

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION POLICY

Ministry of Education

INTRODUCTION

This article provides a Ministry of Education commentary on the policy framework for early childhood education (ECE). It responds to concerns about the policy framework raised in Munford et al.'s "Blending Whānau/Family Development, Parent Support and Early Childhood Education¹ Programme" that the policy framework for ECE places an "emphasis on staff qualifications" and "disadvantages services with high levels of parental involvement".

GOVERNMENT GOALS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Government's vision for early childhood education, articulated in *Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki, A 10-Year Strategic Plan for Early Childhood Education*, is for all New Zealand children to have the opportunity to participate in "quality ECE", no matter their circumstance. Within the plan are three goals to:

- increase participation in "quality ECE services"
- improve quality of ECE services
- promote collaborative relationships.

This vision is driven and supported by research that shows that participation in high-quality ECE contributes to stronger learning foundations, and particularly for children from disadvantaged families. Research shows that these children receive the greatest gains from high-quality ECE, and that a number of factors influence quality: the quality of interactions between and with children; environments rich in learning opportunities and resources; and collaboration with parents. These factors tend to relate to qualifications and adult-child ratios, so government is investing in these areas to support the provision of high-quality ECE. Information provision programmes (such as Team Up), parent support and development programmes, and other initiatives support collaborative relationships.

As well as supporting quality and participation, the development of ECE funding and regulatory policies have sought to account for the diverse range of ECE providers in New Zealand (education and care centres, home-based services, kindergartens, kōhanga reo, playgroups, playcentres). The reviews of funding and regulations, for example,

1 Robyn Munford, Jackie Sanders, Bruce Maden and Elizabeth Maden (2007) in *The Social Policy Journal of New Zealand*, Issue 32, pp.72-87.

are underpinned by the principles that these systems should, among other objectives,² reflect the diversity of ECE services, and recognise the value of ECE services that involve parents, whānau and elders; and reflect the culture, language and aspirations of communities.

ECE policy also aims to facilitate wider government goals. High-quality ECE contributes to the government's *Families Young and Old Priorities: Giving our Children the Best Start in Life* and *Establishing Foundation for Life Long Learning*. Access to affordable, high-quality ECE also supports the goals of *Choices for Living, Caring, and Working*, a 10-year action plan to improve the caring and employment choices available to parents and carers.

PARENT SUPPORT AND DEVELOPMENT

The government currently funds a range of parent support and development (PSD) programmes, through the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Development. PSD programmes include a focus on supporting families and whānau to participate in ECE and deliver key messages about the value of ECE and may also link families with ECE services.

Government is piloting PSD from 18 ECE centres (ECE Centre-based PSD) between 2006 and 2010. The ECE Centre-based PSD initiative is part of a package of services supporting the wider Early Intervention Programme³ led by the Ministry of Social Development. It focuses on developing the role of ECE centres as community hubs for provision of parent/whānau support, and is aimed at families at risk of poor health, education and social outcomes and who have children aged 0–3.

International evidence (mainly from Europe and the United States) suggests that programmes that combine parent education/support and ECE can raise child outcomes and can be more effective than solely parent-focused or child-focused programmes. However, there is little information about how these programmes might work in New Zealand. Findings from the evaluation of this pilot project will help government understand the best ways of supporting such developments.

2 The funding and regulatory systems should also: support improvements in quality; be more responsive to cost drivers; facilitate the achievement of the government's strategic plan and other government objectives; and reflect best administrative practice.

3 The Early Intervention Programme is built on the vision that all vulnerable children receive the support they need from before birth to their transition to school to provide them with the best start in life.

THE ECE FUNDING SYSTEM

The new ECE funding system, implemented in April 2005, changed the way the Ministry of Education funds ECE services. The overall goal of the funding system is to make high-quality ECE more accessible and affordable to families by funding on the basis of costs and supporting improvements in quality.

Supporting the Costs of Provision

Since 1 April 2005, funding had been linked to the major cost drivers faced by particular types of ECE services, so that the structure of funding rates is based on the structure of various ECE services. The Ministry of Education's research into cost-drivers has established that staff qualifications and daily hours of operation are the biggest determinants of cost. All-day services are eligible for higher funding subsidy rates because they have higher costs than sessional services because all-day services have to meet better staff-child ratios. In teacher-led services, funding rates increase as the proportion of registered teachers in the service increases, recognising the costs of employing these teachers. These funding rates also support teacher-led services to move towards having all staff registered by 2012 (see more on teacher registration under regulatory review).

The availability of 20 Hours Free ECE (for three and four year olds) to teacher-led services and eligible kōhanga is also based on cost-drivers. Free ECE, implemented from 1 July 2007, is about increasing children's ability to participate in ECE by removing cost barriers, and teacher-led services usually have higher costs than parent-led services.

The funding rates available to parent-led and sessional services reflect the lower cost of provision in these services, and are not related to any government policy about encouraging parents into the workforce, or about discouraging the use of parent-led services.

There is no intention to reduce payments to parent-led services through the funding system as government has agreed to a "no losers" approach in which no services will have their funding lowered.⁴ Each year, since 2005, government has increased the funding subsidy rates for all services to reflect increases in costs. The Ministry of Education surveys and monitors changes in costs and advises government on what increases in the rates should be considered. The government has made specific increases to funding subsidy rates for playcentres and kōhanga to support their sustainability.

4 See: http://www.minedu.govt.nz/web/downloadable/d19637_v1/ece-funding-guide.pdf.

Funding rates for playcentres were increased in Budget 2006, by between 8.7% and 9%, with further increases in Budget 2007. For kōhanga reo, their funding rates were increased by between 13.2% and 13.7% in Budget 2007. Under the new funding system, parent-led services continue to be funded at a rate that means they can charge low fees.

The 30-Hour Limit on Funding Subsidies

The funding subsidy is available for up to 30 hours per week – this in the past was based on hours of schooling. The current rationale for the 30 hours is that it reflects a balance of targeted (through the Childcare Subsidy administered by the Ministry of Social Development⁵) and universal funding; increasing the limit was considered in the ECE funding review and the limit was not changed. Recent changes in the ECE sector suggests the limit has not prevented ECE services from operating longer hours as all significant growth in ECE provision in recent years has been in all-day services that operate beyond 30 hours a week.

In addition to the funding subsidy, specific grants are available to help services meet specific costs. For example, an Annual Top-Up for Isolated Services is available to help ensure access to high-quality services for parents in isolated rural communities, by providing a “top-up” on their funding to a guaranteed amount. Community-based services providing to groups under-represented in ECE may also be eligible for Equity Funding to help reduce barriers to participation.⁶

The mix of funding instruments available (including the Childcare Subsidy) supports the various goals by ensuring that the costs of providing better quality ECE do not limit participation.

THE REGULATORY REVIEW

The new regulatory framework, which is likely to be implemented in 2008, intends to be clearer and simpler for services to understand than the current system and supports the diverse range of ECE services that have evolved to meet the needs of different families. The regulatory system sets good standards and provides a base for improvements in quality.

5 The Childcare Subsidy is targeted to families with low to medium income and forms part of the government’s Working for Families package. Parents in work or training (or some other circumstances) can get up to 50 hours per week Childcare Subsidy. Other parents can get up to 9 hours subsidy a week.

6 The components of equity funding are: low socioeconomic communities; special needs; non-English speaking backgrounds; language and culture other than English; and isolation.

Regulatory Requirements

The regulatory system currently sets out a range of requirements all early childhood services must meet regarding health and safety, staffing (ratios and qualifications), resources, facilities and programme delivery. Staff qualifications are one of many factors of quality, and different requirements apply to different types of services. For example, the Secretary for Education recognises different qualifications for playcentres.

When the new regulatory system is implemented, the need to meet a range of requirements will continue, but the system will clearly allow different types of services to meet these in different ways through a third tier of regulation called the Criteria.⁷

Teacher registration targets aim to improve quality in teacher-led services, as research shows teacher qualifications contribute to high-quality ECE in these services. By 2012, all teacher-led services will need to have registered staff. As more parents are working, more families rely on teacher-led services. Qualification requirements, alongside the other minimum standards, help provide parents with assurance that their children's health, safety and education needs are met, in their absence, through trained staff. Parent-led services do not have to meet the same qualification requirements because they generally operate with much better adult-child ratios and parents are often present with their children.

Facilitating Diversity of Provision

The government is committed to supporting high-quality parent services through the funding and regulatory review, research, and information provision. The Ministry of Education is currently carrying out policy work into how quality is achieved in parent-led services. A first step of this work has been the completion of a research project into quality in parent and whānau-led services,⁸ which will be used to inform policy decisions.

Regulation does not constrain how ECE services operate their programmes and there is existing flexibility in the system. The outcomes in the early childhood curriculum, Te Whāriki, are broad and enable services to bring their own philosophical perspective to the operation of the service. Although, within this flexibility, early childhood services are encouraged to respond to the needs of the children participating, and are expected

7 The Ministry of Education is currently consulting on the proposed licensing and certification Criteria for ECE services. The consultation period closed on 30 November 2007.

8 http://www.minedu.govt.nz/web/downloadable/dl11310_v1/21-dec-05-summary-report---final-web-version.doc.

to develop their programmes in collaboration with parents and whānau. This expectation is expressed in the *Statement of Desirable Objectives and Practices*, which all chartered services must meet, and is included as licensing requirement in the proposed Criteria.

The regulatory system, furthermore, provides for the operation of parent-led playgroups without having to be licensed. This system recognises that these groups help to fill gaps in ECE provision (i.e. where it may not be sustainable to run a licensed service) and may better meet the needs of some families than other types of provision. The Ministry of Education funds playgroups (provided they meet basic minimum requirements) and provides playgroup parents with advice and support to them to deliver a range of learning opportunities for children. Funding and support for eligible playgroups will continue in the new regulatory system.

CONCLUSION

The development of ECE policies in New Zealand has been underpinned by the government's vision that all children have the opportunity to participate in high-quality ECE. Funding and regulatory policies seek to balance a range of ECE-related goals and other government goals, while facilitating diversity in the ECE sector to allow them to continue to meet the diverse needs of parents.

Even though work on teacher-led services appears prominent, particularly through the teacher registration goals, this does not reflect a policy favouring towards these types of services. Further policy work on how to support parent-led services is continuing, and ECE centre-based PSD is also being piloted, with ongoing evaluation, to help government find best ways of supporting these developments in the future.