

# ***BLENDING WHĀNAU/FAMILY DEVELOPMENT, PARENT SUPPORT AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAMMES***

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## **Abstract**

Internationally, the combination of early childhood education and parent support and whānau/family development initiatives are recognised as having the potential to improve child outcomes and overall whānau/family wellbeing. This paper considers the experience of a community organisation that has successfully blended these two service components. The paper highlights some of the benefits of this programme, which developed from a playgroup and a counselling service in the 1990s into a fully developed community centre and licensed early childhood centre in 2004. The paper also considers some of the challenges the current policy environment poses for services that blend early childhood and parent support initiatives. Two related areas of tension are identified – the perceived emphasis on staff qualification as a key marker of a high-quality programme, and the funding model for early childhood care

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and education programmes – an unintended consequence of which may be to disadvantage services that have high levels of parent engagement.

## INTRODUCTION

There is increasing interest in finding innovative ways of delivering parent support and education programmes that improve family functioning and reduce levels of child maltreatment. Early childhood education is considered to be a key setting where parent support and development can be effectively undertaken.

This is not a new idea. For example, during the 1980s and 1990s Barnardos New Zealand developed its Homebuilders Family Support services alongside its early childhood education programmes with these sorts of goals in mind. More recently, the potential of early childhood educational settings to facilitate improvements in parent capacity and family/whānau functioning has been the focus of a number of new initiatives, such as the Early Childhood Education Centre-Based Parent Support and Development initiatives<sup>2</sup> (ECE PSD). Internationally and locally, early childhood education has also been identified as an important resource, which, when added to parent support programmes, contains significant potential for addressing some of the more intractable challenges presented by struggling and vulnerable families (Brostrom 2006, Lightburn and Warren-Adamson 2005, Warren-Adamson 2001). Research in New Zealand has also identified the value of developing innovative and flexible frameworks for supporting families who face a range of challenges that make parenting difficult (see, for example, Munford and Sanders 2006). It is therefore an appropriate time to consider a range of models and frameworks within which this blending of early childhood education and parent support and development can occur.

This paper considers the experiences of Te Aroha Noa, a non-governmental whānau/family and community centre that has developed its own particular blend of early childhood education and parent support and development over the past 17 years. Having its origins in collaboration with parents in the early 1990s, the Te Aroha Noa model predates the current interest in working across the early childhood–family support interface. The centre shares with other early childhood services the philosophy of providing a range of high-quality early learning experiences for young children within a safe and well-resourced environment. However, its structure, the staffing and mode of operation differ from traditional early learning centres, and it is this difference that brings challenges for Te Aroha Noa as it negotiates the complex early childhood education policy environment.

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2 <http://www.minedu.govt.nz/index.cfm?layout=index&indexid=10987&indexparentid=10943>.

This paper begins by briefly reviewing the early childhood educational framework and the more recent interest in early intervention services that draw on early childhood education and parent support and development ideas. It then discusses the development of the Te Aroha Noa model and some of the benefits of this programme. Finally, it considers some of the challenges the mainstream early childhood policy context creates for centres that emphasise parent engagement but are not eligible to operate within the ECE PSD framework.

## THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

Government-sourced early childhood funding enables a range of early childhood education programmes to be delivered. More recently, policy has also facilitated the development of parent support and development initiatives, which some early childhood centres are able to access. Early childhood policy seeks to achieve two primary objectives. Early learning programmes, whether centre or home based, tend to reflect these in their services by providing:

- access for children to high-quality early learning and developmental opportunities provided by qualified practitioners
- safe, monitored care for young children to enable their parent(s) to participate in the workforce (Adema 2006).

These two characteristics are largely consistent, although as Adema notes, at the margins they create tensions. For example, the 30 hours per week of early childhood education funded by government reflects the 30 hours per week of education provided to primary and secondary school children, and while this may meet young children's educational requirements, it does not necessarily meet workforce demands experienced by parents.<sup>3</sup>

A range of programmes are offered within early childhood settings, some of which explicitly encourage the involvement of parents, but the delivery frameworks in responding to increased levels of demand from employed parents nonetheless emphasise the provision of education services and care for other people's children by professional educators and care providers. Developments in the early childhood model over time have emphasised this character, and over the past decade early learning

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3 According to the Ministry of Education, although the legacy reason for the 30-hour limit was that it matched hours of schooling, the current rationale is that it reflects the balance of targeted (through Child-care Subsidy) and universal ECE funding. Early childhood services are not required to use this funding only for hours 0–30 per week; and the 30-hour limit has not discouraged services from operating more than 30 hours, as almost all recent growth in provision has been in all-day services that operate more than 30 hours ([http://www.minedu.govt.nz/web/downloadable/d19637\\_v1/ece-funding-guide.pdf](http://www.minedu.govt.nz/web/downloadable/d19637_v1/ece-funding-guide.pdf)).

centres have increasingly come to resemble “schools” for small children, where education programmes are provided by early childhood teachers (Adema 2006).<sup>4</sup>

This model also serves labourforce and welfare policies because, with the addition of childcare subsidies and credits available through the Working for Families package,<sup>5</sup> parental participation in the labour market is facilitated (Adema 2006). Both early childhood education and labour market/income support policies therefore encourage the provision of services to children and their families/whānau by professionally qualified teachers.<sup>6</sup> Less attention has been given to the way in which early childhood services can be encouraged to work with the needs of the whole whānau/family. As Davies et al. (2002:31) have argued, historically relatively little consistent consideration has been given in social policy to addressing whole-child and whole-family/whānau needs:

Nor can it be said that consistent efforts are being made to address the needs of parents as well as the needs of children. Community and neighbourhood developments have not yet been widely promoted as part of the strategy to improve the parenting and well-being of the nation’s young children.

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY INTERVENTION MODELS THAT BLEND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION WITH PARENT SUPPORT AND DEVELOPMENT

Perhaps in recognition of the gap identified by Davies et al. (2002), early childhood settings have recently been seen as potential sites for facilitating and encouraging positive family development by providing parent support and development programmes. Indeed, early childhood educational services provide numerous opportunities for “critical moments” (Thomson et al. 2002) through which children’s development can be positively influenced and the functioning of vulnerable families improved.

Warren-Adamson (2001:12), writing in the United Kingdom, has observed that early learning centres can provide the “spine of the resource” for community centres that seek to support vulnerable parents and children and to foster positive change. He refers to the way that, when combined with social support programmes, early learning centres have the potential to provide neutral and safe avenues for parents to begin

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4 The Ministry of Education comments that the new ECE regulatory framework, which is likely to be implemented in 2008, will enable ECE services to be licensed to deliver a mix of teacher-and parent-led sessions on different days ([http://www.minedu.govt.nz/web/downloadable/dl19537\\_v1/licensing-and-certification-process.doc](http://www.minedu.govt.nz/web/downloadable/dl19537_v1/licensing-and-certification-process.doc)).

5 <http://www.workingforfamilies.govt.nz/>.

6 According to the Ministry of Education, the policy framework does not emphasise staff qualification as the most important marker of a quality programme: instead early childhood services are required to meet a range of quality criteria for programmes, staffing, resources and facilities; and to continue to improve the quality of the teaching and learning in their services.

to access wider support systems. They can provide non-stigmatising points of entry to a wide range of services and hold the potential for early intervention rather than reactive services (Davies et al. 2002:31–32). They also provide low-key, unthreatening opportunities for vulnerable parents to test out services without having to reveal too much of their own personal struggles, and to build relationships that can later provide much more intensive support. Early childhood services in this sense hold the potential to be more than high-quality childcare services for working parents. When combined with parent engagement and support, they have the potential to contribute to social policy objectives concerning whānau/family development.

In terms of understanding the potential benefits of well-designed early intervention programmes that meet both child and parent needs, Sykora (2005:118) observes:

Taking an economic perspective on the contribution that early childhood interventions can make to a society, Rolnick and Grunewald (2003, Grunewald and Rolnick 2005) report that for the long-term betterment of a society there are few economic development strategies that can yield a higher level of benefit than investing in getting children off to a good start in life.

Locally, a number of government initiatives have sought to achieve these kinds of benefits with disadvantaged, vulnerable and stressed whānau/families. In these cases, care for children while parents work is not the key objective; instead, the focus is on providing comprehensive support for children and parents. Funded as new or pilot initiatives under the rubric of the Government's Early Intervention Programme, these services either add parent development activities into a pre-existing early childhood education centre<sup>7</sup> or blend early childhood education into a suite of services delivered by a social service agency.<sup>8</sup> These new initiatives are typically provided in a limited number of locations, often identified as areas of high need using a range of indicators including the NZ Deprivation Index (Ministry of Education 2006:5). They are not, however, available across the country as a routine part of early childhood programme funding.

There is good guidance in the literature concerning the key components of effective early intervention programmes, some of which are summarised below:

- accessible, tailored to meet local needs, and address specific risk factors that vary between communities and neighbourhoods

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7 For instance, the new initiative Early Childhood Education Centre-Based Parent Support and Development guidelines state: "Any licensed and chartered ECE centre within these [specified] TLAs will be able to apply. ...Providers of services will not be eligible for funding unless the application is made from an identified centre" (Ministry of Education 2006: 5).

8 For instance, Plunket has provided a number of the Parents as First Teachers (PAFT) initiatives across the country (although PAFT is not, according to the Ministry of Education, an ECE service – see <http://www.ecd.govt.nz/paft/whatispaft.html>).

- use ecological models and take a whole child, family and community approach
- flexible, adaptable and comprehensive
- offer a variety of programmes addressing the strengths and needs of specific communities and neighbourhoods
- a strengths focus that involves identifying the skills, capacities and resources that families bring even when they require significant support
- based on evidence-based interventions, in particular high-quality home visiting and early childhood education
- a strong and accurate theoretical foundation linking stated goals and methods used to achieve these
- staff who can practise in culturally sensitive ways
- high-quality management and administration – well-trained, well-supervised and well-paid staff, and low staff–participant ratios
- integrated – linked with other programmes and community activities, including the development of common goals, objectives and collaboration between organisations
- significant rather than tokenistic involvement of parent and community members
- non-stigmatising
- a good match between family and child needs and the services provided (Davies et al. 2002:34, Sykora 2005:123).

Robilliard (2005:148) and Mackay (2003:100) observe that successful early interventions require integrated approaches to service delivery using multi-disciplinary, collaborative models combining the best of educational and family development theory and practice. They also suggest that flexibility is the key to securing ongoing parent engagement and confidence. These characteristics can require services to move away from structured models where parents and children are delivered service modules in relatively uniform ways.<sup>9</sup> It is this characteristic that can present the greatest challenge to early intervention located in the early childhood education environment, where funding and policy may be seen to favour programmatic approaches. This characteristic can also present challenges to family support programmes that are funded under prescriptive contract regimes.

### THE TE AROHA NOA MODEL

With the exception of Whalley and colleagues (see, for example, Whalley 2001) in the United Kingdom, the literature has been relatively silent on the value and effectiveness of programmes that take a grass-roots approach and grow their own

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9 The Ministry of Education notes that there is no regulation of how ECE services operate their programmes on a daily basis, and instead services are encouraged to respond to the needs of the children participating, within the context of the broad-based curriculum framework provided by Te Whariki ([http://www.minedu.govt.nz/web/downloadable/d19677\\_v1/regulatory-review-consultation-document-june.pdf](http://www.minedu.govt.nz/web/downloadable/d19677_v1/regulatory-review-consultation-document-june.pdf)).

unique blend of early childhood education and parent support activities rather than responding to special funding initiatives. The remainder of this paper considers a programme that has this type of genesis, growing out of a playgroup that worked with the early learning needs of children while also responding to the support needs of their parents. The early learning centre, which was opened in 2004, has grown out of a 17-year collaboration between local parents and staff. In its current configuration it represents a seamless blending of early learning, parent support and development, whānau/family support, and adult education and community development programmes.

From the outset the service intended to work with the whole child and whole whānau/family in context. Achieving parent engagement at all levels of Te Aroha Noa's operations has been a priority. Rather than starting as an early childhood programme and adding on whānau/family development, or as a family development service and later including early childhood (Warren-Adamson 2001), this programme developed both streams together in response to needs articulated by parents. The result was an organic, responsive programme blending child development and parent growth.

### History of the Te Aroha Noa Programme

During the 1990s Te Aroha Noa provided counselling for families/whānau and ran regular playgroups for parents and their children. The early playgroups provided a safe, welcoming venue for parents to extend their understanding of, and learn new strategies for responding to their children's social and developmental needs, while gaining support from other parents, playgroup facilitators and counsellors (Munford et al. 2006). Through contact with Te Aroha Noa's playgroup, many parents gained the confidence to seek out further opportunities for their own development and to address personal issues that restricted their capacity to be the parents they wished to be.

Towards the end of the 1990s the playgroup began to develop a life of its own. Parents and facilitators sought out opportunities to work together to extend the range and nature of activities provided, and the parents increasingly began to shape the way in which the playgroup operated. The playgroup facilitators, recognising the potential of this organic development, encouraged parents to explore a wide range of issues, sought out new opportunities and resources that could be brought into the playgroup, and a highly collaborative model emerged where parents and facilitators jointly shaped the programme.<sup>10</sup> Out of this process grew a vision for an early learning centre, and it was these roots in the collaborative approach to centre development that gave the new facility its distinctive character.

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<sup>10</sup> This approach is one shared by playgroups more generally (<http://www.ecd.govt.nz/playgroups/whatis.html>).

The new centre was built on a foundation of parent engagement. Parents are a fundamental part of the centre. They participate in the management and delivery of the early childhood curriculum alongside, and on an equal footing with, the qualified early childhood teachers. Although this collaborative model has at times presented challenges, Te Aroha Noa has maintained its original commitment to parent involvement as integral to its programmes.

Relationships are critical to Te Aroha Noa. The centre works with Te Whāriki, the national early childhood curriculum statement, and develops its programmes through a collaborative process whereby adults (parents, qualified early childhood teachers, parent educators and others) work together on its implementation and on the development of self-review processes that allow for innovation, adaptation and change. The processes used at the centre were favourably reviewed by the Education Review Office, and the self-review processes were also positively endorsed in external evaluations of various programmes, such as a SKIP initiative that is also run at Te Aroha Noa.

### The Programme in 2007 – Potential and Benefits

All personnel (parents and qualified early childhood teachers) in the centre have the title “educator” in recognition that each adult brings an important set of skills and expertise to the learning arena. In this, the centre explicitly incorporates the principle of ako (to learn, study, instruct, teach, advise), a critical dimension of Māori pedagogy (Pihama et al. 2004), which recognises that everyone is simultaneously a teacher and a learner:

According to Pere “Traditional Māori learning rested on the principle that every person is a learner from the time they are born (if not before) to the time they die” (1994:54). Everyone was in a constant state of learning and therefore teaching because as well as the individual, the collective benefited through the transmission of knowledge (Nepe 1991). (Pihama et al. 2004:16)

The Te Aroha Noa vision is that adults and children come together in the centre to learn, and that in reducing professional and age-related barriers, children’s development is enhanced, parent growth and support are fostered, and the potential for the development of innovative educational and social programmes and theories is increased. In this way, Te Aroha Noa is part of an international movement concerned with fostering the development of “learning communities” (Leviton-Reid 2004, Whalley 2001).

The mixture of parents who are employed as educators and parent volunteers working as equals alongside qualified early childhood teachers is a distinctive aspect of the Te Aroha Noa centre. This practice highlights the complementary nature of skills and expertise that parents and practitioners bring to children’s lives – different sorts of expertise and types of experts contribute to children’s well-rounded development.

At Te Aroha Noa parents are seen as experts and competent, rather than deficient. This normalises learning, growth and change as a fundamental characteristic of everyday life for everybody.

The very flat organisational structure that emerged from this philosophical position created safe, open opportunities for people to share their knowledge and skills for the benefit of everyone within the community. Achieving this vision, however, was not without its challenges. Tertiary-qualified staff, trained to operate as independent and competent professionals, required significant adjustment in their work practices to make the transition to working with parents in a fully collegial fashion.

For parents, it requires a major time commitment because they are ultimately expected to attend the centre with their children. The centre adopted a range of welcoming strategies to gently draw parents in. In the early stages of contact parents may not be ready to stay for whole sessions, but they are encouraged to stay as long as it takes to settle their children. As they gradually build confidence in their capacity to work with their own and other people's children, they stay for increasing amounts of time. Ongoing and significant parent involvement is important because Te Aroha Noa seeks to deepen and extend the engagement of parents with their children through the centre experience, rather than to provide a "service" that children access separately while their parents work. In this way the Centre differs from many other early childhood services in that it does not set out to provide care and education for children while their parents work. Once parents can stay at the centre for whole sessions, they are able to have a "take a break" day for one session a week to attend courses, deal with other whānau/family business and have time to themselves.

Parent educators also participate in structured learning exchanges focused on child education, development and positive parenting. Other parents associated with Te Aroha Noa are able to participate in these learning exchanges as well. The level of involvement that occurs in the Te Aroha Noa experience means that many parents need to face the personal challenge of participating in an educational setting, something that may hold painful memories (Munford and Sanders 1999). However, with support and over time, parents have not only gained confidence and skills in their role as parents, but some have also become able to return to their own formal education, moving on to enrol in tertiary education.

Parent engagement is a fundamental part of developing a successful learning community (Leviton-Reid 2004). By participating in the centre through programme development, delivery and management, and by working with their own and others'

children, parents are able to grow and develop in ways that enrich their lives and those of their children. This learning:

- provides a strong foundation that parents can draw on throughout the life course as they face other challenges
- provides a framework for the development of a wider community of adults who can be drawn into journeys of growth and development (Whalley 2001:8)
- maximises the potential for spill-over benefits to other families/whānau in the wider community
- blurs the boundaries between professionals and parents that can alienate parents and unintentionally give a message that the care and education of small children is best left to professionals.

While recognising that for many parents and children across the country the reality is that parents enrol their children in early childhood centres so that they can participate in the workforce, Te Aroha Noa has begun to question the long-term benefits for children and parents of this approach, particularly in the critical early childhood years and where parents and children are vulnerable, stressed or struggling. Drawing on nearly two decades of experience in working with vulnerable parents and children and on the knowledge and wisdom of the early parent pioneers from the playgroup, Te Aroha Noa has observed that children's overall and long-term wellbeing is best enhanced when parents are supported and enabled to fully participate in their children's lives. Internationally, the benefits to children, particularly those who are vulnerable or stressed, has also been commented upon (Whalley 2001). Children gain benefits from having positive, supported, developmental encounters with their parents in early childhood settings, and parents extend their skills and grow in confidence in their capacity to be nurturing parents when they are supported to work with their children in early childhood settings (Warren-Adamson 2001, Whalley 2001, Lightburn and Warren-Adamson 2005).

Active parent engagement in the management and day-to-day running of the centre also has benefits for the centre, and for the nature and quality of the early learning programmes offered. Parents bring essential knowledge and fresh perspectives to which the centre would otherwise not have access. For example, recently the centre developed a preparation-for-school programme that children join after their fourth birthdays. As with other aspects of the centre, this initiative emerged from the centre's regular reflection meetings. It seemed like a natural progression: once the centre was established and developed its programmes for younger children, parents began to think about the next big transition their children would face, the transition to school. Because parents were involved in the management and planning of all centre activities, this issue was easily picked up in the context of normal weekly meetings, and the bridge-to-school programme was developed.

This programme provides three separate sessions per week for the four-year-old children, where they further develop skills in such areas as literacy, numeracy and oral language that will enable them to be competent, confident learners on arrival at school. They also have weekly trips outside the centre to places such as the supermarket, library, parks and rivers to broaden their experiences. As they near school age they and their parent are taken on weekly transitioning-to-school visits to help the child to feel secure in the new environment.

This programme has been noted by local schoolteachers as preparing children well for this major transition. The close involvement of parents and the community-based nature of the early learning centre means that the transition process takes account of the realities of each individual child and is also tailored to the nature of the three primary schools the children will attend. Ongoing parent involvement in Te Aroha Noa also means that the programme can be adapted over time as children and schools change. By being involved in this dynamic learning process, parents are developing transferable capacities to cope and adapt in environments beyond the centre. Parents have become pro-active about the quality of education their children are receiving at school, their level of involvement in school programmes has increased, and they have become powerful advocates for their children in the school context. They now regularly read ERO reports before enrolling their children in schools and are able to meet principals and teachers as equals, asking insightful questions about the curriculum and providing valuable information to school staff about their children.

Because the centre is a locality-based service it enhances the sense of community in this area and provides a venue for community events and occasions. For example, in one curriculum meeting the possibility of harakeke classes<sup>11</sup> for children and parents was raised. One parent suggested that her grandmother might be able to help with this as she was an expert weaver. This single idea grew into a rich cultural strand in the curriculum, as the kuia<sup>12</sup> brought other weavers with her, who came prepared not only to share their technical expertise in weaving but also the stories and songs and powerful history that are an intricate part of harakeke. Parent participation in the development of the curriculum created the possibility for this to happen.

Through these sorts of exchanges the programme becomes more powerful and meaningful because it strongly connects with the lives of the whānau and families that live around the centre. This is critical, because the power of the model developed at Te Aroha Noa lies in its capacity to continually weave a seamless web between itself and the community around it, providing diverse, rich and safe opportunities for both adults and children to learn and grow.

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11 Harakeke is traditional flax weaving.

12 Kuia refers to an older woman, respected by virtue of her knowledge of custom.

The Te Aroha Noa model also has relevance and impact beyond its local community. For instance, in Phase 1 of the Early Childhood Education Centre-Based Parent Support and Development (ECE PSD) initiative, eight new programmes in other communities were each funded \$70,000 per annum to deliver parent programmes for three years. A number of these providers have begun to visit Te Aroha Noa to learn how it has achieved a high and sustained level of parent engagement; this is something that would add value to the ECE PSD model. The ECE PSD model has been developed with a focus on the addition of discrete components (such as parenting skills classes) into existing early childhood programmes provided by professional educators, rather than engaging parents in the definition, development and delivery of services that meet their needs. It is also notable that the ECE PSD model has currently been applied in early childhood education centres where parents are accustomed to dropping their children off so that they can attend to other tasks and responsibilities rather than services like that provided by Te Aroha Noa, which are premised on drawing parents into the very core of centre management, programme development and delivery. The expectation that they will participate with their children in centre activities and the opportunities for some parents to be employed as parent educators has created an environment in which parent engagement is normalised at Te Aroha Noa.

By providing a practical means by which parents can become deeply engaged in the centre, everyone benefits. The resulting programmes offered at Te Aroha Noa can adapt and respond to local parents' and children's needs as they change over time. They can draw from both the best available theoretical knowledge of early learning and parent development as well as the practical realities confronted by local parents and children. The Te Aroha Noa approach is a promising model that blends the core components of highly effective early learning and parent support programmes identified in the international literature with culturally and socially responsive management practices that make it relatively easy for parents to become highly engaged in the programmes.

#### CHALLENGES FACED BY THE TE AROHA NOA MODEL

The preceding discussion highlights the way in which community-grown initiatives offer the potential for enhancing parent capacity and contributing to improved outcomes for children. There are challenges for the organisation, however, and key among these is a funding tension. Te Aroha Noa notes that current early childhood funding only allows for "parent-led" or "teacher-led" options and the funding model which is being progressively introduced between now and 2012 places funding pressure on it to move to a fully-qualified workforce by this time. As it currently stands, there is no place for the teacher-parent-led model Te Aroha Noa has developed.<sup>13</sup>

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13 For example, the current early childhood education claim forms require centres to identify whether they are "parent led" or "teacher led" and do not have an option for "parent-and-teacher-led" centres. The Ministry of Education funding guidelines similarly note only two types of centre-based early childhood provider: teacher led and parent led (see [http://www.minedu.govt.nz/web/downloadable/dl6557\\_v1/2007-feb-ch2-how-the-ministry-funds-services.doc](http://www.minedu.govt.nz/web/downloadable/dl6557_v1/2007-feb-ch2-how-the-ministry-funds-services.doc) - section 2.6.).

As noted above, both education and social policy recognise the value that can be gained from combining rich early educational experiences for young children with parent support of various kinds. From an educational perspective, exposure to early learning and developmentally appropriate experiences provides a sound foundation for the socialisation of children and prepares them for school. Comprehensive care and education for preschool children provide parents with opportunities to participate in the workforce, and in this way key social policy objectives of reduced poverty and income support expenditure can be achieved (Sykora 2005:118). Vulnerable children stand to gain from early interventions and support that address both their education/developmental needs and provide support and education for their parents. Strong gains for children – and for society as a whole – can be expected to be made if the right sorts of investment are made in early intervention and child development programmes (Sykora 2005).

The early childhood policy paradigm has developed with a focus on facilitating the development of high-quality programmes that allow parents to leave their children in the care of others. A limited number of programmes such as the ECE PSD initiative have been developed to facilitate the engagement of parents in early learning environments in a restricted number of locations, but these have not altered the fundamental features of early learning policy and funding. Teacher-led services receive greater funding than parent-led services and centre-based care receives a higher hourly rate than home-based care. Reflecting the desire to encourage parental workforce participation, sessional services (three to four hours' care) receive approximately 10% less funding than full-day services. Staff qualifications also influence payments:

hourly funding increases with the proportion of hours worked by registered and qualified staff throughout the day (not just during the 30 hours period); funding for a centre which only employs certified teachers (a requirement for kindergartens) is almost 30% higher. (Adema 2006:60)

Programme quality has been consistently identified as a marker of effective services (Sykora 2005). A qualified workforce is used as a proxy measure for programme quality in early childhood; other dimensions, such as the nature of programmes delivered or the specific nature of individual centre operations, are not included in the funding formula. The funding model encourages programmes to achieve a fully qualified workforce as soon as possible and by 2012 at the latest (see for example the early childhood funding guidelines<sup>14</sup>):

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14 <http://www.minedu.govt.nz/index.cfm?layout=document&documentid=11884&indexid=10966&indexparentid=10946>.

The Strategic Plan for Early Childhood Education ... intends to allow only fully registered teaching staff to have contact with children as from 2012 onwards. (Adema 2006:61)

From 2012 the financial viability of centres that do not have a fully qualified workforce will be seriously compromised because of this requirement. As Adema (2006) has noted, this policy shift is likely to punish services located in poorer areas that struggle to recruit qualified staff, and it will also punish services such as that developed at Te Aroha Noa that explicitly seek to engage and involve parents who are not qualified early childhood educators.<sup>15</sup> Despite its goal of improving the nature and quality of children's early years experiences, the Strategic Plan for Early Childhood Education (see [www.minedu.govt.nz](http://www.minedu.govt.nz)) may therefore have some serious unintended consequences (Adema 2006:61). Because fully qualified teachers are least likely to be attracted to services that operate in low-income areas, and the funding of centres will be contingent upon them retaining a fully qualified workforce, participation rates of low-income families are likely to reduce. The children and parents who arguably most need access to high-quality early learning experiences are the group that will most likely miss out (Adema 2006).

This new policy will also result in significant reductions in payments to programmes such as that developed at Te Aroha Noa, which have intentionally sought high levels of parent involvement by employing parents as educators. Within this funding context the model developed by parents and staff at Te Aroha Noa will not be financially viable beyond 2012 because of its commitment to maintain a very high level of parent engagement. It will lose income for each child hour of service provided. The new policy, designed to improve the quality of children's early learning experiences, in the Te Aroha Noa case will result in the loss to a vulnerable community of an important early childhood service that embraces a whole child and whole family/whānau approach.

## CONCLUSION

Internationally, the combination of early childhood education and parent support initiatives are promising vehicles for improving child outcomes, particularly when such initiatives are grounded in locality-based settings. Two related areas of tension have been identified in this paper which restrict the capacity of New Zealand funding and policy models to gain the maximum benefits such blended initiatives offer. First, the emphasis on staff qualification as the single most important marker of a quality programme excludes non-early-childhood-qualified parents from early childhood settings. Parent engagement and involvement are known to be linked to good child

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15 There are a number of initiatives from government, such as scholarships and incentive grants, much of which is targeted to low-income communities to try to address staffing shortages in the sector (<http://www.minedu.govt.nz/index.cfm?layout=index&indexid=5405&indexparentid=10945>).

outcomes outside of early childhood educational settings, so it is hard to understand why, in the early learning centre environment, parental presence constitutes a risk to quality. High levels of parent involvement should not be taken as an indication of low quality.

Second, and flowing from this, the funding model disadvantages those services that have emphasised parent engagement by employing parents as educators in their centres.<sup>16</sup> These are the programmes that are most likely to successfully work with vulnerable, high-needs families. Innovative, locally developed programmes such as that provided by Te Aroha Noa will not meet the new funding requirements from 2012 and will therefore be financially unable to continue to operate past this point. It is difficult to envisage an early childhood centre beyond 2012 that would contemplate sacrificing funding by increasing parent engagement in its operations.

Although the funding model developed in the early childhood sector has worked well for traditional services that provide education and care for the children of working parents, those models that are likely to be most successful in engaging vulnerable families are not so well served by the current policy framework. This framework runs counter to the emerging emphasis on early childhood centres as sites for comprehensive early intervention. It also undermines the capacity of locally generated holistic initiatives to fully engage parents. Quality assessments of early intervention identify that programmes such as that provided by Te Aroha Noa have the greatest potential to make a sustainable and substantial difference in the long term, and it is time for policy and funding models to consider the ways in which they can adapt in order to facilitate the development of such innovative programmes.

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16 According to the Ministry of Education, the policy framework does not disadvantage early childhood services that have high levels of parent engagement, unintentionally or otherwise: the funding framework is based on recognising the different costs of providing ECE through different structures, and it compensates services with more teachers for the higher cost of employing teachers. ([http://www.minedu.govt.nz/web/downloadable/dl9637\\_v1/ece-funding-guide.pdf](http://www.minedu.govt.nz/web/downloadable/dl9637_v1/ece-funding-guide.pdf)).

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