

**EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

***New pathways to an uncertain future***

*by*

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## Introduction

Nga Huarahi Arataki, Future Directions<sup>1</sup> (the Plan) the long-term strategic plan for early childhood education, was founded on three key platforms: to improve quality, to increase participation and to increase collaboration between agencies, local providers and communities. Widely agreed to measures of structural quality were cited in the Plan and among them were requirements for qualified, registered teachers. State funding was linked to the number of qualified registered teachers and incentives were put in place alongside a growth in training opportunities for this to happen.

Peter Moss's outsider's perspective of New Zealand's early childhood provision noted that it had:

... developed a reform of [Early childhood education and care, 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<sup>2</sup>

In many ways, the Plan incorporated aspects of UNCROC and the Ministry of Social Development's Agenda for Children.<sup>3</sup> Currently, New Zealand's early childhood education services operate under a recently reviewed regulatory framework that prescribes structural and operational responsibilities. There has been significant financial investment by governments in reviewing and implementing regulations. Teachers and parents in whanau-led services (both licensed and non-licensed, informal services such as play groups) are monitored at a central and regional level by Ministry of Education personnel. As well as establishing minimum standards the regulations<sup>4</sup> also include statements pertaining to the professional aspects of teaching, such as a behaviour management regulation and guidelines, there is direct reference to the national curriculum document, *Te Whāriki*<sup>5</sup>.

*Te Whāriki*'s official release in 1996 represented a significant step towards recognising New Zealand's youngest children's rights. *Te Whāriki* has a well-quoted aspiration for children:

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1 Ministry of Education. (2002). Pathways to the future: Nga huarahi arataki. A 10 year strategic plan for early childhood education. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

2 May, H. (2008). New Zealand's 'Pathways to the Future' strategic direction in early childhood policy. Paper presented at the Early Childhood Care and Education Seminar Series 3, Centre for Social and Educational Research, Dublin.

3 Ministry of Social Development. (2002). New Zealand's agenda for children. Making life better for children. Wellington, New Zealand: Ministry of Social Development.

4 Early childhood regulations and policy statements are available from <http://www.lead.ece.govt.nz/ServiceTypes.aspx>, downloaded 31 July, 2010

5 Ministry of Education. (1996). *Te Whāriki*. He whāriki matauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum. Wellington: Learning Media.

To grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society<sup>6</sup>.

This strong aspiration supports children as citizens in the here and now. Interwoven within *Te Whāriki* are curriculum strands of Belonging, Wellbeing, Exploration, Communication, and Contribution. The contribution strand, articulated in a child's voice question as "Is this place fair for me?"<sup>7</sup>. This question is central to any discussion about children's rights in early childhood settings and implies support for children's rights to participate by asking teachers to consider how children contribute to an early childhood setting. How do they assume responsibility? How do they understand justice and fairness? These are questions about power, where it resides and whether or not it is shared. Certainly, principled statements in many of the official documents support power sharing, emphasising well-intended partnerships between teachers and parents<sup>8</sup>.

This document is based on principles that reflect UNCROC closely. Recent research by Te One (2009) used three categories of rights to investigate perception of children's rights in early childhood settings. As a background to this paper they are cited below.

### **Participation rights: The child's autonomy to express views and make decisions**

The idea of children's autonomy is expressed in Articles 12, 13, 14 and 15 which "note that children have a right to express their views on matters that affect them, and that children have a right to assemble, raise questions and voice opinions (Articles, 13 and 15)"<sup>9</sup>. The Preamble to UNCROC signals the importance of autonomy by stating that: "the child should be prepared to live an individual life in society"<sup>10</sup>. Article 29 concerns the role of education in preparing children "for responsible life in a free society" which implies that education is an important provision right that supports children's autonomy<sup>11</sup>.

UNCROC "challenge(s) all those responsible for the education of children to think in new ways about how to prepare them for democratic citizenship"<sup>12</sup>. However, adult and parental perceptions suggest that very young children are constrained by their lack of competence and experience in exercising choices; hence this is a particularly powerful argument confounding perceptions of children's rights in the early childhood sector.

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6 *ibid*, p. 9

7 Carr, M., May, H., & Podmore, V. N. (2002). Learning and teaching stories: action research on evaluation in early childhood in Aotearoa-New Zealand. *European Early Childhood Research Journal*, 10(2), 115-125., p. 119

8 Ministry of Education. (1996). Revised statement of desirable objectives and practices (DOPS) for chartered early childhood services in New Zealand. Wellington: The New Zealand Gazette, 3 October 1996.

Ministry of Education. (1998). Quality in action. *Te mahi whai hua. Implementing the revised statement of desirable objectives and practices in New Zealand early childhood services.* Wellington: Learning Media.

Ministry of Education. (2006). *Nga arohaehae whai hua. Self-review guidelines for early childhood education.* Wellington, NZ: Learning Media.

9 Power, F., Power, A. R., Bredemeir, B. L., & Shields, D. L. (2001). Democratic education and children's rights. In R. A. Hart, C. P. Cohen, M. F. Erikson & M. Flekkoy (Eds.), *Children's rights in education.* (pp. 98-118). London: Jessica Kingsley. (p. 98).

10 Child rights information network. [CRIN](2007). Convention on the rights of the child [Electronic Version]. Children's rights information network, 1-22. Retrieved 25 June, 2007 from <http://www.crin.org/docs/resources/treaties/uncrc.asp>, (p. 2)

11 *Ibid*, p. 13

12 Power et al., 2001, p. 98

### Protection rights: The family’s responsibility to nurture and bring up children

The Preamble to UNCROC acknowledges the role of the family “as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and wellbeing of all its members and particularly children”<sup>13</sup> :

State Parties shall respect the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents, or, where applicable, the members of the extended family or community. (Parents, family) should provide, in a manner consistent with the child’s evolving capabilities, appropriate direction and guidance in the exercise of the child’s rights recognised in the present Convention.<sup>14</sup>

### Provision rights

Provision rights articulate children’s rights, as members of society, to receive care appropriate to their emerging capacities. Provision rights also obligate others to provide care. In other words, children are dependent on others for care. Article 18 acknowledges parents as primary caregivers and at the same time obligates states parties to support parents or caregivers by providing appropriate childcare services. Table 1 below depicts three well used categories of rights and articles of UNCROC that are of particular relevance to the early childhood sector<sup>15</sup>.

Protection rights	Relevant articles	Provision rights	Relevant articles	Participation rights	Relevant articles
Discrimination	2	Minimum standards of family life	5, 27	A name and an identity	7, 8, 30
Best interests	3	Physical care and special care	6, 23	Consulted and to be taken into account	12
Substance Abuse	33	Access to parental care	18	To form an opinion	12
Physical and sexual abuse	19, 34	Education and health	28, 24	Physical integrity and privacy	16
Exploitation	32, 35, 36	Development	29	Information	17
Injustice	40	Social security	26	Freedom of speech and to challenge decisions made on their behalf	13, 14
Conflict	38	Play, recreation, culture, and leisure	31		

**Table 1: Categories and types of rights**

13 CRIN, p, 1

14 Ibid, pp 1 - 2

15 Te One, S. (2009). Perceptions of children’s rights in three early childhood settings. A thesis submitted to the Victoria University of Wellington in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education., Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington.

Table 2, below at page 7, links some of these Articles to establish a relationship between the principles of Te Whāriki and categories of rights often used to explain UNCROC. As a background, working paper, these tables establish the interest of the early childhood sector's NGO contribution to this report.

Research nationally and internationally has demonstrated that there are positive outcomes for children as a result of participating in early education of high quality<sup>16</sup>. Since the 2003 ACYA report<sup>17</sup> there has been some significant progress towards increasing quality, improving collaborations between early childhood services and community agencies, and increasing participation rates for children under 5 years old. The Labour-led coalition government invested in early childhood education and this partially closed the gap between the early childhood sector and other education sectors. Colin James, a noted political commentator 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<sup>18</sup>.

Increased funding went to improving quality by investing in qualified teachers, improving participation by increasing the number of places as well as to special initiatives to encourage Maori and Pasifika services to set up, and to encourage enrolments from these under represented communities. There was significant investment in New Zealand-based early childhood research in the Centres of Innovation programme. Professional development for teachers was funded centrally in a move to up skill the workforce to comply with curriculum and assessment regulations.

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<sup>16</sup> UNICEF. (2008). The child care transition. A league table of early childhood education and care in economically advanced countries. Florence, Italy: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.)

<sup>17</sup> Action for Children and Youth Aotearoa. (2003). Children and youth in Aotearoa 2003: The second non-governmental organisations' report from Aotearoa New Zealand to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. Wellington.

<sup>18</sup> Otago Daily Times, 19 February 2008

Categories of rights →	Protection Rights	Provision Rights	Participation Rights	Interwoven Interdependent Interrelated
Principles of Te Whāriki ↓				
Family and Community	Children's wellbeing and belonging protected	Accessible, affordable early childhood services provided	Place and space for families and community input	
Relationships	Relationships and partnerships nurtured and protected	Collaborative relationships with communities and government to provide services	Relationships/partnerships facilitate curriculum negotiations between children and teachers/parents	
Empowerment	Is this place fair for us? Children's contributions supported and protected	Space and place for contributions created	Support to empower children to contribute; to exercise their agency	
Holistic Development				Rights do not exist in isolation; context, perceptions and practices viewed as a whole

**Table 2 Categories of rights and the principles of Te Whāriki**

### Twenty hours 'free'?

One of the most significant policy moves implemented during this era was. Twenty Hours Free ECE policy "aimed at increasing participation in teacher-led services and eligible kōhanga reo by reducing the cost barrier to families"<sup>19</sup>. Initially, this policy entitled eligible teacher-led services to claim funding for up to six hours per day and up to 20 hours per week for three- and four-year-old children

19 Froese, N. (2008). Early Effects of 20 Hours ECE [Electronic Version]. Retrieved 20 March 2009 from <http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/ece/30449/30476>. (p. 1))

enrolled in early childhood education. The intention of the government funding is to increase participation rates. An early effect has found this to be the case with more three- and four-year-olds attending for more hours per day, and for more days per week (. This initiative was welcomed by some in the sector as a move towards free early childhood education which would place the sector on an equal footing with the primary and secondary provision. However, initially it was not equally applied. The Early Childhood Council, representing the interests of private sector providers complained that the costs of the scheme were unfairly distributed, disadvantaging parents who were unable to benefit from the scheme<sup>20</sup>. Initially the policy did not include parent/whānau-led services who protested that this disadvantaged them, and their children<sup>21</sup>. This has since been amended, and for those children enrolled in whānau-led services such as playcentres. Since 2008, when the National Government came to power, the word 'free' has been dropped in a semantic move which legitimises centres options to charge fees to meet regulations. Political pressure from parents ensured that this policy was to the fore in the election campaign and in the most recent lead-up debates to the 2010 budget.

### **Funding cuts**

The 2009 and 2010 Budgets both announced cuts to spending in the early childhood sector, as well as significant changes which potentially undermine the gains made in the past nine years. The 2009 and 2010 Budgets both announced cuts to spending in the early childhood sector, as well as significant changes which undermine the gains made in the past nine years. In the 2009 budget, professional development and research were cut and later that year, the target of 100 per cent qualified teachers was abolished. The 80 per cent target, that was to be reached by 2010, was pushed out until 2012. In 2010 funding that encouraged centres to employ more than 80 per cent qualified teachers was cut. It is not clear whether the benchmark of 80% by 2012 will be required by regulation.

There are grave concerns that these cuts will undermine quality and lower participation rates<sup>22</sup> and as such, this represents a backward step in the quality of service provision as measured by OECD and UNICEF evaluation criteria<sup>23</sup>. Further, this working paper argues that such steps potentially breach a fundamental intention of UNCROC as stated in Article 4 and Article 44 in particular. Article 44 concerns the notion of progress towards improving measures which give effect to children's rights. Removing funding will impact on the quality of service. Previous UN Committee reports have recommended that policy decisions need to consider the impact they might have on children. There is no evidence in the public arena to suggest that such considerations have been taken into account. Current research<sup>24</sup> is yet to be finalised, but indications are that established criteria for quality are reliable and robust.

### **Trained qualified teachers**

During the Labour-led coalition years, the early childhood sector experienced significant progress towards meeting the 2012 goal of a fully qualified and registered early childhood profession. This aspiration has always been contentious particularly in a mixed private/state funding arrangement as is the case in New Zealand, and, recent policy decisions have impacted significantly on the future direction of the Plan.

This funding regime acted as an incentive for teachers to become qualified and registered, and met a wider aspiration for improved quality of service. The Government estimate it will save about \$400 million over four years by abolishing the top two funding rates for early childhood centres - the

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20 NZ Herald, (27 April 2007

21 ibid

22 "Qualified teachers," Monday, May 31, 2010

23 UNICEF. (2008). The child care transition. A league table of early childhood education and care in economically advanced countries. Florence, Italy: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

24 The Office for the Commissioner for Children is currently undertaking an investigation into early childhood care and education for infants and toddlers

funding rates depend on qualified staff. However there is a concern that parents will be affected and much will depend on how their centre responds to the funding cut. If all the costs are passed on in fees, parents will have to pay the \$400 million<sup>25</sup>. If the costs are not passed on, families will be affected in other ways. Qualified teachers are one of the known key indicators of quality early childhood education, so cutting that funding also places quality at risk<sup>26</sup>. Centres eligible for the top two funding rates have used that money to increase the quality of education they are offering to our youngest citizens. Cutting that funding will therefore deliver a drop in quality and/or a significant increase in fees for parents.

### **Increased costs for parents**

There are concerns that the funding changes might increase costs for parents from between \$25 - \$40 per week and could affect more than 100,000 children<sup>27</sup>). This may well impact negatively on participation rates for children in early education. Equally concerning is the fact that some services participating in the 20 hour free programme are not allowed to charge fees, but will face a budget shortfall of up to 13 per cent.. It is likely that professional conditions, such as non contact time, professional development will be eroded. Salary gains of recent years that have made early childhood teaching an attractive professional may also be eroded. Ratios are likely to be cut back to the minimum, which is low by international standards, especially for children under two. Other economies in areas such as resources, maintenance and excursions are likely to be compromised as well

However there is a concern that parents will be affected and much will depend on how their centre responds to the funding cut. If all the costs are passed on in fees, parents will have to pay another \$400 million over four years<sup>28</sup>) The Government estimates it will save about \$400 million over four years by abolishing the top two funding rates for early childhood centres - the funding rates depend on qualified staff. However there is a concern that parents will be affected and much will depend on how their centre responds to the funding cut. If all the costs are passed on in fees, parents will have to pay. If the costs are not passed on, families are likely to be affected in other ways.

### **New funding**

While the government has taken out \$435 million in funding for teacher-led services over four years, it is investing \$91 million in, supported playgroups and support for ECE providers to work with hard to reach communities, including some Maori and Pacific Island families. The Government hopes that it may reach up to 3.300 children under this project.

While these initiatives are welcome, they should not be at the expense of existing services, which are already enrolling the vast bulk of Maori and Pasifika children, for whom participation rates are between 85 and 95 per cent. For example, kindergarten services operate in low income communities, charge no fees, and have always had qualified teachers, and are among the hardest hit by the budget cuts. The government's commitment to increased participation is laudable, but those children not currently enrolled in services are hard to reach, and other programmes have tried to engage these families with mixed results. In any case, the research shows it is sustained, regular quality early education that makes the difference, and attendance at a weekly play group may not be effective, unless it leads to enrolment at a quality service with qualified teachers.

However, innovation is required, and it may be that this project is effective if it is properly funded and controlled, and allowed time to succeed. Any lessons may be transferred to the rest of the sector if it is properly evaluated and the lessons disseminated.

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25 Downloaded from [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/audrey-young/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1501219&objectid=10646081](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/audrey-young/news/article.cfm?c_id=1501219&objectid=10646081) on 31 July 2010

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27 ([http://www.nzherald.co.nz/politics/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=280&objectid=10646286](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/politics/news/article.cfm?c_id=280&objectid=10646286)

28([http://www.nzherald.co.nz/audreyyoung/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1501219&objectid=10646081](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/audreyyoung/news/article.cfm?c_id=1501219&objectid=10646081)

What these changes represent is a shift in priorities from funding teacher-led, centre-based services to funding less costly, privately provided parenting programmes. Funding for these programmes is likely to be contestable encouraging the private/public provider mix characteristic of the sector. This model replicates an earlier period where contestable funding in the ECE training arena resulted in proliferation of low level courses of dubious quality.

As a result of the 2010 budget, the proportion of Government funding in early childhood education (ECE) services is significantly reduced. Participation rates in early childhood are high by universal standards but there is no automatic right to a place at a service, nor is there any planned provision to ensure that services are established where there is a need. Demand exceeds supply in many areas. In addition, the mix of private sector/public sector provision has resulted in uneven access to early childhood services. Provision rights for children from low socio-economic backgrounds and ethnic minorities are at risk in a market driven economy where establishing early childhood centres in some communities is regarded as risky by private providers. Community-based provision requires capital and in some cases lobbying over several years and, in at-risk communities, the transient populations are unable to sustain this. Responsiveness to early childhood provision and subsequent participation in ECE services is an on-going issue.

Poor children, Maori and Pasifika children are most likely to miss out in fast growing population areas and in some rural areas. Another concern is the volatility of the share market where some early childhood providers have invested. Children's rights are at risk if the services they attend are subject to the rise and fall of commodities in a global recession. Although not yet the situation here, the Australian experience of the ABC chain collapsing is evidence of how provision, participation and indeed, quality are interrelated in the ECE sector. ABC is currently for sale in New Zealand and concerns have been expressed by some communities that this might impact on their children's access to early childhood education, as well as potentially disrupting the quality of their experiences.

### **Conflicts of interest**

Helen May<sup>29</sup> argues that 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

She also noted that the interests of children were assumed in the debates about the policy which in itself is a concern that children's rights are still marginalised, even more so in difficult economic times: "Nevertheless, the policy is 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."<sup>30</sup>.

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29 May, H. (2008). New Zealand's 'Pathways to the Future' strategic direction in early childhood policy. Paper presented at the Early Childhood Care and Education Seminar Series 3, Centre for Social and Educational Research, Dublin.

30 May, H. (2008). New Zealand's 'Pathways to the Future' strategic direction in early childhood policy. Paper presented at the Early Childhood Care and Education Seminar Series 3, Centre for Social and Educational Research, Dublin., p. 9

Emeritus Professor Anne Smith from the University of Otago<sup>31</sup> emphasised the relationship between top quality early childhood services and positive, long-term outcomes for children's learning: "what happens to young children matters a lot, and if children don't have access to top quality early childhood education during the early years, it is a missed opportunity to have a positive impact on their lifelong learning. Professor Smith says that the evidence is overwhelming that in-depth teacher education is one of the most important elements of quality, which has long-term effects on young children's learning, and she finds it inexplicable that the government is lowering expectations for early childhood training. Under two year olds are particularly vulnerable to poor quality, so it's just as important for people working with under two year-olds to be qualified as it is for older children."

The early childhood sector experienced significant progress towards meeting the 2012 goal of a fully qualified and registered early childhood profession. This aspiration has always been contentious particularly in a mixed private/state funding arrangement as is the case in New Zealand and recent policy decisions have impacted significantly on the future direction of the Plan. According to Professor Helen May Government concerns about the 'trebling' in costs for early childhood education is in fact about the cost of policies intended to redress a long tail of: underfunding, low qualification levels, poor quality and high costs to parents. These successes are now under threat<sup>32</sup>.

In an unpublished media release, Professor Margaret Carr noted that "although this government has been keen to raise standards, it runs a great risk of undermining the quality of education in New Zealand by eroding some key aspects of the work in the early childhood sector. Children in quality early childhood do well at school, and this erosion is an example of inconsistent and disconnected policies" She added: "I fear that there may be more reduction of quality to come, seriously threatening the ability of the early childhood sector to work with families to provide the foundations for resourceful caring and imaginative citizens who love learning and know how to learn. Early years' teachers work with children at an important time for brain development, and their work is highly skilled"<sup>33</sup>

Since coming to power, the government has removed or lowered expectations in a number of areas which influence quality. These include:-

- the axing of professional development programmes for early childhood teachers to support implementing the early childhood curriculum;
- cancelling the Centres of Innovation scheme - a project which showcased innovative practice to inspire other centres;
- reducing to 80%, and extending the time frame, of the 100% goal of qualified and registered early childhood teachers in all centres;
- reducing to 50% the requirement for qualified and registered teachers in provision for under-twos;
- rescinding previously agreed improvements in the ratios of teachers to children.
- reducing the training incentive grants<sup>34</sup>

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31 Three professors of education ... downloaded from <http://educationalleadershipproject.blogspot.com/2010/05/three-professors-of-education-have.html> 30 June, 2010.

32 *ibid*

33 *ibid*

34 <http://educationalleadershipproject.blogspot.com/2010/05/three-professors-of-education-have.html>

34 Mitchell, L., & Hodgen, E. (2008). *Locality-based evaluation of Pathways to the Future — Ngā Huarahi Arataki - Stage 1 Report [Electronic Version]*. Retrieved 20 March 2009 from <http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/ece/28939/28940>.

Centres which have 100% qualified staff, beyond requirements, are concerned that the funding to pay teachers salaries linked to the number of qualified staff will be similarly cut back. Families will be concerned about this too. The 2010 Budget cut funding to the early childhood sector and as a result, services which have traditionally been funded by the state are now expected to accommodate significant cuts to their expected budgets.

### **Increasing children's participation**

Participation rates in early childhood are high by universal standards but there is no automatic right to a place at a service, nor is there any planned provision to ensure that services are established where there is a need. Demand exceeds supply in many areas. In addition families may not have access to the kind of service that best suits them. In addition, the mix of private sector/public sector provision has resulted in uneven access to early childhood services. Community-based provision requires capital and in some cases, lobbying over several years and, in at-risk communities, the transient populations are unable to sustain this. Responsiveness to early childhood provision and subsequent participation in ECE services is an on-going issue. Participation rates in early education remain a focus of government interest despite the recent policy changes. Mitchell and Hogden's 2008<sup>35</sup> review of the implementation of the Strategic Plan noted that some populations still experienced disadvantages in accessing early education services. Several initiatives to increase participation have been implemented since the Strategic Plan's inception. The two policies discussed below have a focus on participation, but they are also examples of how provision rights are being met (Article 18) and of the measures taken to protect children by providing support for parents to access educational opportunities.

The Promoting Early Childhood Education (ECE) Participation project's primary goal is to ensure that "every child has the opportunity to participate in quality ECE, by assisting communities to address barriers resulting in non-participation in ECE, by children who might otherwise participate"<sup>36</sup>. Based on the premise that such participation will "reduce ethnically-related disparities, the project targeted Māori and Pasifika, however, during the implementation, the focus on Māori and Pasifika was widened to include other groups with low ECE participation, including low-income and refugee families"<sup>37</sup>. Evaluations found that projects responded to diverse models of early childhood provision, and these were broadly inclusive of different philosophies within communities. The funding allowed for flexible delivery of services. As such, this policy supports a rights-based approach because it potentially strengthens families by providing a service in a community.

Yet another policy supporting parents and supporting children is the Parent Support and Development pilot project (PSD) trialled in 18 early childhood centres between 2006 and 2010. This project emerged from research evidence showing "that two-generational programmes that combine parent education and support and ECE can raise child outcomes and are more effective than solely parent-focused or child-focused programmes alone"<sup>38</sup>. The notion of an early childhood centre as a hub is a collaborative strategy reflecting New Zealand and international research suggesting that targeting single risks in isolation is relatively ineffective. The PSD project "recognises that better service co-ordination offers opportunities to improve service quality, effectiveness and efficiency"<sup>39</sup>.

Based in communities, working out of early childhood education services, this pilot project supported the Strategic Plan's vision for New Zealand: "that all children have the best start in life, flourish in

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36 Dixon, R., Widdowson, D., Meagher-Lundberg, P., Airini, & McMurchy-Pilkington, C. (2007). Evaluation of Promoting Early Childhood Education (ECE) Participation Project [Electronic Version]. Retrieved 20 March 2009 from <http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/ece/11760>.

37 Ibid, p.1

38 Ministry of Social Development, & Ministry of Education. (2004). ECE centre based parent support. Overview paper. (p. 1)

39 Ibid, p. 4

early childhood, and are supported to reach their potential”<sup>40</sup>. A universally provided service, such as an ECE centre, that targets vulnerable families is a non-stigmatising strategy to improve, intervene, and strengthen “families, whānau and communities, and [improve] inter-agency co-ordination, collaboration and communication”<sup>41</sup>. Not only did this programme align with UNCROC, it is also evidence of compliance at many levels. There was an intention to protect children, a strategy to support parents in their role, and a commitment to providing access to early education for children based on research evidence demonstrating early intervention has long-term benefits.

International evidence suggests that participation in early education for vulnerable families and children at risk of poor health, education and social outcomes supports their development, and protects their rights<sup>42</sup>. The PSD pilot is nested within the Early Intervention Programme led by the Ministry of Social Development and the overall intention was to generate some New Zealand-based evidence of how governments can support PSD effectively. Centres contracted to deliver PSD services were directed to report on four outcomes:

- Improve effective parenting by vulnerable parents building on their skills and knowledge;
- Increase participation and engagement in ECE by vulnerable parents and their families;
- Improve consistency between what the child learns at home and in the ECE centre;
- Lead vulnerable parents to be better connected to broader social and informal networks.

Final evaluations of the programmes are still in process, but initial evidence from the services indicate that such a programme had merit and yields positive outcomes for children. Initial anecdotal indications are that the PSD pilot provides some evidence of success in utilising existing services (ECE centres) to reach a typically reluctant group of participants, classed as ‘at risk’. The pilot programme ended in June, 2010 and the latest budget allocated extra funding of \$91.8m over four years for five intensive, community-led participation projects targeting .Maori and Pasifika children, and children from lower socio-economic areas<sup>43</sup>. In the context of the other cuts to the early childhood sector, this is a welcome initiative.

Research indicates that early education of high quality improves positive social outcomes for children, but if the early childhood experiences of poor quality education can be damaging. There are discrepancies between the quality of services in the private sector and in the state sector. Private sector services were found to rate lower for quality indicators, and, from a rights-based perspective, it is essential that providers are able to not just maintain the quality of service, but also improve the quality of experience for young children. Poor children, Maori and Pasifika children are most likely to miss out in fast growing population areas and in some rural areas. Another concern is the volatility of the share market where some early childhood providers have invested. Children’s rights are at risk if the services they attend are subject to the rise and fall of commodities in a global recession. Although not yet the situation here, the Australian experience of the ABC chain collapsing is evidence of how provision, participation and indeed, quality are interrelated in the ECE sector.

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40 Ministry of Education. (2002). Pathways to the future: Nga huarahi arataki. A 10 year strategic plan for early childhood education. Wellington: Ministry of Education. (p. 1)

41 Ministry of Social Development. (2006). Early years service hubs(.p. 4)

42 UNICEF. (2008). The child care transition. A league table of early childhood education and care in economically advanced countries. Florence, Italy: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

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43 Tolley, 20 May 2010 downloaded from <http://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/extra+ece+spending+targeting+families+need>

on 30 June, 2010

## Conclusion

Overall, there has been measurable incremental improvement in the early childhood sector but the most recent policy announcements indicate that these are under threat. Implementing a child rights-based early education service in the early childhood sector is complex because of the imbalance between adult responsibilities and children's rights to care and education. Recognition and understanding of rights for children under five have not been achieved to the same extent<sup>44</sup>, but advocacy by many professionals has resulted in a shift from promoting children's development to respecting children's rights "to be involved in decisions that affect their lives"<sup>45</sup>. General Comment 7<sup>46</sup> is specifically directed to early childhood (birth to eight years old) in "recognition ... that young children are holders of all rights enshrined in UNCROC and that early childhood is a critical period for the realization of these rights". General Comment 7 noted that: "[r]espect for the young child's agency is frequently overlooked or rejected as inappropriate on the grounds of age and immaturity. ... They have been powerless within their families, and often voiceless and invisible within society"<sup>47</sup> (). Additionally the General Comment emphasised that: "Article 12 applies both to younger and to older children. As holders of rights, even the youngest children are entitled to express their views"<sup>48</sup>

Taylor, Smith & Gallop<sup>49</sup> (2009) argue that "New Zealand takes children's rights seriously" (p. 83), and that key policy decisions supportive of children's citizenship include appointing a Children's Commissioner (1989), New Zealand's ratification of the UNCRC (1993), the Agenda for Children<sup>50</sup> and Pathways to the Future, Nga Arataki Huarahi<sup>51</sup>. There is a history of New Zealand early childhood education policies that support children's rights<sup>52</sup>. However, In her speech to the inaugural early childhood special interest group at the 2009 New Zealand Association for Research in Education conference, Anne Smith<sup>53</sup> celebrated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child by highlighting some of the markers for children's rights in the early childhood

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44 Lansdown, G. (2005). Can you hear me? The rights of young children to participate in decisions affecting them. Working Paper 36. The Hague, The Netherlands: Bernard van Leer Foundation.

45 Ibid., p. v

46 United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2005). General comment No. 7 (2005). Implementing child's rights in early education [Electronic Version], 23. Retrieved 1 November 2005 from <http://www.comminit.com/en/node/189146/303>.

47 ibid Section 11

48 ibid Section 11; Te One, S. (2009). Perceptions of children's rights in three early childhood settings. A thesis submitted to the Victoria University of Wellington in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education., Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington..

49 (Taylor, N. J., Smith, A. B., & Gollop, M. (2009). Children's perspectives on rights, responsibilities and citizenship: New Zealand. In N. J. Taylor & A. B. Smith (Eds.), *Children as citizens? International voices* (pp. 81-98). Dunedin: University of Otago Press.)

50 Ministry of Social Development. (2002). *New Zealand's agenda for children. Making life better for children*. Wellington, New Zealand: Ministry of Social Development.

51 Ministry of Education. (2002). *Pathways to the future: Nga huarahi arataki. A 10 year strategic plan for early childhood education*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

52 Dalli, C., & Te One, S. (2002). Early childhood education in 2002: Pathways to the future. In I. Livingston (Ed.), *New Zealand Annual Review of Education* (Vol. 12, pp. 177-202). Wellington; Dalli, C. (2002). Early childhood policy in New Zealand: Stories of sector collaborative action in the 1990s. Paper presented at the Paper presented to the Country Seminar for Education International, Wellington, New Zealand; May, H. (2002). 'Blue skies': Talk in the 'playground'. *Delta: Policy and Practice in Education*., 54, 9-28;

53 Smith, A. B. (2009). Implementing the UNCRC in New Zealand: How are we doing in early childhood? Paper presented at the NZARE, ECE Special Interest Group

sector: *Te Whāriki*, the national early childhood curriculum statement stood out as a toanga (a treasure), encapsulating aspirations for early childhood education and for children's rights. Adding a sobering note to her speech, Smith commented that the 2009 Budget cuts had effectively stalled recent momentum towards improving quality services for children and for communities. These concerns are regularly echoed in newspaper reports and on television<sup>54</sup>. The world-wide recession has provided the current administration with reasons to tighten public spending, and with a rationale to alter and cut existing early childhood education policies. This does not auger well for children and their families, or for children's rights. Early childhood researchers, scholars and practitioners are deeply concerned<sup>55</sup>.

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54 Akuhata, Saturday, May 29, 2010

55 Akuhata, Saturday, May 29, 2010; Carr & Mitchell, Friday, June 25, 2010