government’s commitment towards establishing a teacher-led profession remained firm throughout the decade despite opposition from a variety of sectors, including private operators, or in locations that had difficulty recruiting qualified teachers, those experiencing the industrial effects of increased costs, and from parent-led services, such as playcentre and Kohanga Reo. Some Kohanga Reo did qualify as teacher-led centres and parents and Kaiako in both organisations were recognised as ‘teachers’ for licensing and funding purposes. There were also issues for the growing number of Pasifika, Montessori and Rudolf Steiner centres, whose distinctive character required staff with qualifications sympathetic to the particular philosophy. The ideals of diversity have been tested by the teacher-led policy.

The commissioned report, ‘Outcomes of early education: literature review’ (L. Smith et al, 2008), provided reassurance that the increased investment towards improving quality participation in early childhood education was both positive and prudent. The research evidence collated, indicated positive (cognitive, learning dispositions and social emotional) outcomes for children participating in good quality early childhood education in both the short and long term. As well as detailing benefits for parents, the report outlined the long-term cost/benefits for governments.

The transformation in the structural landscape of early childhood teaching has led to a 're-think' of the role of the professional early childhood teacher. There is the suggestion that distinctive professional qualities defining early childhood teachers in New Zealand are emerging (Dalli and Cherrington, 2005). These include particular 'pedagogical styles and strategies' and a distinctive 'professional knowledge and practice', underpinned by a framework of 'collaborative relationships' (Dalli, forthcoming). The principles of *Te Whāriki*, the goals of *Pathways to the Future*, and the new Centres of Innovation (COI), a strategic plan policy intended to showcase excellence, are all seen as having helped shape this uniquely New Zealand early childhood teacher. By 2008, sixteen centres had undertaken a three-year action research cycle to extend and showcase to other teachers an area of innovation and excellent practice in their programme. Anne Meade, who led the COI work, has written of the transformative experience in which 'teacher-researchers have become educational leaders, by making their practice-based knowledge both explicit and public' (Meade, 2006, p. 45).

From 2002, the government invested considerable resources towards realising a teacher-led policy. In 2005, a new funding model was introduced linked to the actual costs of employing qualified teachers (Ministry of Education, 2005). Funding would increase as centres phased-in the requirements for qualified and registered teachers. This favouring of centres that employed qualified staff caused concern amongst private childcare centre owners, who had a legacy of reluctance to employ more teachers than the regulatory requirement.

The new funding model also addressed issues of pay parity across the education sectors (May, 2005). In 2002 kindergarten teachers won pay parity with primary and secondary teachers, all of who are state servants. Pay parity was harder to negotiate and regulate for teachers in childcare services outside the state sector in the community – private domain. In 2004, the Ministry of Education released the *Guide to the new early childhood funding system – Implementing Pathways to the Future*. This recognised that childcare centres operators must pay wages to their qualified staff, at least at the level agreed to under the largest industrial agreement for childcare – even though this was a minority of employers. In 2005, a claim for pay parity with kindergarten teachers was tabled and eventually accepted by the signatory childcare employers on condition that government funded the cost. The government subsequently required all centres to attest to

the wage levels of their staff as a requirement for receiving additional funding (Ministry of Education, 2005). The pay parity solution was not perfect as attestation of pay parity across the higher levels of the scale was not required. However, the shortage of teachers meant that many centres did offer pay parity.

Despite ongoing challenges with the implementation of the teacher-led scheme, Labour government policy remained staunch, at least until November 2008. Overall, the qualification policy demonstrates a significant shift in political opinion regarding the status of early childhood teachers and their and qualifications, particularly in the context of childcare (Smith and May, 2006).

Free ECE

I have previously analysed the state's shifting political interest for investing in the education of preschool aged children (May, 2002). In the early postwar years, political interest and policy was influenced by psychological theories of developmental readiness for school and new 'understandings' of mother – child relationships. Later, support for early childhood services was framed around issues of equity for children, women and minority groups. During the 1990s, it was rationalised as a prudent economic investment for the nation. All of these gazes remain operative. By the 2000s the cautiously seeded view that the state should support its preschool-aged child citizens began to gain currency. This consideration is surprisingly tardy when compared to the oft-quoted statement outlining the 1939 Labour Government's vision for the education of the school aged child:

The government's objective, broadly expressed, is that every child: whatever his level of ability, whether he be rich or poor, whether he live in town or country, *has a right as a citizen, to a free education* of the kind for which he is best fitted and to the fullest extent of his powers (my emphasis) (Fraser, 1939).

The intention of the Strategic Plan Working Group was to extend this vision to preschool aged children from birth. Since 1989 all attending children were entitled to up to 30 hours per week of subsidy paid to the centre, but no right to a place and affordability was still an issue.

During 2007, in the lead up to the launch of the '20 hours free ECE' policy there was extensive and heated media debate. The big issue was the expectation of entitlement. Parents soon realised that the policy was flawed if the centre their child(ren) attended had

not opted into the scheme, or they lived in small towns, rural settings or certain city suburbs where parents had little choice in the kind of service available. The *NZ Herald* (17 January 2007) raised fears with the headline, ‘Thousands face missing out on free pre-school’. Their concern was fuelled by the Early Childhood Council, and its strong corporate and commercial interests; recommending to its members not to participate in the scheme. Parents of 50,000 children received a pamphlet entitled, ‘Early Childhood Education. Why your child might miss out?’ The reason given was that level of subsidy providers would receive from the government was too low (Early Childhood Council, 2007). The sentiments of rights was to the fore:

The government promised **free ECE** for your child. Please act now to make sure you get what you were promised. It is only fair – no ifs, no buts, no maybes.

Conversely, the Minister of Education, Steve Maharey, saw the reluctance of some providers to join as the ‘problem’. Although the policy did not guarantee ‘entitlement’, Maharey seemed to be supporting the notion when he told the reporter for the *Sunday Star Times* (17 June 2007) that the policy ‘is about the principle of 20 hours free and the right of young New Zealanders to that education’.

After the policy was implemented it had an immediate impact on the quarterly Consumer Price Index, which recorded a drop of 32.4% in the cost of fees for parents causing a 5.2% drop in the overall price of education in the country (Statistics NZ, 2007). It is too soon to fully evaluate its consequences. However, the government has been monitoring the take-up. By February 2008, 76% of centres were participating, including home-based services, benefiting 85,000 children, comprising 83% of the three and four year old children enrolled in early education (Ministry of Education, 2008). More private centres began to join, partly due to pressure from parents but, also after the government conceded that, legally, there was nothing to stop centre owners, like schools, charging an ‘optional fee’. Strict guidelines were issued to ensure there were no penalties for parents who did not pay a donation and to stop costs being shifted to the fees of younger children or other hours used outside of the scheme. By June 2008, the uptake of services offering free early childhood had risen to 80%. While only half of the privately operated centres initially joined the tide of opposition began to turn as the larger corporate providers began to sign up, mainly under pressure from their parents.

The opposition National Party, spurred by commercial interests, had campaigned against '20 hours free ECE', but the policy's popularity with parents and the difference it made to family budgets caused a turnaround. In July 2008, with the election looming the party announced that, if elected, they would 'maintain' the existing scheme because 'thousands of parents are using it and we do not want to cause uncertainty'. National, determined that the policy would be known only as '20 hours ECE' thus dropping the word 'free' and reducing the pressure to keep funding levels apace with costs. Everyone excepting government has continued to call the '20 hour ECE' policy 'free' despite 'optional fees'.

The level of government funding for the scheme was contentious because it was calculated on average costs and regulatory standards. Many services predicted a shortfall due to higher than regulation staffing levels or high property costs in some regions. In the *NZ Herald*, (27 April 2007), the Early Childhood Council described the policy as 'dangerous' and 'the biggest threat to quality of early childhood in our generation'. There was some justification to the complaint. A further concern related to the extent to which fees or donations from parents and subsidies from government should fund the actual costs of quality provision or be used in part to enhance profits. In the heat of the debate, the New Zealand Council for Education Research released data indicating private centres provided a lesser quality service (Mitchell and Brooking, 2007) and warned about the growth in the commercial sector at the expense of community sector. Increases in government funding had attracted investment in the business of childcare.

This early commentary can only identify the issues and illustrate the polemic of the debate concerning the '20 hours free ECE' policy. The divisions within this debate have made apparent the structural tensions underpinning early childhood policy. Balancing the multiple interests in the sector is a difficult task. These interests can be summarised as follows:

- Interests of centre providers in balancing the business of free early childhood education with the costs of quality
- Interests of private business in protecting its profit levels
- Interests of community services being the preferred provider
- Interests of early childhood teachers in achieving full professional status and pay parity
- Interests of parents in gaining access to free early childhood education

- Interests of government in increasing participation in cost effective quality early childhood education

The central issue regarding the interests of children was almost absent from the debate. Nevertheless, the policy was a result of political, professional and scholarly consensus that participation in quality early childhood education is a significant benefit for children and their families both ‘here and now’ in their daily life and also in the future at school and beyond. While there is still no entitlement for access to free early childhood education, New Zealand was inching towards this in terms of both policy and rhetoric.

After the release of *Pathways to the Future* (2002) I crafted a new version of Prime Minister, Peter Fraser’s 1939 vision for the school aged child. Using a mix of original and recent rhetoric, the statement is inclusive of ‘blue skies’ aspirations concerning the role of early childhood institutions for young children:

The government’s objective should, broadly speaking, be that every child, whatever their family circumstances, whether their parents are solo, separated or married, at work or at home, whether they be rich or poor, whether they live in town or country, are Maori or Pakeha, should have a right as a citizen to a free early childhood education that meets their family needs, recognizes their cultural heritage and provides a rich learning environment in a community of learning that empowers both adults and children to learn and grow as equal participants in a democratic society (May, 2002).

The Labour government’s mapping of the strategic plan ‘pathway’ to 2012 has less ‘blue skies’ but was nevertheless evidence of a supportive state.

The retreat

This final section uses some power-point slides from the presentation in London to summarise the ‘shifting directions in New Zealand early childhood policy.’

1. Measuring the end-of-decade statistics of the strategic plan policies indicate its successes and shifts of the two key policy planks.

FREE ECE	FULLY QUALIFIED
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consumer Price Index drop - 5.2 drop in education costs: 37.8% drop in ECE costs to parents. • Approx 25% centres in scheme charging 'optional fee' • 88% of all enrolled 3-4 years olds accessing 'free ECE' (will increase this year) • 93.5 of all teacher-led centres in the scheme • 2005-2009: Participation increased 17.5%. Average of 19.5 hours pw. • Overall enrolments increased by 10%. For younger aged children up to 21% increase 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Since 2002 the proportion of early childhood teachers with a qualification increased from 49% to 64%. • 57% of children attending ECE centres are currently in centres with over 80% staff qualified and registered • 53% of unqualified teachers enrolled in a tertiary institution to upgrade • Enrolments in early childhood teacher education programmes increased by 65%

2. In particular, the landscape of early childhood provision had shifted over the decade with the rise of private (for profit) provision, and trend continued for the growth in education and care (childcare) centres.

Statistics of the business of childcare

- 2008: 36% of all enrolments in ECE (including home-based) were in privately owned services
- 60% of children attending education and care (childcare) centres are in privately owned centres
- Overall participation rates increased by 10% over past 10 years but there are localities where participation is low
- 2005-9 enrolment trends:
 - kindergarten -12%
 - education and care +20.9%
 - home-based +54%.

3. In a reaction to some of these issues in 2008 I was asked by the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI – Te Riu Roa), the industrial and professional union for early childhood and primary teachers, to convene a Quality Public Early Childhood Education project for community early childhood providers. The aim was to create a more powerful coalition of interests to advocate for the strengthening of community based services. Many past early childhood policies had initially privileged community services. Most policies had been extended to the private services. The endeavour, while against the political tide, did produce strong aspiration statements and goals for community services that sat alongside a

broader education campaign for ‘Quality Public Education - 2020’ (Mitchell and May, 2009).

Against the tide

National collaborations: QPECE-2020

Vision

1. Every child has a right as a citizen to participate in free early childhood education.
2. Every family that wishes to can access high quality, community-based early childhood education.
3. The project group advocate for government policies to realise our vision by 2020.

Goals

1. Promotion of community-based ECE services including parent-led services through the development of a national plan for all ECE provision throughout Aotearoa New Zealand.
2. Provision of appropriate services to ensure every child can participate in free high quality ECE.
3. Robust accountability to government, parents, whānau and communities linked to indicators that demonstrate high quality ECE.

2006
QPE 4210: Quality Public Education for the 21st Century

2008
Quality Public ECE: A Vision for 2020

2009
Strengthening Community-based Early Childhood Education in Aotearoa New Zealand
Report of the Quality Public Early Childhood Education Project
Helen May and Linda Mitchell

4. Even prior to the change of government the tide was changing. In the midst of the world economic crisis when the NZ Treasury ‘opened’ its books’ prior to the late 2008 election, the government’s early childhood policies were blamed for contributing to the apparent ‘red ink’ of debt. The 2010 Budget was particularly harsh. The government had already halted at 80% the goal of 100% qualified teachers, but in the budget announced that those education and care centres with 100% would from 2011 only be funded at the 80% level. Notions of ‘20 hours free ECE’ were further disappearing as those centres contemplated charging fees to cover the shortfall, or decided not to appoint qualified staff.

‘Early Childhood Education Being Targeted by National For Funding Cuts’ 22/4/10

BUDGET: 20th May 2010

Budget a bitter blow for quality

“Black Budget” for Early Childhood Education

Childcare funding slashed

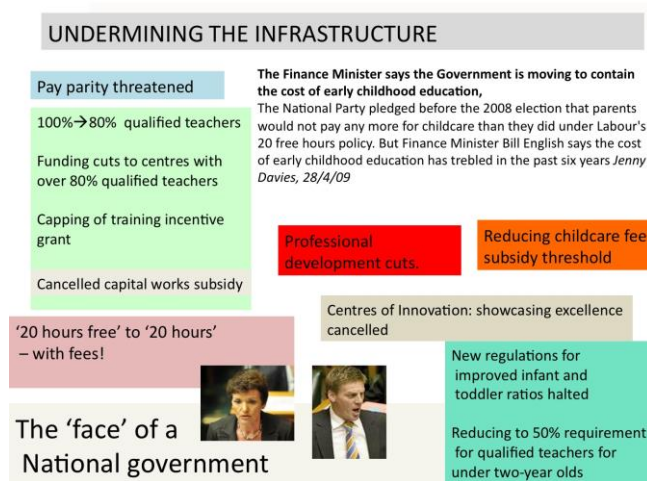
Early childhood educators devastated

Preschool costs to rise

Budget launches attack on quality teaching for youngest learners

ECE budget brutal blow to children and families

5. Overall the cutbacks were wide-ranging. The only beneficiaries were parent-led playcentres and kohanga reo Maori immersion centres who negotiated a better funding package under the governments '20 hours ECE' policy. They had long felt aggrieved at their exclusion from the 'free ECE' policy intended to fully subsidise the costs of qualified teachers.



6. In contrast to earlier decades, the qualifications debate during most of the 2000s was about realising the staged targets for the proportion of qualified teachers in education and care centres and gaining pay parity with kindergarten and primary school teachers. At the end of the decade the tenor of this debate began to revert to older questions concerning the value of qualified staff. This was something that was politically never questioned for over five-year-olds in school.

Qualification divides

<p>'Preschool Budget cuts right move' Editorial NZ Herald May 24, 2010</p> <p>Did childcare centres ever need to be fully staffed by trained teachers? or was this a classic case of 'qualification inflation'? The best at this level might not require professional training.</p> <p><i>It is a matter of personal belief as to whether a high proportion of all centre staff should be trained teachers.</i></p> <p>John Key, Prime Minister, 2010</p>	<p>It is a matter of an informed and evidence-based educational decision. These questions would never be raised about adults who teach 5-6 (or older) year-olds in school....</p> <p>We had hoped that 100% qualified teachers for <i>all</i> children in EC made us different from other countries with a high level of income equality and would contribute to the government's aim of equitable and quality outcomes for children from all backgrounds.</p> <p>Margaret Carr and Linda Mitchell, 2010.</p>
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In summary, New Zealand's early childhood policy still has a comprehensive infrastructure but the recent cut-backs and cancelations are reminders of the fragility of the gains. There is however, a long history of advocacy in the sector towards realising its 'blue skies' aspirations and working strategically in difficult times on small gains and containment whilst planning afresh opportunities for progressing the broader policy front.

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